1 Introduction

1.1 The Legendary Sagas

When medieval Icelandic society was integrated into European Christendom and the church's technology of writing came into contact with the island's rich oral traditions, a variety of written forms were produced to help preserve and shape knowledge of the past that had long been transmitted by word of mouth. As Pernille Hermann (2022, 37) demonstrates, Icelandic writers saw literacy as a "fence against forgetting [. . .] that could help them minimize the process where memories would disappear slowly". Of the forms they experimented with to preserve those memories, the saga was the most popular and adaptable: it was capable of switching between prose and verse, of adopting features from various written genres while maintaining the character of orally told tales, and, although it was positioned as a historical form of writing, it had space for considerable authorial intervention and creativity. Its great flexibility produced a huge corpus of diverse texts that were compiled and copied over the course of many centuries, from the inception of the form in the twelfth century all the way into the twentieth.

Among the most popular sagas were those set in Scandinavia's most distant past: the time of legendary heroes who performed exceptional feats but navigated a world that had not yet encountered Christianity. In modern scholarship, these texts are known as the *fornaldarsögur* (or legendary sagas), although this term does not seem to have been used by medieval Icelanders themselves (Clunies Ross 2010, 76–80).[1] And just as the Icelandic saga in general was a highly adaptable literary form, so too was the *fornaldarsaga*: the extant texts that deal with this period vary in their use of poetry, their structure, mood, and character types. They form a corpus with blurry edges that arguably has as much variation within it as it does when compared to other saga subgroups, and, as a result, much scholarly discussion has scrutinised the term '*fornaldarsaga*' and the texts brought under its designation (e.g. Mitchell 1991, 8–43; Quinn 2006b). The division within the corpus, advocated for by Helga Reuschel (1933) and then Kurt Schier (1970, 72–91), between the *Heldensagas* (heroic sagas), *Wikingersagas* (Viking sagas), and *Abenteuersagas* (adventure sagas), based on tone and the character of the protagonist, has had enduring appeal. Similar bipartite divisions between the tragic/comic and the heroic/adventurous sagas have also been suggested (Mitchell 1991, 43; Torfi Tulinius 2002, 20).

1 Throughout this book I follow the categorisations of saga subgroups described in Clunies Ross 2010, 31–36.

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The focus of this book is on the latter subgroups – the *Abenteuersagas* or 'comic-adventurous' sagas. My aim, however, is not to delve into the 'problem' of taxonomy but rather to approach the legendary sagas' variability from a cultural memory perspective. Before discussing my approach further, I will outline some of the prevailing views about these sagas that are worth reassessing.

1.2 The 'Comic-Adventurous' Sagas

The 'comic-adventurous' *fornaldarsögur* are seen by many as representing a sharp break from saga 'tradition'. The other subgroups (the *Helden-* and *Wikingersagas* or the 'tragic-heroic' sagas) are generally considered the more 'traditional' in the corpus and have come to be viewed as a type of historiography that preserved traces of 'genuine' pre-Christian legends. This is due to overlaps in their content with material recorded elsewhere, such as in eddic verse, *Snorra Edda*, and the legendary portion of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, as well as in sources from further afield like *Beowulf*. Significant examples are *Völsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (e.g. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012; Rowe 2012). The writing down of texts such as these has been placed within the Europe-wide *origo gentis* tradition, as the Icelandic equivalent of, for example, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*. It has been argued, moreover, that they had significant genealogical value for their patrons (e.g. Sverrir Jakobsson 2003; Gottskálk Jensson 2009; Lassen 2012). By contrast, the 'comic-adventurous' sagas are seen by many as the products of a wholly different school of saga writing that, instead of casting ancient legends in a new historiographical form, produced works of escapist fiction that bear only a superficial resemblance to such legends (O'Connor, 2017, 94–96). Their perceived fictional status is so strong that some have even labelled them the *lygisögur* (lying sagas), although the use of this term as a generic marker has fallen mostly out of favour due to its pejorative connotations (Driscoll 2004).

Central to the 'comic-adventurous' sagas' 'fictional' reputation is their close relationship with the translations of continental romance, known in modern scholarship as the translated *riddarasögur* (knights' sagas or chivalric sagas).[2] The translations, such as those of the Arthurian Matter of Britain and Marie de France's *lais*, had a widespread influence on Icelandic literary production following their introduction in the thirteenth century. Saga compilers borrowed motifs, settings, and plot structures from them to produce both what scholars define as a

2 For an overview of the translations, see Glauser 2005, page number missing.

new saga subgroup – known as the 'indigenous' *riddarasögur* – and this seemingly 'new' branch of the *fornaldarsögur*. Their influence was so great that it is often hard to distinguish between these two groups; they are seen by some as having hybridised over time and are sometimes referred to in general as 'romances' (e.g. Kalinke 2005). The translated *riddarasögur* are also often credited with popularising a new fictional mode of writing because they were not based on oral tradition (Mundal 2012, 190). Attention is drawn instead to the prominence of 'fantastic lore' (Vésteinn Ólason 2007, 19) in these texts, featuring, as they do, a diverse cast of non-human characters capable of nature-defying acts of magic (e.g. Hume 1980; Mundal 2006). These sagas have also been marked out (and derided) for their derivativeness – their repeated use of a set stock of motifs that weaken any sense that they might have been considered works of history (Driscoll 2004, 197–198).

Further evidence for their 'non-traditional' status is found in their divergence from 'objective' saga style (Glauser 2005). Whereas saga prose had traditionally attempted to erase any trace of authorial agency, the narrators of the 'romance' sagas intrude in their stories to comment on events and construct an exaggerated "rhetoric of historicity" (O'Connor 2017, 95) by making outlandish claims about sources and bolting on genealogical framing. This rhetoric has, for the most part, been understood as part of a wider parodying tendency that poked fun at traditional saga style. Critical in this interpretation are a series of passages that Marianne E. Kalinke (2005) terms the *apologiæ*, in which saga narrators address their audiences directly to defend the veracity of their accounts.[3] The vast majority of scholars have interpreted these passages as jokes. Because most of the sagas they accompany are so farcical and manifestly untrue, the argument goes, the *apologiæ* must have been intended to either satirise traditional saga style and signal a conscious departure from it or to construct a (very thin) veneer of historicity to justify the telling of an obviously fictional story.[4] Kalinke (2005, 318–319), for example, argues that they "bespeak the author's awareness of the fictional and alien character of the literature they were propagating".

1.3 Reassessing the 'Comic-Adventurous' Sagas

The ground is, however, well laid to re-evaluate these sagas, which is what I intend to do here. My aim in this book is to take the characteristics which have

3 For a list of *apologiæ*, see O'Connor 2005, 126–128.

4 For a full survey of these views, see O'Connor 2005, 102–103.

been used to separate the 'comic-adventurous' *fornaldarsögur* from 'tradition' and instead use them as windows into the changing significance of the legendary past in the late medieval period.

1.3.1 History, Fiction, and the Fantastic

Central to my arguments is the proposition, put forward by Ralph O'Connor (2005; 2022), that their *apologiæ* and 'rhetoric of historicity' should be taken at face value rather than as an attempt to poke fun at saga tradition. According to O'Connor, those inclined towards the latter view rely on a problematic definition of fiction, meaning any narrative that has been invented. Instead, he adopts Dennis Howard Green's (2002, 11–17) narrower definition of fiction as a literary mode that is predicated on an agreement between author and audience that what is narrated does not represent events that really happened. O'Connor argues that there is no evidence for such an agreement in any saga subgroup: sagas were assumed to represent history, and those deemed otherwise were liable to being dismissed as lies (*lygisögur* or *skröksögur* (false sagas)), a condemnation of quality as well as truth value. The 'romance' sagas' claims to history should, he argues, be taken as evidence for their compilers' adherence to the traditional historical mode rather than (paradoxically) being used as evidence for their divergence from it. These sagas should be understood, not as fiction, but as historiography "in a broader sense" (O'Connor 2005, 88), in which there was room for *considerable* authorial invention but which was confined by a historical framework – a framework that was, admittedly, much broader than anything we would recognise as history today.

Recent reassessments of the 'fantastic' provide further cause to take these sagas' claims to representing 'history' seriously. Scholars have increasingly come to embrace the 'mixed modality' of the more conventionally historical saga subgroups and acknowledge that what modern audiences might describe as 'fantastic' was part of the language medieval Icelanders used to understand the world and their place within it (e.g. Ármann Jakobsson 1998–2001; Mayburd 2017; O'Connor 2017, 90–94). Carl Phelpstead has, for instance, suggested that the varied levels of 'fantastic' content across the different saga subgroups might reflect the flexibility of medieval views on plausibility. He writes that "what a medieval Icelander would find implausible (fantastic) in a Scandinavian context might be much more plausible when located elsewhere" (Phelpstead 2012, 41). As O'Connor (2022, 295) notes, moreover, many of the *fornaldarsögur*'s 'fantastic' elements "replicate, extend or otherwise work with then-current ethnographic, geographical, and natural-historical learning" – for example, commonly held medieval

knowledge about monsters on the fringes of the world. With these insights, the question of saga 'plausibility' and 'history' moves from making blanket statements about the truth value of a whole subgroup, to instead drawing attention to how compilers negotiated the plausibility of their narratives through, for example, their use of settings and *apologiæ*.

1.3.2 Cultural Memory and Intertextuality

These approaches open up the possibility of reading the 'comic-adventurous' *fornaldarsögur* as works of historical writing that, although different in several ways and unlike our own understanding of history, were in keeping with the conventions of the saga as a specific historical form. Developments in the field of cultural memory studies offer conceptual tools which, I believe, can help to understand the significance of their 'difference'. That is, what that 'difference' might reveal.

The concept of 'cultural memory' was developed by Egyptologist Jan Assmann (1995) from the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1992) on 'collective memory'. Assmann conceived of two types of 'collective memory': he saw 'communicative memory' as non-institutionalised and passed between a few generations, and 'cultural memory' as existing over long periods of time in highly formalised media (such as texts, icons, and rituals), which are produced by a small class of specialised elite memory carriers. Cultural memory, Assmann (1995, 132) argued, is identity-forming and used by societies (specifically its elites) "to stabilize and convey that society's self-image". One of the central tenets of memory studies is its orientation towards the present: remembering is not an act of pure preservation, but one of selective reconstruction dependent on what knowledge is available and relevant at the time of remembering. The focus of cultural memory studies is, therefore, not on the relationship between memories and the 'real' events they attempt to represent, but between memories and the communities that produce them. Cultural historian Alon Confino (2011, 41) puts it very simply: "the historian of memory considers who wants whom to remember what and why, and how memory is produced, received, and rejected".

For the Icelandic sagas, it is the context of their creation which is interesting from a memory perspective, and Jürg Glauser (2000) has demonstrated how the sagas reconstructed the past in ways that were relevant to the thirteenth- and fourteenth- century elites who were responsible for their production. This was the era of civil war, the collapse of the Commonwealth (1262–1264), and the subsequent reorganisation of Iceland's political structures, events that motivated the writing down of a 'useful past' to aid the individuals and groups vying for power

and help society at large deal with the instability of their time (Clunies Ross 1993; Vésteinn Ólason 1998). Situated within the grand narrative of history provided by the church, the different saga subgroups that emerged in this period divided history into different phases, from the legendary past and Viking Age of the *fornaldarsögur*, through the settlement age described in the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders), and up to the Sturlung Age of the *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas). With many of their characters connected genealogically, they formed a "'great narration' of the Icelanders' pre-history, their exodus, immigration and settlement, and their change of faith" (Glauser 2000, 212). Once committed to vellum, they formed a resource from which Icelanders of the thirteenth century onwards could draw on to remember the past and construct their communal identities – whether national, regional, or familial.

But bearers of cultural memory (or 'sites of memory'), like the sagas, are not static repositories of information about the past; to have significance within a community, they must be continually reaffirmed or contested through performance, repetition, or reference.[5] And indeed, as cultural memory studies have developed beyond Assmann's original conceptualisation, the dynamic and performative nature of memory has come to the fore. As Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (2009, 2) write, cultural memory has come to be understood as "an ongoing process of remembrance and forgetting in which individuals and groups continue to reconfigure their relationship to the past and hence reposition themselves in relation to established and emergent memory sites". This significantly expands the scope of memory-oriented saga studies, inviting attention not just to how and why the sagas were written in the 'first' place but also to how and why they were remembered and forgotten: how they were, for instance, disseminated, 'canonised', or rewritten.

The view of memory as an ongoing dynamic 'process' turns the problem of the 'comic-adventurous' sagas' literary 'derivativeness' into an opportunity to tap into debate and dialogue about the legendary past. The repeated use and adaptation of particular motifs, the intermixing of romance and 'traditional' character types, structures, and styles are promising candidates for the study of what Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (2005, 265–271) describe as the "memory of literature". That is how, via intertextuality, texts metaphorically 'remember' each other and thus variously reaffirm or contest previous representations of the past.

5 The term 'sites of memory' or 'lieux de mémoire' was used by French historian Pierre Nora (1996–1998) to describe the focal points that shape individual memory and around which group identities coalesce.

This approach to cultural memory was pioneered by Renate Lachmann (1997, 15), a critic of Russian literature, who argued that literature is the "mnemonic art par excellence" of culture. To outline how this works, she begins with the classical legend of the poet Simonides of Ceos and the origin of individual memory, as retold by Cicero and Quintilian. They explained how, after a building collapsed around a banquet, Simonides was able to identify the mutilated bodies because he could remember the order they had been sitting in. Their identities were inscribed into a structure, the seating plan, and remembering that structure gave Simonides access to his memories of the individuals. Cicero described this process as a kind of 'inner writing' comparable to writing on a wax tablet. The seats of the deceased were like the words or images inscribed on a tablet which stand in for and give access to the information that is to be remembered.

Lachmann goes on to explain how the same principles can also apply to literature on two interrelated levels: that of the literary system and the individual text. Firstly, a particular culture's literature, much like Simonides's seating plan or Cicero's wax tablet, is a structure or 'memory space' into which memories are inscribed. On this level, the individual texts function like the signs on the tablet or the seats in the seating plan. The system as a whole – the body of literature –is the tablet or the plan. But, on the other level, those individual texts are themselves also their own wax tablets: they have their own internal structures (plots, settings, characters) that, like the signs on the tablet or the seats in the seating plan, represent and help recall what is to be remembered – such as stories, places, and people.

Intertextuality connects these two levels and mimics the process of individual memory. Each text within a body of literature does not generate meaning in a vacuum, but rather (in part) through dialogue with other texts within that system – dialogues that emerge, as Wolfgang Iser (1997, xvi) writes in his foreword to Lachmann's monograph, from "the points of intersection at which different contexts clash, collide, overlap, interpenetrate, or are telescoped into one another". As a result of those intersections, texts 'remember' other texts. They draw into themselves those other 'memory spaces' and, in doing so, reorganise them, change them, and confer new meanings on them. In Lachmann's words, each text "inscribes itself in a memory space made up of texts, and it sketches out a memory space into which earlier texts are gradually absorbed and transformed". Through these 'rememberings', they also reconfigure the wider memory space of the literary system as a whole – the wax tablet on which each individual text is like a mark.

The comparison Lachmann makes between intertextuality and memory is more than just a neat metaphor. Rather, it is a way we may attempt to understand how cultural memory – a society's conception of itself – develops across time and

space. As discussed above, in medieval Iceland, the written word was, like Simonides's seating plan and Cicero's wax tablet, viewed by those involved in textual production as a structure within which to store memories of the past. Embedded within the early sagas they compiled were other structures of memory. They refer, for instance, to memories encoded in geographical features, genealogies, burials (e.g. Bennett 2014; Callow 2006; Clunies Ross 1993), and even sometimes – as Hermann (2022, 168–186) has recently shown – in seating arrangements. The incorporation and consequent reconfiguration of these 'memory spaces' into the saga narratives did not just produce aesthetic effects – it is evidence of, in Lachmann's (1997, 16) words, the "process by which a culture continually rewrites and retranscribes itself". Honing in on that process draws attention to the fact that literature is not just "a representation of cultural memory, rather it enacts the operations of memory, thus opening up a means of access to observing how and perhaps why culture comes about" (Iser 1997, xiii). Therefore, to better understand how and why Icelanders' literary representations of the legendary past changed to resemble 'romance', it is worth foregrounding those representations' intertextuality and their constructive relationships with the memory space that they formed a part of.

As Kate Heslop (2018, 259) notes, premodern literature is generally well-suited to such analysis "with its profusion of variations and rewritings". Hermann (2013, 338) points out, moreover, that much work has been done specifically to enable saga studies in this vein, since they would take off from the same place as traditional philological analysis, which is concerned, among other things, with identifying textual borrowings.[6] The possibilities of this kind of study are laid out further by Geraldine Barnes's (2014, 190) work on the 'indigenous' *riddarasögur*, in which references to learned and historical texts "invite audiences to join authors in an elaborate minuet of intertextuality". Promising too are the developments in the related field of genre, which, rather than a seemingly neutral taxonomical tool, has increasingly been understood with "a more reflexive model in which texts are thought to use or to perform the genres by which they are shaped" (Frow 2015, 27). Many saga scholars have, accordingly, shifted away from the project of categorising sagas into genres to focus instead on how individual sagas 'use' or 'refer to' genres (Hermann 2013, 338–340; Sif Ríkharðsdóttir 2020). Particularly relevant here are studies on the productive interaction between the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* (e.g. Ármann Jakobsson 1999; Ferrari 2012), which open further doors for understanding how these texts engaged in an intertextual dialogue about the past.

6 On the application of Lachmann's work to skaldic kennings, see Glauser 2018, 241–242.

By using intertextuality to analyse literature as a medieval Iceland's cultural memory, the 'comic-adventurous' *fornaldarsögur*'s 'fictional' qualities – such as their derivativeness, proximity to romance, playfully self-conscious narration, and use of 'fantastic lore'– would not be used as reasons to deny them the status of 'legendary histories', but could instead be used as windows into the potentially radical revision of that history, which might reveal something about the people who produced and promoted them.

1.3.3 Material Philology and Cultural History

However, if one is to use modern literary theory to make connections between medieval texts and their contexts – to try and understand "how and perhaps why culture comes about" (Iser 1997, xiii) – caution must be exercised. In a manuscript culture such as late medieval Iceland, it is impossible to speak of a 'text' and the 'author' in the same way that modern critics like Erll, Nünning, and Lachmann do. Medieval texts were, by nature, variable and multi-authored: they were borne out of living and fluid oral cultures and were subject to continual rewriting at the hands of scribes and compilers who adapted and re-curated them each time they were copied down (Cerquiglini 1999; Quinn 2010, 15–17; Lukas Rösli and Stefanie Gropper 2021, 10–14).

Since the 1990s, embrace of this complexity has fuelled the emergence and popularisation of 'new' or 'material' philology.[7] Rather than attempting to identify the 'best' version of a text or reconstruct a hypothetical 'original' (as was a goal of 'traditional' philology), proponents of 'material' philology have advocated for the study of individual text witnesses as works in their own rights. From a cultural memory perspective, this means approaching each witness of a saga not as an artefact of something which has been forgotten, in a kind of "mourning for the text" (Cerquiglini 1999, 34), but rather it necessitates seeing scribes as active agents who, through their copying, revising, and rearranging practices, variously reaffirmed or altered the versions of the past which they had inherited (Rohrbach 2018, 214). The unit of analysis for studying the 'memory of literature' in a manuscript culture such as Iceland, should, consequently, not be the abstracted 'text' or 'work', but rather the 'text witness', which is to be understood within its specific codicological and historical contexts (Johansson 2012, 367).

Taking this approach opens the doors for a more historically grounded study of cultural memory in literature. Manuscripts are, as Stephen Nichols (1997, 12)

7 See further Nichols 1990; Driscoll 2010; Rohrbach 2018.

writes, "necessarily a collaborative effort bespeaking the social, commercial, and intellectual organization of a specific moment in time", and therefore can give very specific insight into the communities that produced them. For a great many 'romance' sagas, that 'moment' was the fifteenth century, when they seem to have been particularly popular. Rather than the civil wars and the collapse of the commonwealth, which are sometimes considered the context for the *fornaldarsögur*'s inception (e.g. Torfi Tulinius 2002), the fifteenth century when they were copied in large numbers was, in Ármann Jakobsson's (2012, 29) words, "the age of plagues, the 'English age', the heyday of the Catholic church, and the age of rivalling magnates fighting over land and property". Several scholars have connected this political backdrop to the 'indigenous' *riddarasögur*, and recent interventions by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2014) and Hans Jacob Orning (2017) have also demonstrated the potential the *fornaldarsögur*, and specifically their manuscripts, have as windows into the concerns and ideologies of this period's elites.[8]

These two studies warrant further discussion as they have a great deal in common with my own project – the specific boundaries of which are sketched out in the final part of this introduction. Both Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir and Orning adopt a 'whole-book' approach in their analysis of late medieval *fornaldarsögur* or 'romance' manuscripts. The former looks exclusively at AM 152 fol (1500–1525) while the latter offers a comparative analyses of AM 343a 4to (1450–1475) with AM 471 4to (1450–1500) and Holm perg 7 4to (1300–1325). Both show how the parallels and tensions between sagas in one codex can produce meanings that are not evident when the same sagas are read in isolation. Moreover, both take the view that, in Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's (2014, 89) words, "all preserved medieval texts, including legendary sagas and romances [. . .] foreground contemporary issues and are thus valuable evidence through which historical attitudes can be recovered".[9] She concludes that the texts in AM 152 fol "promote certain ethical and moral values, and ways to organize society, especially the dominance of certain groups over others, based on factors such as social class, nationality or ethnicity, region and gender" (120). Similarly, for Orning (2017, 33), the legendary sagas are "a reflection" of their production context which, despite, or perhaps because of, their 'fantastic' nature, can reveal the tensions that were at play within that context. The conclusions he draws relate to the manuscript patrons' relationship with Norway, their aristocratic political manoeuvrings, and their views on how society should be ordered.

8 Studies which relate the *riddarasögur* to their late medieval contexts include Barnes 2000; Bagerius 2009. Specific attention is paid to their manuscripts by Glauser 1983; Kjesrud 2010.

9 On Orning's (2017) methodology, see 32–39.

But it is my belief that adding a memory lens would allow us to go beyond these historically-grounded readings to explore not just how sagas and their manuscripts reflected socio-political contexts, but also how they may have actively shaped them. As Gabrielle Spiegel (1990, 77) wrote in her response to the postmodern challenge to history: "texts both mirror *and* generate social realities, are constituted by *and* constitute the social and discursive formations which they may sustain, resist, contest, or seek to transform". Both studies discussed above move, at points, towards this kind of analysis: Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2014, 90) suggests that AM 152 fol, which "promotes [. . .] values" (120), "could also have had the effect of shaping individual and group identities, which were possibly multiple, shifting over time and competing". Moreover, Orning (2017, 220), for whom manuscripts primarily 'reflect' contexts, also hints that in places "reality emulated fiction".

The study of cultural memory offers a possible way of schematising this relationship more specifically. In fact, one could argue, it is the most use to which these conceptual tools can be put. From a historian's perspective, studying memory does not "offer any true additional explanatory power. Only when linked to historical questions and problems [. . .] can memory be illuminating" (Confino 2011, 47). As argued above, viewing literature as a culture's memory can be a way of trying to understand how a culture forms and reforms itself – it is about observing, and understanding the nature of, cultural change. But culture, and a culture's memory, are not separate from other fields of social experience, such as politics and religion. Cultural memory does things *in* society: it is wielded by and in response to those in power, it shapes individual and group identities, it sets moral and ethical agendas, and, as I will argue in this book, it can sketch out the boundaries of what a society understands to be possible. Thus, to quote Confino (2011, 45) again, "in their most innovative rendition, memory studies wish to explore whether, and in what way, the presence of memory is not so much a manifestation of the society around it, but a shaper of politics, society, and culture, and of beliefs and values". Therefore, my aim in adopting a memory lens to study *fornaldarsögur* manuscripts is to observe how they functioned as agents *within* their contexts instead of merely its artefacts.

1.3.4 Media, Literacy, and Orality

The question remains of *how* the *fornaldarsögur* operated within their contexts? The answer to such a question cannot be found in theories of intertextuality alone, even when adapted to acknowledge scribal agency in saga authorship and when those sagas are situated within their codicological and historical contexts.

This is because, as discussed already, Icelandic sagas were not equivalent to modern fiction, but neither were they works of straightforward 'history'. Moreover, as has also already been alluded to, sagas were deeply embedded in the oral sphere: literate and oral cultures co-mingled for many centuries after the introduction of the written word in Iceland (Gísli Sigurðsson 2018; Johansson 2017). In order to interrogate the relationships between these texts and their contexts, it is necessary, therefore, to first attempt to answer another question: what exactly was the saga? Or more specifically, the *fornaldasaga*? This is a question about media, another topic that has received increasing interest in the study of both cultural memory and Old Icelandic texts (e.g. Heslop 2018; Glauser 2023).

As was evident in Assmann's original conceptualisation, cultural memory cannot exist without media. Iser (1997, xii) writes, moreover, that "cultural memory is collective memory, which cannot be genetically transmitted, and which thus has to find its own form". That form, which for Iser and Lachmann was the modern literary text but which here is the Icelandic saga, is what facilitates contact between information about the past and its audiences; in Kate Heslop and Jürg Glauser's (2018, 20) words, it "stands between two other positions and performs certain functions in the ensemble composed of all three". Media places constraints on communicative acts and signals what significance those communications have. It is a frame or guide to both creation and interpretation, setting boundaries that relate, for example, to that communication's truth-value.

But much as a culture's literature is a dynamic memory space that is constantly reforming itself, a culture's media are also "caught up in a dynamics of their own" (Erll and Rigney 2009, 3). Media are "always 'emergent' rather than stable, and technologies for meaning-making and networking emerge in relation to each other and in interaction with each other" (Erll and Rigney 2009, 3). Thus, in order to understand a particular representation of the past, we must consider its medium and how it operates within a "framework of collective processes of signification" (Erll and Nünning 2005, 284) – how it relates to other forms of media that existed before and alongside it. Heslop (2022, 4) has recently demonstrated the rich possibilities of situating skaldic verse within such a rich media landscape, or, as she terms it, as nodes within a "network of medial practices".

For the Icelandic saga, the crucial 'technologies' at play were, on the most basic level, the spoken and written words. As mentioned above, many other forms of media are referred to in the Icelandic sagas – such as geographical features and genealogies – which functioned (to return to Cicero and Lachmann) as the signs on the wax tablet that give structure to memories. My concern here is less with the signs than the shape of the tablet itself – that is, the individual saga – and since the saga emerged out of a confluence of oral and written methods of remembering, its relationship to orality and literacy must be investigated.

This was a major topic of scholarly debate in the earlier twentieth century, contributions to which were concerned, above all, with the question of whether the written sagas were indebted more to oral traditions or continental European book culture. These have come to be known as the 'Freeprose' and 'Bookprose' stances respectively.[10] But what once were two opposing positions have become considerably more nuanced, and studies of living oral traditions have revealed them to be something of a false dichotomy (Clunies Ross 2010, 41–43). Saga compilers, as well as subsequent scribes, are now seen more frequently as participants *in* oral tradition as opposed to its passive recorders (as was the traditional 'Freeprose' position): they drew on much of the same material as the oral tellers but cast it in a new medium.

This investigation into saga origins, which has immense implications for understanding the sagas as media, was concerned, above all, with the more 'traditional' saga subgroups – particularly the *Íslendingasögur*. But the 'comic-adventurous' *fornaldarsögur*, although produced by a more firmly 'bookish' culture, were also embedded in a profoundly oral media landscape. Such is evident in their narratorial asides which, as well as offering truth defences, refer to both the oral and written spheres: they discuss other written texts as well as oral traditions, and they address audiences who have either *lesit* (read) or *hlýtt* (listened) to their narratives. In terms of content, the *fornaldarsögur*'s close relationship with the oral sphere is well attested too. As is often noted, compilers drew much of their content from oral traditions, whether those were legends or 'folklore' – the latter being more often the case for the 'comic-adventurous' *fornaldarsögur* (e.g. Mitchell 1991, 32–43; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003). It seems likely, moreover, that the *fornaldarsögur* were received, at least in part, aurally too. Such is the case in the infamous scene in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* where the legend of Hrómundr Gripsson provides entertainment at a wedding in Reykjahólar in 1119 (*Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, 1952, ch. 10, p. 18). This story seems to have been based on the teller's own memory rather than a written text, and, as Judy Quinn (2020, 78) observes, its audience was restricted to the "political elite". But over time, saga manuscripts became an integral element in storytelling practices that reached a broader cross section of society. This was widespread in the late eighteenth century in the custom known as the *kvöldvaka* (evening wake) where *sagnaskemmtun* (saga-entertainment) was used to keep people awake while they completed their evening tasks. Two eighteenth-century Icelandic scholars described it like this:

10 For a summary of these debates, see Clover 2005, 239–253; Clunies Ross 2010, 38–48.

> Ja end i Dag fortælles de mundtligen i Island, især i Tuusmørket; men naar Lyset er tændt, beskikkes giærne en Dreng, som godt kan læse, eller en anden af Giæsterne, dertil; og hvis Huusbonden er en Elsker af Historier, laaner han hos Naboerne eller andre gode Venner, saa mange Sagar, som han kan være forsynet med for heele Vinteren; og herved bliver den Arbeidende munter og vaagen. (Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson 1772, ch. 68, p. 47)

> Even today stories are told orally in Iceland, particularly in the twilight; when the lamp has been lit, someone, often a boy who can read well or one of the guests, is chosen to read, and if the head of the household is a devotee of sagas, he will borrow from his neighbours or other good friends a sufficient number of sagas to last him the winter; and in this way the workers are kept contented and wakeful. (Driscoll 1997, 40)

The existence of a similar practice in the fifteenth century is suggested by numerous references the narrators of 'romance' sagas make to aural reception (Glauser 1983, 78–100; O'Connor 2005, 159). In particular, this one in the 'indigenous' *riddarasaga Rémundar saga keisarasonar*:

> Nu þa godir menn leggit nidr gny ok glaum hark ok [har]eysti ok hlydit huat sa segir er undir bokene situr þui betra er at heyra godar dæme saugur ok faugur æfintyr fra agiætum monum saugd helldr en onytsamligt skial ok skrum fram flutt med oheyrilig [um hlatri] sem margir heimskir menn gora uili þer ok ei þat gora þa er lokit starfi þess er undir bokeni situr þui at henni er [eigi gaman] utan allir þegi utan sa er soguna segir þui þat er skemtiligt ok hyggiligt at heyra godar saugur fra agiætum monum (AM 579 4to, fol. 18^{v} ll. 4–9; *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, 1909–1912, ch. 4, pp. 11–12.)[11]

> (Now, good people, leave off your din and gloom and listen to what the one who is reading is saying, for it is better to hear good exempla and beautiful tales told of celebrated people, rather than the worthless gossip and boasting, delivered with unseemly laughter, with which many foolish people carry on. Please do not do that; then the effort of the one who tells the story is wasted, for it is no fun unless everyone is silent but the one telling the story. For it is entertaining and intelligent to listen to good stories about celebrated people.) (adapted from O'Connor 2005, 159).

Of interest here is not only the fact that a physical book formed the basis of saga-storytelling, but the suggestion that such entertainment had, in O'Connor's (2005, 159) words, "not only to contend with background-noise but also to compete with other, less respectable and (perhaps) more popular, forms of entertainment". Thus, although committed to vellum, these sagas were part of the oral sphere too and in competition with other kinds of oral communication.

Consequently, these sagas can be described as 'vocalised' texts, a concept developed by Paul Zumthor (1984) and popularised by the Old English scholar Ur-

11 Broberg's edition of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* is based on AM 539 4to (*c.* 1600–1700) with variants from AM 579 4to labelled as the K-text.

sula Schaefer (1992). In Heslop and Glauser's (2018, 31) words, "*[v]ocality* denotes a view of medieval narrative culture as one that, although existing in manuscript form, and therefore literate, contains substantial elements from pre- or extra-literate communicative and medial formations". In such cultures, "the role of the human voice continued to be fundamental to every process of reading" and "left unmistakeable traces in the preserved texts, so that the performativity of medieval literature is inevitably inscribed in the manuscripts" (Heslop and Glauser 2018, 31). Vocality allows for the simultaneity of different media in one communicative act and thus makes space for texts like these to be both written and oral.

But beyond just labelling the sagas as 'vocalised' texts, if we are to try and understand *how* they acted as agents in the production of cultural memory and, consequently, played a wider role in society as 'shapers' of politics, belief, and values, it is necessary to interrogate that vocality and the nature of their relationships with coterminous oral and literate traditions. What makes this avenue of enquiry particularly intriguing is that the compilers of the 'comic-adventurous' *fornaldarsögur* (and indeed 'indigenous' *riddarasögur*) also seem to have been interested in the media status of their texts: through their 'rhetoric of historicity' and playful addresses to the audience, they display, what Glauser (2010, 313) describes as a pronounced "media-theoretical discourse". Analysing that discourse may be revealing about what the 'saga' really was – or what sagas were understood to be by those responsible for creating them. In particular, it may shed further light on the question of saga 'history', since so many of the self-conscious asides found with the 'comic-adventurous' sagas are concerned with the question of historical truth. As noted above, medieval Icelanders certainly had space within their concept of 'history' for things which modern critics typically associate with fiction, but, as Else Mundal (2012, 185) writes, the presence of the *apologiæ* shows that "there was a limit to what people in an Old Norse audience would believe", thus there must have been limits to what they accepted as 'history'. What those limits were warrant investigating.

Such an approach runs parallel to that advocated for by media theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, for whom 'medium theory' (2004) arises from the media themselves. Rather than positing generalised rules about media from the 'outside', 'medium theory' is "an immanent vernacular, closely tied to the practice while reflecting on it from within. When approaching media, it asks: 'Who's behind it? What do they want?' without [. . .] a mystical notion of the mass media system as a massive, living totality" (Mitchell 2008, 18).[12] While no 'mass media system' was

12 Heslop (2017) also adopts Mitchell's approach in her study of media in Old Norse heroic legend.

at play in medieval Iceland, I believe Mitchell's approach here is still relevant. Over the course of the many centuries in which sagas were produced, the form's media status – such as the nature of its vocality and its perceived truth-value – undoubtedly changed. As noted above, media are dynamic and 'emergent' rather than stable. Therefore, if we are to attempt to answer a question as large as 'what exactly was the saga?', a good place to start would be what those sagas, on a case-by-case basis, say about themselves.

1.3.5 Research Questions

The very general question I set out at the beginning of this introduction was why are the *fornaldarsögur* so varied? And, more specifically, why are those known as the 'comic-adventurous' *fornaldarsögur* so 'fictional', 'fantastic' and 'derivative'? I then outlined how tools from cultural memory and media studies may help to not only understand those differences and why they came about, but may also help develop some further insight into the status and function of these texts in late medieval Icelandic society.

Viewing intertextuality as the 'memory of literature' invites us to ask, for example: how did saga compilers respond to the versions of the legendary past they had inherited? What was so appealing about the translated *riddarasögur* that they chose to write legendary histories that looked so much like romances? Why did they reuse so many of the same motifs? How and why did they fit material that we would call 'fantastic' into those histories? And, if they were so concerned that their sagas might, as a result, be perceived as unbelievable, such that they would need an *apologia*, why write them down?

Tuning into the sagas' status as 'mediums of cultural memory' raises further questions about the memorial function of the form itself: what kind of memory medium was the Icelandic saga, specifically the legendary saga? What were its boundaries as a (potentially) historical form of writing? What kind of relationship did it have with literate and oral cultures? And other written and spoken 'texts'? Why did this form appeal to literary patrons in this period? And, what role did it play more broadly in late medieval Iceland?

1.4 The Manuscripts under Study: AM 589a–f 4to and AM 586 4to

To begin answering these questions, this book looks at just two manuscripts: AM 589a–f 4to (hereafter 589a–f) and AM 586 4to (hereafter 586), which were written by the same two scribes in the late fifteenth century (Loth 1977).[13]

They present a particularly interesting case for this kind of study. They contain mostly 'comic-adventurous' *fornaldarsögur* and 'indigenous' *riddarasögur* that are well suited to intertextual analysis, as well as numerous references to their own written status and aural reception, making them interesting from a media perspective too. Perhaps most intriguing is their unique constellation of *apologiæ*. These passages are, O'Connor (2005, 263) notes, "textually extremely unstable" and vary across their manuscripts in whether or not they are included, how long they are, and which texts they are associated with. In 589a–f, the *apologiæ* are mostly clustered around *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (589f), which has a prologue, an epilogue, and a mid-saga interjection.[14] There is also an epilogue following *Ektors saga* (589d).[15] There are a further two *apologiæ* in 586: the prologue to *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans* and the prologue to *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*.[16] A focus on these specific manuscripts allows us to closely observe what the *apologiæ* were 'doing': as significant interventions on behalf of the scribes, they reveal something about how those scribes responded to the texts they were tasked with writing down. By providing opportunities to observe the relationship between saga and *apologiæ,* they provide fertile ground for exploring the boundaries of saga 'history'.

The rest of the compilation would suggest, nevertheless, that 589a–f and 586's scribes compiled their manuscripts with some care and seem to have been interested in, and perhaps concerned about, the historical credentials of their work. This is evident in the relationship between *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and its 'prequel' (as the saga which was copied before it in the manuscript is sometimes termed), *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* – Sturlaugr starfsami being the father of Göngu-Hrólfr. Despite their genealogical connection, these two sagas are contradictory and record

13 Overviews are provided in Chapter 2 and Chapter 6.

14 The same prologue is associated with *Sigurðar saga þögla* in AM 152 fol (1500–1525); see further Lavender 2018, 81–93. The epilogue is incomplete in 589f but preserved in full in AM 152 fol (also associated with *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*), and the mid-saga interjection (which appears in both 589f and AM 152 fol) is in its longest form in 589f.

15 *Ektors saga*'s epilogue appears in a shorter form with the same saga in AM 152 fol.

16 The prologues also accompany both sagas in AM 343a 4to (1450–1475), and that with *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* appears with the same saga in AM 577 4to (1450–1499).

different information regarding the place and manner of Sturlaugr starfsami's death. This, along with the evidence of *Sturlaugs rímur*, has prompted the suggestion that *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* was originally composed by someone with knowledge of a shorter, now lost version of *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* (Björn K. Þórólfsson 1934, 399–402; Sanders 2006, 877). However, in the late fifteenth century when the scribes of 589a–f decided to copy the two texts sequentially, only the longer version seems to have been available, in this case AM 335 4to (1390–1410) (Zitzelsberger 1969b, 308–309). While they made some effort to iron out easily fixable inconsistencies between their two sagas, such as the number and names of Sturlaugr's children and the destination of his quest for the aurochs's horn, they nevertheless produced a manuscript containing two texts that differ in regards to some significant details.[17] It seems likely, moreover, that these scribes also used AM 335 4to as their exemplar for two short narratives in 586 (*Af þremr kumpánum* and *Af þremr þjófum í Danmörk*), although further philological analysis would be needed to confirm this. If this was the case, that leaves two sagas and several other short narratives that are in AM 335 4to, which the scribes of 589a–f and 586 had access to but chose not to include in their own codices.[18]

Further evidence for the scribes' selectivity is provided by two other genealogical pairs of sagas that they copied sequentially (the exemplars of which are unknown): 589e's *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra* and *Ála flekks saga* (Áli being the grandson of Hálfdan), and 586's *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* and *Vilmundar saga viðutan* (Vilmundr being the grandson of Bósi). It is clear that these scribes did not just copy whatever texts they had at their disposal; they clearly put some thought into what to include, how to arrange it, and how their audiences might respond. This makes the two manuscripts they produced promising candidates for the kind of whole-book analysis, which has been proved fruitful by, among others, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2014) and Orning (2017). At present, it is not possible to identify patrons for 589a–f and 586 like these scholars do for their objects of study, and, by consequence, draw some conclusions about individual motivations. However, in my analysis of the manuscripts, I will argue that the text witnesses they contain share a number of recurrent patterns and viewpoints, relating, for example, to kingship, gendered aristocratic modes of behaviour, and the practice

17 In other witnesses of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* the destination of Sturlaugr's quest is 'incorrectly' given as Ireland (for example AM 152 fol, fol. 99^{v}, l. 39) whereas in 589f's version it is Bjarmaland (589f, fol. 15^{v}, ll. 16–17), as is told in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*.

18 The other texts in AM 335 4to are a Norse version of an Old Testament passage about Samson; three short narratives now titled *Af sjö listum og sjö dyggðum og sjö leikum*, *Um heilræði er einn arabískur maður kenndi syni sínum*, *Frá skógfaranda manni og einum ormi*, and *Af versificatori er gjörðist portari*; *Gibbons saga*; *Drauma-Jóns saga*; and the beginning of *Af rómverska dáranum*.

of magic. The arguments I will make about the presence of these themes are, by nature, subjective and speculative, but it seems unlikely that whoever put these codices together in the late fifteenth century did so at random without some thought as to what they were trying to achieve by doing so. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2014, 94) writes that AM 152 fol's large size and ornamentation make it "a prestigious, élite codex that was probably intended to encode certain ethical values and serve an ideological function". As will be discussed in Chapter 2, 589a–f and 586 were made much more frugally. However, with the former (the more complete of the two today) taking up a total of 141 leaves, it is clear that they would have nonetheless required a significant investment to produce.[19] Moreover, since that investment seems to have been channelled into content rather than aesthetics, that content is worth investigating in more detail, even if there are no named scribes or patrons to assign the agency of their creation to.

Moreover, although their creation contexts are unknown, some information is available about 589a–f and 586's later transmission histories because of work done by Agnete Loth who introduced the 1977 facsimile edition. She identified a number of names in the manuscripts' margins that were added from about a century after their initial production and suggested several individuals who they may have referred to. Although these names cannot help identify precise patrons, they do help localise the manuscripts to a degree and give insight into transmission and reception, which are of great relevance to a historically grounded study of cultural memory (Confino 2011, 47).

1.5 The Structure of this Book

This book is divided into two halves, taking its structure from two of the approaches Erll and Nünning (2005, 264–80, 284–86; Hermann 2013, 335–40, 344–46) suggest for studying cultural memory in literature: the "memory of literature" and "literature as a medium of cultural memory".[20]

The first half is concerned with unpicking the 'memories' encoded in 589a–f through a literary, intertextual analysis focussed on its representation of the legendary Scandinavian past. Although both manuscripts contain *fornaldarsögur*, I have chosen to focus on just 589a–f here because they are both relatively large compilations, and it would not be possible to provide a detailed analysis of both.

19 By comparison, AM 152 fol is made up of 200 leaves.

20 The third angle they suggest, "memory in literature", is relevant to the concerns of Chapter 7 which discusses the sagas' discourses on media and memory.

Of the two, I regard 589a–f as more interesting because of its unique version of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and because, as will be discussed in Chapter 8, it may have circulated more widely than 586.

In Chapter 3, I examine the texts in the first five parts of the manuscript (589a–e) and outline the interpretation of the past constructed across them. I take Lachmann's intertextual framework as a broad starting point and also draw on insights from recent scholarship on saga genre and hybridity. This provides a backdrop to the texts which I believe are the most interesting in the manuscript – *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* and *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* – which I examine closely in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 respectively. Here, I look at more specific instances of intertextuality: cases where we can identify clear borrowings of motifs or names, where explicit references are made to other texts, and when particular narratives about the past are summoned through the use of certain settings. I pay particular attention to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*'s *apologiæ*, which, I argue, are key to understanding the peculiar nature of this saga's representation of pre-Christian history.

This discussion leads into the concerns of the second half, where I explore the historical significance of the legendary past in both 589a–f and 586. I draw attention to the medium in Chapter 7, using text-internal evidence to hone in on how the scribes understood their own role and that of the form within which they worked. The manuscripts' vocality and relationship to 'folklore' forms a key part of the discussion.

This lays the foundations for Chapter 8, where I relate the legendary past depicted in 589a–f and 586 to the fifteenth-century historical context in which they were produced. Part of this chapter is devoted to the manuscripts' sixteenth- and seventeenth-century transmission histories, since they provide some hints at who may have been responsible for their production. I then make some suggestions about the significance of the manuscripts' sagas for their patrons, with a particular emphasis on the potential political implications of their 'vocality' and close relationship with oral tradition. The discussion about transmission also reveals something about these sagas' reception, and so I make some suggestions about how the manuscripts may have continued to shape cultural memory as they were circulated and read during the centuries that followed and may have played a role in the development of early modern discourses on folklore and magic.

This study is an attempt to take a closer look at the workings of cultural memory, literacy, and orality in late medieval Iceland and shed some light on how the legendary saga functioned as a site at which they interfaced. It takes as its starting point the belief that the legendary sagas made up not a coherent corpus of texts, but rather a series of contributions to the complex and dynamic 'space' that was Icelandic cultural memory. My aim is to explore these manuscripts, and the specific text witnesses they contain, as interventions in that space and mediums of

cultural memory, which played an active role in the evolution of communal histories and identities in fifteenth-century Iceland. I do not aim to provide sweeping general conclusions about the function of the legendary past during this period. Rather, I follow Erll's (2011, 171) contention that "[c]onceiving of 'literature as a medium of cultural memory' requires a rigorous contextualization of literary works" and a "realization that the literary production of cultural memory is an ongoing process, characterized by a dynamic interplay between text and context". Accordingly, through my own contextualisation of these two manuscripts, on literary, media, and historical levels, I aim to provide one snapshot of a complex memory culture that was constantly in flux.