7 The Vocality of AM 589a–f 4to and AM 586 4to

To better understand the relationship between the sagas, their manuscripts, and their historical contexts, it is necessary to foreground the medium – that which facilitates contact between the narrative and its audience. To do so, I have chosen to interrogate how 589a–f and 586 define themselves – their own 'medium theory' (Mitchell 2004). As discussed in the Introduction, my aim is not to make broad claims about 'the saga' as a medium in general, nor about a particular subgrouping, or even one particular text. Rather, my goal is to examine the 'medium theory' that is specific to the particular sources in question (these two collections of unique text witnesses) and to identify what their own "media-theoretical discourse" (Glauser 2010, 313) was: what are they mediating? For whom? And for what purposes?

As discussed in the Introduction, the Icelandic sagas' 'vocality' – their status as both oral and written – is a key aspect of their 'medium theory'. Accordingly, my specific interest in this chapter is in how 589a–f and 586 relate to their own orality and literacy (in terms of both sources and reception) and how they position themselves in relation to other oral and written 'texts'. I begin by discussing in turn how literate and oral traditions are presented in the sagas and their *apologiæ*, how they are brought hierarchically into contact, and how they relate to the courtly elite identity that is constructed across them. I then discuss the *apologiæ* of 589f's *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and 586's *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* and, via comparison to one of the earliest examples of an *apologia*, argue that they point towards tensions in the mediation of oral sources. I then broaden the scope to consider the wider textual marketplace within which these texts were circulating and discuss how they position themselves in relation to other texts as well as how they relate to their own written status. Finally, I consider the views they express about the capacity of the written word to preserve memories.

7.1 Literacy

Across the two manuscripts, literacy and book learning is afforded high status and aligned with the ideal courtly culture described in Chapter 3. It is a characteristic associated with some of the sagas' heroes: Kirialax is considerably more learned than the rest, but *Klári saga*'s title character is also "til bækur settr" (589d, fol. 1^{r}, ll. 14–15; *Clarus saga*, 1878, ch. 1., p. 1) (set to study) before his pursuit of Serena, and the eponymous protagonist of *Vilmundar saga viðutan* is taught "boknæme" (586, fol. 20^{v}, l. 27; *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, 1962, ch. 8, p. 152) (book-

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111338651-007

learning) by his mother. But since most of the sagas take place in the pre-Christian (and thus pre-literate) past, written texts play a larger role as sources of authority that enhance the sagas' historical and learned credentials. According to its introduction, *Klári saga* was supposedly derived from a written source with clerical associations. It opens by saying:

> Her byrium uær upp [þersa frasaugn] sem sagdi u[irduligr herra] ion biskup haldorsson aigiætrar miningar en hann [fan hana] skrifada med latinu i [Franz] i þat form er [þeir kalla] ritmos en uær kaullum henndingum (589c, fol. 8^{v}, ll. 22–25; *Clarus saga*, 1878, ch. 1, p. 1)[161]
>
> (Here begins this story which was told by the worthy bishop Jón Halldórsson of noble memory, and he found it written in Latin in France in that form which they call *ritmos* but we call *hending*.)

Similar claims are made in some *apologiæ*, such as in the prologue of *Ektors saga*:

> [þ]eir menn er mest stunda á iardliga speki eru iafnliga a stundandi at lesa sem flestar frædi bækr suo at þar af megi þeir þui rauksamligar samansetia þau afreks uerk er unnit hafa agiætir kappar fyri heimi uær hófum fundit i þeim bokum er saman hefir sett eirn agiætur meistare huer er het gallterius hann hefr suo sitt mal at hann segir fyst frett borg þeirri er troia hetir er agiætuzt hefir uerit iaullu asea uelldi ok þa er hun stod med mestum bloma uoru i henne xii konung domar uoru þar ok iafnvel tolf haufut tungur uar þo þeirra sa konungr agiætaztr er priamus het hann uar haufut konungr i borgini hans son uar hinn sterki ektor er sterkaztur hefir uerit um hans daga ok margir adrir þa þeir se hir eigi nefnd ok segium nu fatt af þeim afreks monum ok stundum hellde til anara atburda (589d, fol. 17^{v}, ll. 1–10)[162]
>
> (Those men who are most learned in earthly wisdom are as equally engaging to read as more learned books since they have truthfully composed those [accounts of] great deeds that have been done by great champions for this world. We have found [this story] in those books which have been composed by the great master who is called Gallterus. He claims that he told the first news about that city which is called Troy, which was the greatest of all the Asian domains. When it was most flourishing, it had twelve kingdoms and accordingly there were twelve languages, although that king who was most praiseworthy was called Priam. He was over-king in the city [and] his son was the strong Ektor, the strongest of his day, and many others which here are not named. But now we say little of the deeds of those men, and proceed rather to other events.)

The epilogue extends this appeal to learned authorities further:

---

161 The text on this page is very damaged.

162 This version of the prologue is unique to this manuscript and has been edited by Loth separately: *Et indledningskapitel til Ectors saga*, 1970. It also appears in AM 585a 4to, a seventeenth-century copy of this witness.

> [n]u uilium uer sagdi sá er þessi æfintýr hefir saman sett bidia lydin at um bæti mina fáfrædi þui uer haufum hardla fiari staddir uerit þeim tidindum hefir eg sagdi hann fundit i frædi bokum meistara gallteriums en uer truum hann fundit hafa i bokum humerus skalldz er saman hefir sett troio manna saugu ok þa eptir farandi marga adra af hans kyns monum sagdi hann þenna ektor en uid alexandro magno ecki vanntad hafa en maurg ágiæti yfer borit ma nu þat á sliku sia at solar gudin hefir eigi minni uirding lagt á þa menn er eigi hafa skirn hlotid en þa er hann hafa heidrad i þessi uerolldu. En nu þo at sa hafi mikil efni i fært i sinum studium þa megum uer þo eigi undradzt þeira agiæti sakir þess at suo margt kann til at bera á uorum daugum at uer mundum eigi trua ef oss uæri sagt ur fiarlægum staudum ok þui munum uer eigi mistrua nu þesse æfintyr sagdi hann þenna mikla bardaga uerit hafa hin fyrsta dag calendas mánadar iulii ok uoru þa til piningar lausnara heimsins þuiu hundrud uetra siautiger ok siau uetr (589d, fol. 48^{v}, ll. 1–15; *Ectors saga*, 1962, ch. 28, pp. 185–186)[163]
>
> ("Now we want," said the one who composed this story, "to ask of the people that they should improve upon my ignorance, because we are very far from those events. I have," he said, "found [this story] in the learned books of Master Gallterus" – but we believe he found them in the books of the poet Homer – "who composed the story of the men of Troy and then that of many other members of his kin." He said this Ektor was not inferior to Alexander the Great and surpassed many excellent people. Now from this it may be seen that the sun god has not bestowed less honour on those men who have not been baptised than those who have worshipped him in this world. But now, even though he has included a lot of material in his studies, we ought nevertheless not wonder at their greatness because so much is known to have come to pass in our days that we would not believe if it was told to us in distant places and therefore we should not disbelieve this story. He said the great battle had taken place on the first day of July and was three hundred and seventy-seven years after the suffering of the world's redeemer.[164])

By referring to the "frædi bokum" (learned books) of Gallterus (known as the author of *Alexanders saga*) and Homer (supposedly the author of *Trójumanna saga*) these passages position *Ektors saga*, in Barnes' (2014, 207) words, "als eine Übung in *Translatio studii* von der antiken Welt in das westliche Europa und weiter nach Island gestaltet" (as an exercise in *translatio studii* from the ancient world to western Europe and on to Iceland). It is interesting that the scribes of this manuscript have included in their epilogue a 'correction' of the 'original' compiler's claim that the story was based on one by Gallterus, preferring to cite Homer as the saga's inspiration. This coheres with the manuscript's wider designation of Troy as the origin point of European courtly culture and goes further by situating the text itself as a product of that culture: it was inspired not by the French Gallte-

163 This version of the epilogue is considerably longer than that recorded in the Loth's edition, which is based on AM 152 fol, and (to my knowledge) has not been edited separately.

164 Thanks are due to my anonymous peer-reviewer who has improved the translation of the epilogue considerably.

rus (known in English as Walter of Châtillon), but by the classical authority Homer.[165] *Ektors saga*'s prologue also evokes the Troy connection through its reference to the myth of Trojan origins, which (as discussed in Chapter 4.1) finds its fullest expression in the Prologue of *Snorra Edda*. The information recorded about the twelve kingdoms and languages of Troy specifically crops up, as Loth (1979, 364) notes, in Codex Wormianus's extended redaction of the *Snorra Edda* Prologue, while the reference found in *Ektors saga*'s epilogue to the "solar gudin" having placed as much worth in unbaptised men as he has Christians corresponds with the sympathetic interpretation of paganism outlined in the *Edda*'s other versions.[166]

7.2 Orality

Orality, the counterpart to literacy, is afforded two levels of status in these texts. On the upper level is orally composed and/or transmitted poetry. This seems to have been of limited interest to the manuscripts' scribes since there is relatively little in the sagas of 589a–f and 586, but it is mostly spoken by high-status speakers when it does appear.[167] Verses are spoken by the eponymous protagonists of the legendary *Ásmundar saga kappabana* and the *Íslendingasögur Króka-Refs saga* and *Þórðar saga hreðu*. In all, the heroes either recount or foreshadow their own courageous deeds, and none of the verses are quoted for explicitly authenticating purposes, although we can assume they served this function to a degree nonetheless.[168] Poetry is also spoken by otherworldly figures in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, and *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. The verses in *Bósa saga*

165 It is worth noting that the references to both of these authorities in the mid-saga interjection in 589f's *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (quoted on p. X) are unique among the saga's medieval witnesses.

166 Elsewhere 'sólarguð' refers to Apollo, but here we must assume that it was the Christian God that the scribes had in mind. On the different interpretations of paganism in the Prologue's different versions, see Wellendorf 2018, 84–108.

167 There is a total of thirty-nine stanzas across the two manuscripts' 174 leaves.

168 There is one place where we would expect a claim to the authority of verse, that is in the above quotation from the prologue to *Göngu-Hrólfs* saga. The version of the prologue attached to *Sigurðar saga þögla* in AM 152 fol makes a claim to poetic sources in its first line: instead of "forn skrædum" (old scrolls) it refers to "fornkuædum" (AM 152 fol, 69^{v}, l. 2.31) (old poems). It is likely that the reading in 589f is an error: in addition to there being no material evidence for the use of scrolls in medieval Iceland, as O'Connor (2009, 368) notes this line of the prologue seems to be distinguishing between oral and written sources – learned individuals and poems on the one hand, and books on the other. The fact that it has not been corrected, however, may attest to the limits of the scribes' interest in poetry more generally.

ok Herrauðs, spoken by the witch Busla, are particularly unique and will be discussed further below. In *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* they are ominously recited by the priestesses in the pagan temple in Bjarmaland (quoted on p. 67) and in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* by the undead Hreggviðr who celebrates Hrólfr's upcoming victory against Eiríkr (quoted on p. 94). The only other reference to poetry in these manuscripts is in *Stúfs þáttr*, where the title character's verses (none of which are actually quoted) become his ticket into the favour and retinue of King Haraldr harðráði. With the exception of *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* and *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* where women speak prophetic verses, a *fornaldarsögur* commonplace (Quinn 1998), speaking poetry is presented as an admirable heroic practice, albeit one which is not elevated to a particularly high degree.

The other kind of orality represented in these sagas relates to the knowledge transmitted by lower-class or otherwise marginal figures. It is afforded a much lower status and presented as a distinctly opposing field of knowledge to that associated with literacy. This opposition is clearest in *Vilmundar saga viðutan*: both of Vilmundr's parents are from noble families – as well as learning "boknæme" from his mother, his father is said to have taught Vilmundr the courtly pursuits of "sund ok tafl ok at skiota ok at skylmazt med skiolld ok suerd" (586, fol. 20^{v}, l. 26; *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, 1962, ch. 8, p. 152) (swimming and chess and to shoot and joust with a shield and sword). However, they live "i afdal langt i burt fra audrum monnum" (586, fol. 20^{v}, l. 21; *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, ch. 8, p. 152) (in a small valley far away from other people), and this means that Vilmundr develops an understanding of the world which is clouded by superstition. When he asks his parents where he can find the people from the sagas he knows, they tell him that "menn uoru þa allir dauder, en traull uære epter i heiminum sumstadar ok dræpi þau menn ef þau sæi þa, alfar lifa ok eru þeir i iórdu nidri" (586, fol. 20^{v}, ll. 28–30; *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, 1962, ch. X, pp. 152–153) (the men were all dead, but there were still trolls in some parts of the world who kill men if they see them [and] there are *álfar* and they live underground). Consequently, when he meets a princess for the first time he asks her if she is a human, *tröll*, or *álfkona* and tells her that he does not know what a king is, much to her court's amusement. His parents' worldview is not compatible with life at her royal court, and over the course of the saga Vilmundr clears the cloud of superstition that he was brought up with: he befriends the princess's brother and eventually ingratiates himself with the king too, earning himself a title and royal wife. He returns to his father "ok baud honum at fara med ser, ok bua eigi leingr suo fiarre monnum" (586, fol. 22^{v}, l. 8; *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, 1960, ch. 17, p. 176) (and bade him to go with him, and not live so far away from other people), and he too is given a territory to rule by the king.

A similar opposition between the unlearned superstitions of the common people and the upper-class heroes comes through in the famous self-conscious comment made by Vilmundr's grandfather Bósi of *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*. When Busla, Bósi's foster-mother, offers to teach him *galdr* (a kind of pre-Christian magic),[169] the narrator reports that "þose sagdizt eigi uilia at þat uære skrifat i saugu hans at hann ynne nockurn hlut med sleitum þann sem honum skylldi med kallmennzku telia" (586, fol. 13^{r}, ll. 21–22; *Die ältere Bósa-saga*, 1893, ch. 2, pp. 6–7) (Bósi said he didn't want it to be written in his saga that he had achieved anything with trickery which it should be said he had done with manhood). The implication here, as Mitchell (2011, 190) notes, is that Busla's magic and Bósi's heroic masculinity are incompatible – one is fitting content for a hero's saga and the other is not.

A character similar to Busla features in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* as well. When the evil Grímr Ægir is introduced it is said that "ecki uissu menn ætt hans ne kynferdi þuiat groa uólfa hafdi fundit hann i flædar male i hlesey, hun uar modir þordar ok hafdi hann upp fætt ok kennt honum alla fiolkyngi" (589f, fol. 14^{r}, ll. 11–13; *Gaungu-Hrólfs saga*, 1830, ch. 2, p. 241) (No one knew Grímr's background or his family, for he'd been found on the beach at Hlésey by the sorceress Gróa, who was the mother of Þórðr and had fostered Grímr and raised him and taught him all kinds of *fjölkynngi* (sorcery)). Later in the saga, Grímr Ægir is also said to perform *galdr*, precisely the same skill that Busla had offered to teach Bósi.[170] Another comparable figure is Véfreyja of *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, the elderly foster mother of Ása, of whom it is said that "kom henne fatt a uuart" (*Sturlaugs saga starfsama*. Version A, 1969, p. 9) (little happened to her that was unexpected) and that she taught Ása "kun*n*astu" (*Sturlaugs saga starfsama*. Version A, 1969, p. 9) (knowledge, or magical lore). Véfreyja does not have as problematic a status as Busla or Gróa, but nevertheless she lives on the fringes of society and is something of a joke: the erotic interest she takes in the protagonist when she "strauk hann allan ok þickizt hann mikit styrkna uid" (589f, fol. 3^{r}, ll. 26–27; *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*. Version A, 1969, pp. 13, 91) (stroked him all over and he seemed to become very strong) was clearly, as Sanders (2006, 881) says, intended to be funny. In these cases, the orally-transmitted skill-sets of these marginal figures (all lower class and female) are subordinate to the world of the upper-class heroes. The relation between oral traditions and the saga which these examples suggest is one of opposition.

169 On *galdr*, see Meylan 2014, 35–39.

170 "i þui bles grimr med suo miklum galldri" (589f 4to, fol. 14^{v}, l. 20; *Gaungu-Hrólfs saga*, 1830, ch. 3, p. 244) (at this, Grímr blew with so much galdr).

The same is suggested by the *apologiæ*, which, as well as appealing to written texts for legitimacy, distance themselves from the unlearned traditions associated with the lower classes. This is expressed explicitly in the prologue to *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*:

> [þ]esse saga hefzt eigi af lokleysu þeirre er kater menn skraukua ser til skemtanar ok gamans med ofrodligum setningum heldr sannar hun sig sialf med rettum ættar taulum, ok fornum ordz kvidum er menn hafa iduliga af þeim hlutum er i þessu æfintyre eru skrifader (586, fol. 12^{v}, ll. 24–27; *Die ältere Bósa-saga*, 1893, ch. 1, p. 3)
>
> (This saga is not based on the nonsense which merry people invent for their entertainment and pleasure in unlearned arrangements, rather it proves itself with correct genealogies and old sayings, which people frequently take from those things which are written in this tale.)[171]

Here, the narrator positions their saga as an authoritative account of the past by distinguishing it from the stories told by the common people (O'Connor 2009, 367). There is a precedent for this defence, as O'Connor points out, in the prologue to the S-recension of Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (one of the earliest recorded *apologia*), in which Oddr alludes to a plurality of narratives regarding the missionary king.[172] Oddr writes that "betra er slict með gamni at heyra en stivp meðra saugvr er hiarðar sveinar segia er enge veit hvart satt er. er iafnan lata konungin minztan isinvm frasögn" (Oddr Snorrason, *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, 1932, Prologus (S-text), p. 2) ("it is better to listen to such things with pleasure than to listen to stepmother tales told by shepherd boys, in which one never knows whether there is truth because they always count the king least in their stories") (Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, 2003, Prologue, p. 35). As Quinn (2000, 40) writes, the implication here is that there were informal, oral narratives circulating about the missionary king among the illiterate populace who, many years after conversion, "continued telling traditional stories without realigning them to reflect Christian values". By contrast, Oddr presents himself as the arbiter of the authoritative account who has sifted through the problematic sources and committed the correct account to vellum (Quinn 2000, 39–40). In O'Connor's (2009, 366) words: "[c]oncern for truth is presented as one of several prestigious features which are the preserve of saga-authors, and which are irrelevant to the world of unlearned storytelling" – the world of shepherds and lower-class women. The same kind of claim is made in the prologue to *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* where the truth value of the saga – a narrative which has been "skrifad-

171 The final clause is translated with the guidance of O'Connor 2009, 363.
172 The beginning of the saga is missing in the A-recension (AM 310 4to).

ir" (written) – derives from its difference to the stories circulated by the unlearned populace.

7.3 The *apologiæ* and the Medium

However, as the preceding chapters have made clear, a sharp divide between oral traditions and the sagas in question cannot be maintained, because these texts contain a large amount of precisely the kind of material that the above examples suggest are in tension with the sagas' aristocratic focus and historical credentials.

In discussing this 'oral material', I follow Thomas DuBois's (2014, 59) definition as that which "has either its sources and/or its transmission within small, informal face-to-face communities outside of officially designated frameworks for the preservation and transmission of knowledge".[173] This does not refer to material that never enters the written record; considering the nature of the sources, such analysis would be impossible. Rather, the metric of assessment is "the degree to which the materials preserved in medieval manuscripts reflect oral sources or oral transmission, despite the obvious and unmistakable fact that they eventually entered, or re-entered, written tradition through their incorporation into the manuscripts we have at hand" (DuBois 2014, 60).[174] Such material can be identified by parallels between texts that do not seem to have direct relationships, and thus likely drew on orally-circulating traditions, as well as through comparison to similar material recorded in later folklore collections.[175]

Examples include the legends that date back to the pre-Christian period, such as those about Goðmundr of Glæsisvellir, Ásmundr berserkjabani (otherwise known as Gnóð-Ásmundr), and Ásmundr kappabani. Then there are the various characters and episodes which do not seem to have been associated with specific legends, but which seem to have been inspired by material circulating in the kind of informal spheres DuBois describes. This relates mostly to the sagas' magical content and the various *tröll*, *álfar*, and other 'small gods' who populate their diverse casts of characters, and which in *Vilmundar saga viðutan* are figured as part of the worldviews of those on the margins of society.[176] But although they

173 See also Frog and Joonas Ahola's (2021, 35) recent discussion of folklore, in which the authors stress the importance of transmission through social networks "without institutional administration".

174 On re-oralisation and the role of literature in shaping Icelandic folklore, see Glauser 1996.

175 An overview of these sources is provided in Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003, 134–148.

176 On 'small gods', see Ostling 2018.

are rooted in pre-Christian beliefs and placed in the pre-Christian past in these texts, such beings persisted in many ordinary Icelanders' worldviews throughout the fifteenth century and beyond. As Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (2003, 149) writes, for many people,

> [t]he land was full of powers that were dangerous to handle, except according to customs which were based on ancient precedent. There were supernatural beings in the woods, the mountains and the lakes; the people knew of springs and rivers which had their own various natures, of burial-mounds with the living dead in them, of ghosts of exposed infants, of trees and stones used in sacrifice.

Such beliefs had a contested relationship with Christianity and left only elusive traces on the written record; in texts such as these, they became, in Michael Ostling's (2018, 10) words, "objects of an endless effort at exorcism by which some Christians seek to expunge them beyond the margins and locate them firmly in hell, in the pagan past, or in the foolish minds of babbling 'old wives'".[177] Examples include both the villainous figures violently overcome by the protagonists (such as the *jötnar*, Grímr Ægir, and the sacrificial pagans of Bjarmaland) as well as the other problematic figures (giantesses, dwarfs, and members of the waking dead) who choose to help them. More specific examples include the magical harps played by the nix-like Kvintalín of *Samsons saga fagra* and Kolr of *Valdimars saga*; the stone-boats used by the *allra trölla þing* in the latter; and the *álfkonur* who appear in *Samsons saga fagra* as the creators of the magic mantle and in the episode in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* where Hrólfr helps one with a particularly difficult birth.

Perhaps the most stand-out example is the series of three curses uttered by the aforementioned witch Busla in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, which are known as *Buslabœn* (Busla's prayer) and *Syrpuvers* (Syrpa's verse) (see Fig. 4). In her second curse, Busla incites a variety of these types of 'folkloric' beings against the King Hringr:

> traull ok alfar ok taufranornir,
> buar bergrisar brenne þinar hallir,
> hate þig hrimþursar, hestar stredi þig,
> straen stangi þig, en stormar ære þig,
> ok uei uerdi þer, nema þu uilia minn giorir,
> (586, 14[v] 10–12; *Die ältere Bósa-saga*, 1893, ch. 5, p. 18)

177 Similarly, DuBois (2014, 72) writes: "Christian textual traditions directed clerical writers toward such an interrogation of local lore [. . .] The sagas' inclusion of seemingly pagan elements becomes a sign of a process of surveillance in which the elite were seemingly constantly involved."

(May trolls and elves and magic-Norns, supernatural inhabitants and mountain giants burn your halls. May frost giants loathe you, sallions violate you, straw prick you and storms bewilder you; and harm will come to you unless you do my bidding.) (*Bósa saga*, 2017, p. 34)

Her third and final verse is a runic riddle:

komi her segger sex, seg þu mer naufn þeira,
aull obundin, eg mun þer syna,
getr þu eigi rádit suo at mer rétt þicki,
þa skulu þig hunndar i hel gnaga,
en sál þin saukui i uite
(586, 14^{v}, 15–17; *Die ältere Bósa-saga*, 1893, ch. 5, p. 19)

(Let six warriors come here; tell me all their names without concealment; I will show [them] to you. If you cannot guess, so that it seems correct to me, then let dogs gnaw you to death and your soul sink to punishment.) (*Bósa saga*, 2017, p. 36)

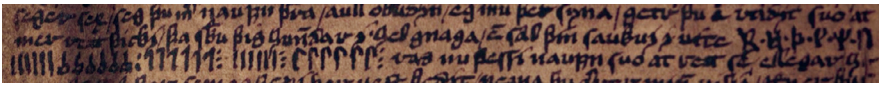

Fig. 4: AM 586 4to, fol. 14^{v}, ll. 16–17; runes at the end of Busla's *Syrpuvers* in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*. Source: handrit.is. Printed with permission. Copyright © of the Árni Magnússon Institute, Iceland.

It is likely that these curses were inspired by material circulating in oral tradition: Mitchell (2011, 54–57) has identified a parallel to the first of those quoted above on a fourteenth-century Bergen rune-stick (N B257) with a similar invocation, and the second has precedents in considerably earlier Scandinavian inscriptions (Thompson 1978, 51–53). This is not to say that the curses were taken wholesale from oral tellers; such would be impossible considering the text-based solution to the final riddle, which, as Claiborne W. Thompson (1978, 55) argues, is inextricably tied to the written medium. Rather, it is to say that, as Vésteinn Ólason (1994) writes, they can be considered "a parody of traditional curses and charms", which drew on material that would have been circulating orally. When dealing with these kinds of written traces of oral tradition, it is helpful to, in DuBois's (2014, 60) words again, "examine these relatively shadowy producers of texts" – i.e. the manuscripts' scribes – "as performers, and view their resultant manuscripts as instances of performance".[178] He writes, these "performers make particular statements about themselves and their understandings of knowledge and

178 On the 'performative turn' in folkloristics, see Lindow 2021; Mitchell 2022, 19–23.

value through the choices they make regarding the use of oral vs. written materials" (DuBois 2014, 61). From this angle, even cases of parody can be considered performances or engagements in tradition, which cast their chosen material in a new (and here mocking) light as well as in a new medium.

But although this 're-performance' of oral traditions is disparaging to a degree, as the preceding chapters have shown, the sagas' heroes are not wholly distinct from the 'trickery' of characters like Busla. This is most obviously the case in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* where the hero's achievements all result from the magical work of the undead King Hreggviðr and the dwarf Möndull. This is also the case in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* where, despite his hesitance, Bósi does come to rely on the witch Busla: the curses quoted above are uttered in his aid, and she helps him a second time at the final battle where she shapeshifts into a *glatunshundtík* (some kind of canine creature) to engage in a mortal combat undersea, never to return again.[179] There are similar instances of helpful magic in the other sagas too. In addition to Véfreyja of *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, some examples from 589a–f are the four *álfar* of Jötunheimar who are responsible for crafting the magic mantle of *Samsons saga fagra*; the various magically empowered helpful giantesses of *Valdimars saga*, *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Hálfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, and *Ála flekks saga*; and the helpful dwarfs of *Ektors saga*, *Þorsteins þáttr bœjarmagns*, and *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*. There is even an act of healing in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* that is almost identical to that performed by Möndull: when Arinnefja reattaches Egill einhendi's hand after preserving it with some *lífsgrös*.

There is, therefore, a contradiction underlying these texts in their relationship to these oral traditions. Their written medium and aristocratic focus means that their compilers were clearly invested in distinguishing their upper-class heroes from the unlearned nonsense told and believed by marginal people like Vilmundr's mother and Busla, but they nevertheless incorporated precisely that kind of material into their texts in ways that are not exclusively demonising or wholly disparaging. This contradiction is best exemplified by the nebulous presence of the *álfar*: in *Vilmundar saga viðutan* they represent unlearned superstition, whereas in *Samsons saga fagra* they are the creators of the elite-sustaining magic mantle, and in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* they are part of the network of otherworldly beings on whom the hero's success depends. Interestingly, these *álfkonur* do in fact live beneath the earth (within a grass-covered mound), just as Vilmundr's superstitious mother had said.

179 Hui (2018b, 233–235) notes that *glatunshundtík* is a *hapax legomenon* that may have some local significance to Gautland where much of the saga takes place.

Here it is worth making another comparison to Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, because a similar contradiction seems to have also been at play. Central to the prologue's truth defence was the saga's Christian purpose: the fact that it centred the king and honoured God, unlike the oral stepmother tales told by shepherd boys. However, much of the saga's information does seem to have derived from informal oral sources, and notably little skaldic poetry survives from the missionary king's reign (Clunies Ross 2014, 67; Grønlie 2017, 46–47).[180] For most of the text, these sources combined with the expectations of the medium are unproblematic. However, there is one significant point where Oddr and/or his redactors waiver. Following the incident where Óláfr takes on Eyvindr kinnrifa, the demon sorcerer mentioned in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*'s prologue, Óláfr goes to battle against Þórir hjörtr. When Þórir is shot with an arrow and dies, a hart springs from his body and injures Óláfr's dog Vigi. The narrator then intervenes to say:

> En þo at þuilikir lutir se sagþir. fra slicum scrimslum oc undrum sem nu var sagt þa ma slict uist utrulict þyckia. En allir menn vita þat at fiandinn er iafnan gagnstaðligr almaktum guði. oc þeir hinir aumu men er guði hafna En fiandinn suikr með allzconar uelum oc suikræðum oc uekr up sinn ureinan anda. með hinum uestum lutum. þeim imoti er guði þiona oc blindar sionir þeira oc oll vit licamans þa bleckir hann oc tælir með morgum lutum. En þessa luti er ver segiom fra slicum lutum oc dómisogum. þa dómum ver þat eigi sannleik at sua hafi verit. helldr hyggiom ver at sua hafi synnz þui at fiandinn er fullr up flærðar oc illzku (Oddr Snorrason, *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, 1932, ch. 45 (A-text), pp. 142–143).
>
> (The sort of tales about such phantoms and prodigies as have just been related may surely seem less than credible, but everyone knows that the devil is always in opposition to Almighty God, together with those miserable men who reject God. The devil betrays us with all manner of deceits and faithlessness and, with the worst contrivances, sets his unclean spirit against those who serve God. He blinds their vision and fleshly understanding, and he tricks and deceives them in many ways. The matters that we have related with respect to such tales and exempla we do not judge to be true in the sense that they happened, but rather we believe that they appeared to happen because the devil is full of deceit and evil) (Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, 2003, ch. 45, p. 97).

There seems to have been some uncertainty about how to relate what must have been orally-transmitted stories about the sorcerer Eyvindr kinnrifa in the saga's written medium. As Siân Grønlie (2017, 54) writes, the reason for this hesitation is a question of "orthodoxy: since the devils that roam the earth have purely aerial

180 Although an oral art form that predates the arrival of literacy in Scandinavia, the formalised and elite status of skaldic verse means it has many of the characteristics we would associate with the written word and was associated with the upper echelons of society rather than the informal circles referred to by DuBois. Judith Jesch (2005) has even argued that it can be considered a kind of proto-literacy.

bodies, the grossly corporeal nature of Eyvindr, who can die, and the hart, which seriously wounds Vigi, is theologically problematic". Thus, the episode requires explanation to make sure it is in keeping with Christian interpretations of pagan magic.[181]

Something similar happens in the prose narration of the Codex Regius. In the legendary portion, the narrator famously emerges between the poems to address an absent narrative – that of Kára, which is lost to us presumably because of the attention it pays to the heathen belief in reincarnation. As Quinn (2000, 37–38) suggests, it seems that the compiler saw this belief to be incompatible with the technology of writing, because just as Oddr disregards his alternate accounts as stepmother stories, the Codex Regius compiler brushes these ones off as "kerlingavilla" (*Edda*, 1983, p. 160) (old-wives' tales). In both cases, a narratorial interjection arises as the result of a tension between oral materials and the written medium.

As discussed in Chapter 5.4.2, a similar process seems to be at work in the *apologiæ* of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* too: the mid-saga interjection and a substantial part of the prologue seem to have been aimed at defending the inclusion of the unusual figures of Hreggviðr and Möndull. Something similar may also be happening in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*. Although its prologue does not specifically mention its magical content, that magic's unique character and its great prominence in the narrative likely contributed to the concern expressed by the prologue that the saga was uncomfortably close to the *lokleysa* (nonsense) that unlearned people were known to make up for entertainment. Moreover, the prose passages that introduce Busla's three curses make their controversial nature clear:

(1) þetta kuelld hit sama kom busla i þat herbergi sem hringr konungr suaf i, ok hof upp bæn þa er sidan er kaullud buslubæn, ok hefir hun uid fræg ordit sidan, ok eru þar i maurg ord ok ill þau sem kristum monnum er þarfleysa i munne at hafa, En þo er þetta upp haf á hene (586, fol. 14^{r}, ll. 28–31; *Die ältere Bósa saga*, 1893, ch. 5, p. 15).

(That evening, Busla came to the room where the king slept and began a prayer which was later called *Buslabæn* (Busla's Prayer) and has become widely known. It contains many evil words which are needless for Christian men to speak. But nevertheless, this is the beginning.)

181 The decision to include the story at all seem to have been too much for some: as Carl Phelpstead (2012, 39) notes, when Snorri Sturluson put together *Heimskringla*, for which Oddr's saga was a source, he abbreviated the account of Eyvindr and removed the marvellous fight between stag and dog which follows: Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, I,* 1941, pp. 322–323.

(2) busla let þa frammi annan þridjung bænarenar, ok mun eg lata þat um lida at skrifa hann þui þat er aullum þarfleysa at hafa hann eptir, en þo ma suo sizt eptir hafa hann at hann se eigi skrifadr En þo er þetta þar upphaf á (586, fol. 14^{v}, ll. 8–10; *Die ältere Bósa saga*, 1893, ch. 5, p. 18).

(Then Busla recited another third of the prayer, and I should pass over writing it, because it is useless to all who repeat it, and it will be repeated less if it is not written down. But nevertheless, this is the beginning.)

(3) hof hun þa upp þat u[ers] er syrpu uers er kallat ok mestr galldur er i follgen ok eigi er lofat at kueda eptir dagsetr, ok er þetta þar i nære enndanum (586, fol. 14^{v}, ll. 14–15 (*Die ältere Bósa saga*, 1893, ch. 5, p. 19).

(Then she started that verse which is called *Syrpuvers* (Syrpa's Verse). The strongest magic is concealed in it, and it is not permitted to recite it after sunset, but this is near the end.)

Although the fact that the curses were copied anyway suggests that these asides are somewhat tongue-in-cheek, they nevertheless show that the verses were problematic and that the decision to commit them to writing may have elicited concern from more conservative members of the audience.

It seems likely, therefore, that the *apologiæ* of both *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* arose, in part, out of a tension between the sagas' oral 'pre-Christian' content and their written medium, much as it did for Oddr and the compiler of the Codex Regius. And across 586 and 589a–f, it is in these two texts that this material plays the largest role: although, as discussed, marginal figures provide magical assistance in many of the sagas, nowhere is it as major as in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, and it usually takes place in more marginal 'otherworlds' as opposed to the Scandinavian mainland, such as in Jötunheimar as is the case for Arinnefja's act of healing.[182]

Moreover, in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*'s prologue (quoted in Chapter 5.4.3), the words that follow the passage about magic and unclean spirits make clear that the *apologia* was added (at least in part) for the benefit of concerned clerics:

er þat ok bezt ok frodligazt at hlyda medan fra er sagt ok gera ser helldr gledi at en angur þui iafnan er þat menn hugza eigi adra syndsamliga hluti á medan hann glediz af skemtaneni, (589f, fol. 13^{r}, ll. 27–29; *Gaungu-Hrólfs saga*, 1830, ch. 1, p. 237)

182 Martin (1998, 319) notes that *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*'s magical content takes places "outside the bounds of Scandinavia". The one exception that must be added to this observation is Möndull's act of healing, which takes place in Denmark and prompts the mid-saga interjection.

> (it is best and most sensible to listen while the story is told and feel joy rather than sorrow because it is always [the case] that men [do] not think about sinful things while they are enjoying entertainment.)

It seems that it was not just on grounds of general plausibility that the saga and its magic might have been criticised, but because those tasked with maintaining the morality of the populace might have had larger moral scruples about disseminating the evidently controversial story at all.

7.4 Entertainment

The obvious question that arises next is: why include this material, when it seems liable to bring the credibility of the sagas and their heroes under question? In neither case does it seem that the compilers were dealing with historical traditions in the same way that Oddr or the Codex Regius compiler were. They seem to have included this material not because they felt like they had to or because their audiences expected it but because, for some reason, they wanted to, despite the criticisms it might elicit from the church.

To begin answering this question, it will be helpful to broaden out to the wider textual marketplace within which these sagas were circulating and examine their relationship to literacy more closely. A useful outline of this marketplace is provided by the prologue to *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans*:

> [e]f menn girnazt at heyra fornar frasagnir þa er þat fyrst til at hlýda þat flestar saugur eru af nauckuru efne, sumar eru af gude ok hans helgum monnum, ok ma þar nema miken uisdom ok eru þeir þo fleire menn at liten skemtun þicker i heilagra manna saugum, Adrar saugr eru af rikum konungum ok ma þar nema i hæuerska hirdsidu edr hversu þiona skal rikum haufdingium, hin þridi hlutr sagnana er fra konungum þeim er koma i miklar mannraunir ok hafa misiafnt ur rett (586, fol. 7^{r}, ll. 15–19; *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans*, 1927, ch. 1, p. 121).
>
> (If people are eager to hear old stories, then it must first be acknowledged, that most sagas have a particular subject matter: some are about God and his holy men, and they can teach much wisdom; there are nevertheless some men, who get little fun from the sagas of holy men. Other sagas are of powerful kings, and they can teach polite manners, or how to serve chieftains. Then the third group of sagas are about those kings who underwent great tests and each passed them in different ways.)

The sagas collected in these two manuscripts would largely fit within the final grouping – which concern kings who underwent great tests – although there is certainly some slippage into the second group for the courtlier among them. The sharpest contrast is provided by the first grouping, the sagas of holy men, or

saint's lives, which are singled out for containing much wisdom as well as their lack of entertainment value.

This is significant for understanding the tension evident in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, because entertainment value and opposition to clerical texts seem to underlie the depiction of Busla. While the expressions of doubt quoted above that precede her curses call to mind the conservatism of more clerically-oriented texts, the narrator's decision to relate them nonetheless positions the saga they are in as something distinctly different – a kind of text that would not censor entertaining material for the sake of propriety. The saga's concluding lines take this a step further, positioning Busla as a kind of mock-saint and the whole saga as a parody of hagiography: "ok signe þa sancta busla alla sem her hafa til hlytt leset ok skrifat edr her nauckut til fengit edr gott at giort A–M–E–N" (586, fol. 19^{r}, ll. 17–18; *Die ältere Bósa saga*, 1893, ch. 16, p. 63) (and bless them, saint Busla, all who have listened, read and written or who have given something or done good A–M–E–N). The conclusion of the saga that follows in the manuscript, *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, also comically recalls some of its own marginal characters, but is even more lewd – so much so that some of it was erased by a later reader (see Fig. 5):

> ok endum uær suo saugu uilmundar uidutan med þui á lyktar ordi af þeim sem skrifat hefir at sa sem leset hefir ok hinir sem til hafa hlytt, ok allir þeir sem eigi eru suo rikir at þeir eigi konungi uorum skatt at giallda, þa kyssi þeir á razen á auskubusku [og takit þat til ydar. allt sligt sem hia for þa Kolr kryppa sard hana og sited j þann frid sem þer fáet af henne] ualete (586, fol. 25^{r}, ll. 32–36; *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, 1962, ch. 24, pp. 200–201).[183]
>
> (And we end this saga of Vilmundr viðutan with these concluding words from the one who has written to that one who has read and those who have listened and all those who are not so rich that they must pay tribute to our king, they should kiss Öskubuska on the arse and take for yourself that which passed when Kolr kryppa fucked her and enjoy what peace that you get from her. Farewell.)

The goal of entertainment is also foregrounded in the passage of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*'s prologue (quoted on p. 98) where the text's claim to history (to orthodoxy and appropriateness) is subordinated to the more immediate one of entertainment. This goal is also stated outright in the prologue's first line: "Margar fra sagnir hafa menn saman sett til skemtanar monum" (589f, fol. 13^{r}, l. 13; *Gaungu-Hrólfs saga*, 1830, ch. 1, p. 237) (Many stories have been put together for people's entertainment). In all these instances, 589a–f and 586's sagas are positioned as en-

183 The final line and a half have been erased and the words within the brackets are supplied by Loth's edition.

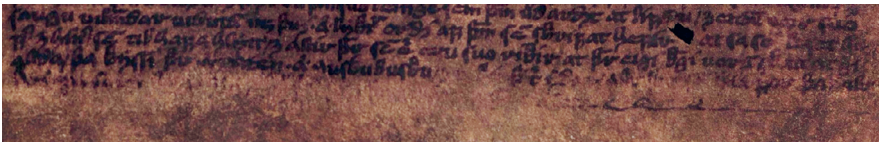

Fig. 5: AM 586 4to, fol. 25^{r}; erasure at the end of *Vilmundar saga viðutan*. Source: handrit.is. Printed with permission. Copyright © of the Árni Magnússon Institute, Iceland.

tertaining narratives that are distinctly different to the kinds of texts promoted by the church and, critically, in tension with the standards expected by it.

Entertainment is also central to the scenes of saga storytelling which we find within the sagas themselves. *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* contains two such scenes. The first is when the sworn-brothers and Arinnefja each tell their life stories so they do not have to sit in silence while she cooks them gruel. She suggests the activity, saying: "uerum eigi hliod [. . .] Mun langt adr en grautren er buen, ok seg þu æfesaugu þina asmundr, En þa skal egell uid taka, En þa mun eg skemta til bordprydi af þui sem yfir mik hefir boret" (589e, fol. 7^{r}, ll. 26–28; *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, 1927, ch. 5, p. 23) (Let's not be silent [. . .] It will be a long time before the gruel is ready, so tell us your life story, Ásmundr. Then Egill will follow. And then I will entertain at the table with what has happened to me). As Gottskálk Jensson (2003, 198) notes, the sagas that the two heroes tell have several of the formal features familiar from written sagas. They are told in the third person and both begin with typical formulas: "ottar het konungr" (589e, fol. 7^{r}, l. 30; *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, 1927, ch. 5 p. 24) (A king was named Óttarr) and "hringr het konungr" (589e 4to, fol. 8^{v}, l. 34; *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, 1927, ch. 9, p. 41) (A king was named Hríngr). Episodes similar to this (but lacking comparable formal features) occur in *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans* and *Af þremr kumpánum*.[184] *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*'s second storytelling-scene comes near the end of the narrative when, "at þessari ueizlu haufdu menn þat til skemtanar um brudlaupit at þeir asmundr ok egell saugdu fra ferdum sinum ok til sannenda um saugu sina segir suo at þær være þar badar skinnnefia ok arennefia ok saunnudu saugu þeira" (589e, fol. 13^{r}, ll. 18–20; *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, 1927, ch. 17, pp. 78–79) (during the wedding, for entertainment Ásmundr and Egill told of their journey, and to prove the truth of their story, it is said that both Skinnefja and Arinnefja were there and they

184 Gottskálk Jensson (2021, 69–71) argues the latter was the inspiration behind the scene in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*.

vouched for it). Critical in all these scenes is that the saga is conceived of as a specifically oral form of entertainment, which passes time and brings communities together. It is worth noting here that truthfulness, guaranteed by eyewitness testimony, is also a critical feature.

These are not, of course, characteristics of the sagas under discussion here, which, although probably read out loud, are fundamentally written texts produced at some remove from the events they purport to depict. Nonetheless, the passages that conclude both *Ektors saga* and *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* position this written status at something of an arm's length. The latter concludes by saying:

> lukum uær her saugu þeira egils ok asmundar fyrir þui at bokfellit minkar en bleket þycknar augum þyngiazt tungan trenar haundin mædizt pennan sliofgaz ok bila aull ritfæren hafi þeir þauck er skrifad hafa ok suo sa er las ok þeir er til hlyddu ok sa er þessa saugu hefir fyrst saman sett (589e, fol. 13^{v}, ll. 29–32; *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, 1927, ch. 18, p. 83).[185]
>
> (Here we end the saga of Egill and Ásmundr because the parchment runs out and the ink dries, the eyes grow heavy, the tongue becomes stiff, the hand becomes weary, the pen becomes dull, and all the writing materials have given way. Give thanks to those who have written, those who have read, and those who have listened, and the one who first put this saga together.)

In contrast to the stories orally narrated by Egill and Ásmundr, the sagas' indebtedness to the written medium is foregrounded and audiences are reminded that, although the story itself is entertaining, the medium to which it now is indebted, the technology of writing, is a fundamentally tiresome pursuit at odds with the heroics performed and told by the protagonists themselves. A divide between those who appear in the saga and those who write it is also evident in the self-conscious aside made by Bósi, which is quoted on p. 113: it is not Bósi who will write the saga, he is just responsible for what it will contain.

185 Those which conclude *Ektors saga* in this manuscript are very similar (and not included in the edition, which is based on AM 152 fol): "nu nidr falla þessa atburdi uelldz þat þui mest at bokfellit minkar en blekit þyknar augum þyngiazt tungan trenar pennen sliofgazt haundin mædizt ok bila aull rit færin hafi sa þauck er skrifat hefir ok sá er las ok þeir er til hlyddu" (AM 589d 4to, fol. 48^{v}, ll. 15–18) (And now we lay down here these events of this kingdom because the parchment almost runs out and the ink dries, the eyes have grown heavy, the tongue becomes stiff, the pen has become dull, the hand has become weary and all writing tools give way. Have thanks for those who have written, those who have read, and those who have listened).

The idea that writing might be at odds with heroic masculinity is made explicit in *Kirialax saga*. After Kirialax has mastered the seven liberal arts and become exceedingly learned, he faces what seems to be a crisis of his masculinity. His father says that he must "prozt oss hann uerda munu omiukr til ridarligrar atferdar sem roskum ok tignum manne hæfir þa er hann ordin suo frodr a bok ok suo godr gramaticus þa skal hefia hann til kennimanz slektar ok uerdi biskup edr abote" (589a, fol. 5^{r}, ll. 20–23; *Kirialax saga*, 1917, p. 14) (prove to us that he is not weak in knightly conduct, as befits a mature and high-born man, as he has become so learned in books and such a good *grammaticus* that he should be raised to the order of a priest and become a bishop or an abbot). After Kirialax excels at the tournament, his father says "er nu profat um kirialax son minn huat manne hann ma uerda" (589a, fol. 6^{v}, ll. 19–20; *Kirialax saga*, 1917, p. 19) (it is now proven about Kirialax, my son, what man he may become). Later in the saga when attentions shift to Kirialax's own sons, Vallterus and Villifer, who disagree over whether to engage the visiting knight Kvintatus in a duel, Vallterus, who wishes to duel, puts it plainly: "hættu broder sagde hann, þin atferd er lytil mannlig, situr þu so kir sem munkr i Einsetu edur mær til kosta" (AM 532 4to, fol. 123^{r}, ll. 14–16; *Kirialax saga*, 1917, p. 96) ('Beware brother,' he said, 'your behaviour is unmanly, you sit as quietly as a monk in a hermitage or a maiden awaiting marriage'). For the men of *Kirialax saga*, the greatest threat to their masculinity does not come from magic (as it did for Bósi) but from proximity to the monastic life of learning – of being docile, stationary, and akin to an unmarried maiden. Even Kirialax's quest for knowledge is achieved not through reading and study but by going out, seeing the world himself, and heroically risking his life in the process.

This same dichotomy is hinted at in the prologue to *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans* too. After outlining its three types of sagas, the narrator defends the plausibility of the events depicted in its final grouping:

> En þo er þat hattr margra manna at þeir kalla þær saugur lognar sem fiare ganga þeira natturu, ok er þat af þui at ostyrkr madr kann þat ecki at skilia huersu miklu þeir mega orka er bædi eru sterkir ok hafa agiæt uopn er allt mattu bita (586, fol. 7^{r}, ll. 20–22; *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans*, 1917, ch. 1, p. 122).
>
> (But nevertheless, it is the custom of many men that they call those sagas lies which are far from their nature, and that is because a weak man cannot understand what great works can be done by those who are both strong and have excellent weapons, which can bite everything.)

Here, belief in the abilities of powerful men and their incredible weapons is positioned as a condition of masculinity, and doubt – a response we know to associate with clerics – its opposite.

7.5 The Written Word and the Preservation of Memory

Although the texts in these manuscripts use written sources to lend authority, they also hint at a view of literacy which is less confident than these claims would first suggest. This is the case in the references to known authors (specifically Gallterus and Homer) in *Ektors saga* and *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. In the epilogue of the former, before naming these figures, the narrator foregrounds the distance between the time of the events described and the time of them being written down, asking the audience "at um bæti mina fáfrædi þui uer haufum hardla fiari staddir uerit þeim tidindum" (589d, 48^{v}, 1–3; *Ectors saga*, 1962, ch. 28, p. 185) (to improve my ignorance because we are very far from those events). The narrator then goes on to reference their written sources, saying that the information in the saga was found in the books of Gallterus, who copied them from those of Homer. The implication is that, although those accounts were written by learned men, direct eyewitness testimony would have provided a better guarantee of authenticity.

In the mid-saga interjection within *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (quoted on p. 97) another potentially long chain of transmission is used to explain the implausibility of the events related. The narrator suggests that Möndull's act of healing may not have actually happened but rather that what once may have been a figurative account had been misinterpreted by later redactors as literal (O'Connor 2005, 146–147). Here, the reliability of the written record is not inherent but rather dependent on the good sense of its interpreters. Caution is also called for by the epilogue to *Ektors saga* in which, as discussed above, a later redactor calls into question the sources apparently used by the person who first put the saga to together. They had believed that the story they based the saga on was written by Master Gallterus, whereas their redactor believes that story was written by Homer. What use is a written authority, audiences are invited to ask, when the identity of that authority is in dispute?

This sceptical attitude towards textuality corresponds with the converse attitude towards eyewitness testimony that is expressed in the other earliest recorded *apologia*, the prologue to Karl Jónsson's *Sverris saga*, which begins in the following way:[186]

> Her hefr up*p* oc segir fra þei*m* tíðindu*m* er nu hava ve*r*it um hríð oc i þe*i*ra M*ann*a min*n*um er fyr*ir* þessi bok hava sagt. En þ*at* er at segja fr*a* Sve*r*ri k*onung*i s*yni* Sigu*r*þa*r* k*onung*s Har-

186 *Sverris saga*'s prologue is extant in AM 327 4to, AM 47 fol (c. 1300–1325), and AM 81a fol (c. 1450–1475), and is extended in Flateyjarbók (1387–1394). On the two versions of the prologue, see Sverrir Tómasson 1988, 388–394.

allz-*sonar* oc er þ*at* uphaf bocariNar er ritat er ept*ir* þ*ei*ri bok er fyrst ritaði Karl aboti Ionson. en yfir sat sialfr Sv*er*rir k*onung*r. oc reð fyr*ir* hvat rita skylldi er su fra-sogn eigi langt fr*a*m komin. Þar er sagt f*ra* nockor*um* h*an*s orrostum. Oc sua s*em* a liðr bokina vex h*an*s styrkr. oc seg*ir* sa hin*n* sami styrkr fyr*ir* hina meiri luti. kælloðu þ*ei*r þaN lut boc*ar* fyr*ir* þui Grylu hin*n* siðaRi lutr bocar er ritaðr eptir þ*ei*ra m*ann*a f*ra*-sogn er mi*n*ni hofðu til sva at þ*ei*r sialf*ir* hofðu set oc heyrt þessi tiðende oc þ*ei*r meN sum*ir* hofðu v*er*it í oRost*om* m*eð* S*verri* k*onung*i. Sum þessi tiðinde varo s*va* i minne fest at m*e*N ritaðo þeg*ar* ept*ir* er ny-orðin v*ar*o. oc hava þau ecki breyz siðan. (*Sverris saga*, 1981, Prologue, p. 1)

(Here we begin to speak of events which happened a while ago, within the memory of the men who related them for this book; to speak, that is, of King Sverrir, son of King Sigurðr Haraldsson. The beginning of the book is written according to the one that Abbot Karl Jónsson first wrote when King Sverrir himself sat over him and settled what he should write. The story has not come far [from its source]. It tells of certain of his battles, and as the book advances, his strength grows, foreshadowing the greater events. They therefore called his part of the book *Gryla*. The latter part of the book is written according to what is related by those who remembered what happened, having actually seen or heard it, and some of them had been with King Sverrir in battles. Some of these stories were fixed in memory, having been written down directly after the events occurred, and they have not been altered since.) (adapted from *Sverrissaga: The Saga of King Sverri of Norway*, 1899, Prologue, p. 1)

Unlike the texts of 589a–f and 586 – which take place long ago and far away – the events of *Sverris saga* happened within recent memory and thus derive their authority from eyewitnesses: King Sverrir himself and those who saw his deeds or heard of them soon after. Central to this truth-defence is the closeness between the written text and the eyewitnesses. It is these same caveats that are used in the mid-saga *apologia* of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* to explain possible errors: inaccuracies may have crept into the saga because the same closeness cannot apply to a text set in the distant past. Although seemingly undermining its own claim to truth, this explanation is accompanied by a (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) claim to the authority of written texts: the narrator accepts no responsibility for the contents of their sources, saying that "er þar ok uannt i mote at mæla, er hinir fyrri menn hafa samsett" (589f, 26^{v}, 30; *Gaungu-Hrólfs saga*, 1830, ch. 25, p. 309) (it is difficult to speak against those things which have been set down by men of the past). The mid-saga interjection therefore both undermines the authority of the written text by emphasising its susceptibility to misinterpretation but nevertheless uses the high status afforded to it to divert criticisms of its own content. The result is a kind of comedic distancing of the written word, which is at once both a source of authority as well as one of potential inaccuracies.

The instability of the written record comes up again later in the saga following the death of Sturlaugr starfsami at the final battle in Garðaríki. As he dies, the narrator says:

> um þenna atburd a greinir miog bækr [at því] suo segir i sturlaugs saugu ok fleirum audrum bokum at hann hafi sottdaudr ordit heima i hringariki ok ueret þar heygdr, En her segir suo at eptir fall þordar kom grimr ægir [upp ór] iórduni at baki sturlaugi ok hio med mæki á hrygg honum suo at hann tæki i sundr i m[idju] uitum uer eigi huort sanara er (589f, fol. 31^{v}, ll. 2–6; *Gaungu-Hrólfs saga*, 1830, ch. 31, p. 332).
>
> (About these events books disagree greatly, because it says in *Sturlaugs saga* and several other sagas, that he died of illness at home in Hringaríki and was buried in a mound there, but this saga says that after Þórðr fell, Grímr Ægir came up out of the ground behind Sturlaugr and struck his sword in his back so that he took [him] apart in the middle. We do not know which is truer.)

In this aside, the saga's written status is foregrounded and positioned as one among several *bækr* (books), which contain different versions of the hero's death. In the absence of first-hand accounts, and with these books as our only sources, it is impossible to know which is closer to what really happened – which one is *sannara* (truer). Interestingly, the alternate account alluded to here is not actually that which either we are familiar with or, it seems, that which the scribes of 589a–f and 586 were familiar with either. In the extant version of *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, recorded in 589f, the eponymous hero dies in Sweden, not Hringaríki as takes place (we may assume) in the now-lost version of *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* which is alluded to here. Across these two texts, this manuscript therefore refers to three distinct accounts of Sturlaugr's death: the one in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* (where he dies in Sweden), the one presumably in the now-lost saga which is alluded to here (where he dies in Hringaríki), and the one described in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* itself (where he dies in Garðaríki). The narrator acknowledges the alternate accounts, but, faced with such a variable record, they can provide no guarantee of truth.[187]

Something similar occurs in *Kirialax saga* when the eponymous hero visits Troy. As he gazes on the graves of Hektor and Akillas, the narrator notes that they are inscribed with the events of the great war in Latin letters: "hir huiler herra ektor hin hæste kappi allz heims hann sa ok lei[di] akillas hins fræga uar þar ok med þui likri mynd pentad allt med gu[lli] ok a grafit þat fræga verk er hann felldi ektorem" (589a, 7^{v}, 16–18; *Kirialax saga*, 1917, p. 26) (here rests Ektor, the bravest hero in all the world. He also saw the tombstone of Akillas the famous which was similarly decorated all with gold and it was engraved with the famous

187 There is a precedent for this in the prose narration of the Codex Regius following the death of Sigurðr where a number of alternative accounts are alluded to. Unlike in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, however, these accounts are ascribed to poems rather than books: *Edda*, 1983, p. 161.

deed that he had killed Ektor). Nevertheless, the narrator offers two different accounts of the heroes' final encounter:

> greinizt su saga miog med meisturunum med huerium hætti þat gerdizt sumir sanna at akillas hefdi heited a pallacem bardaga gydiuna ok ektore hafi hun birzt i þeira uidrskipti med miklu liose suo at hann matte uarla i gegn sia ok hafi tekit af ser hialmin hneigiandi i gegn med litilæte, En meistari dares segir at akillas beid þess at ektor uar nær sprungen af mædi ok hafi adr barezt vid sterkuztu kappa ok unnet þa ok hafi þa akillas komit i mot honum ok unnet hann suo (589a, fol. 7^{v}, ll. 18–25; *Kirialax saga*, 1917, pp. 26–27).
>
> (This saga diverges greatly among the masters regarding the manner in which it happened. Some assert that Akillas had called to Pallas, the goddess of war, and she had appeared to Ektor in their dealings with a light so great that he could hardly see and he had taken off his helmet, kneeling before her with humility. But master Dares says that Akillas waited until Ektor was nearly exhausted and had already fought against the strongest champions and defeated them, and then Akillas had come against him and defeated him in this way.)

Although the words on the gravestones record the events, the narrator reminds us that they only provide a selection of the information – the rest is up for debate. In both this saga and *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, the written record is presented not as an infallible representation of past events and a stable storehouse for memories, but rather a resource to be used with caution, in which meanings are liable to flux, misinterpretation, and contradiction. With only written records available, it is impossible to really know what happened in the distant past.

The way these texts undermine the authority of the written word may have contributed to concerns that 589a–f's scribes had about their manuscript's reception and motivated their decision to add the *apologiæ* to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. Before addressing the saga's magical content, the narrator of the prologue discusses the subjectivity of eyewitnesses, presumably to explain why this account may differ from others. They say: "uerda menn iafnan misfrodir þui þat er optliga anars syn ok heyrd er anars er eigi þo þeir se uid atburd staddir" (589f, fol. 13^{r}, ll. 15–16; *Gaungu-Hrólfs saga*, 1830, ch. 1, p. 237) (People are differently informed because often one sees or hears what another does not even though they may have been present at the same event). The first line of the epilogue, which was never finished, begins to address a similar problem:

> þo þessi saga þicki eigi samhlioda uerda audrum þeim er at ganga þessu male, um manna naufn edr adra atburdi, huat er huerr uann edr giordi med frægd edr uisku (589f, 36^{v}, ll. 11–13; *Gaungu-Hrólfs saga*, 1830, ch. 38, p. 363)
>
> (Even if there are discrepancies between this story and others that deal with the same events, about people's names and other details, and what each person achieved or did with greatness or wisdom . . .)

As discussed above, the discrepancies between this story and others are, when it comes to Sturlaugr starfsami, quite significant, and they are even more so in this manuscript than *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*'s other extant witnesses. The addition of these *apologiæ* suggest that those discrepancies and, arguably, the compiler's insistence on drawing attention to them, concerned 589a–f's scribes. They suggest that, along with this saga's unusual handling of pre-Christian material, its lack of reliable sources and failure to provide a clear suggestion of what 'really' happened weakened its status as saga 'history'.

7.6 Conclusion

The various self-conscious references to writing, reading, and storytelling discussed here reveal the sagas to have a complex relation with both oral and written traditions. It seems that the scribes of these two manuscripts saw their sagas as occupying a middle ground between both.

On the one hand, literacy is given a high status in these texts: it is the domain of the elite with a monopoly on 'legitimate' accounts of the past, which (via intertextual references and the integration of book learning) these texts position themselves within. However, there are also several places where the high status of the written word, and the sphere associated with it, is subtly undermined, both as a practice and as a source of authority. In fact, a central tenet of these sagas' self-definition seems to be predicated on opposition to the sphere most associated with literacy. As the prologue to *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans* makes clear, these sagas are not boring stories about holy men, but rather entertaining tales of powerful kings famed for physical deeds that were so incredible weak monks may not believe them to even be possible. And while the sagas' written status and indebtedness to the Christian technology of writing means that they were confined to a particular narrative of history as well as theological orthodoxy, they nevertheless push those constraints to their limits and relish in making fun of the conservative standards to which they would be held. Such is most obviously the case in the depiction of Busla in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*.

Instead, as the scenes of saga-storytelling in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans* attest, despite their dependence on writing, these sagas were still seen to be fundamentally oral forms of entertainment. This may go some way towards explaining the great prominence of references to oral materials in these texts. Because although the ideal aristocratic courtly culture found across them reaches its apex in *Kirialax saga*, a text which contains little material from oral tradition and is exceedingly bookish, the other sagas indulge in precisely the material which is suggested to be that cul-

ture's antithesis: most of the heroes are ultimately reliant on the kinds of marginal figures and forces that had controversial status within Christian theology and were potentially at odds with the sagas' written medium. It seems likely, however, that these figures had popular appeal and helped to distinguish these texts from the less entertaining ones promoted by the church. The most extreme examples are *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* where the sagas' two potentially contradictory functions – as both oral entertainments and written histories – seem to come to a head. As a result, much like Oddr Snorrason and the compiler of the Codex Regius, the narrator must intervene to justify their choices. In doing so, they reveal the constraints of the saga as a medium. They reveal the extent to which 'pagan' or 'folkloric' content could be incorporated into a saga, and, in the case of Sturlaugr starfsami, they suggest that there was a limit to how far saga writers could question the authority of the written word before the integrity of the saga as a form would break.

In this way, these two manuscripts participate in both the clerical world of Christian book learning and oral traditions, with one foot in and one foot out of both. This is not just in the practical sense of being examples of 'vocalised' texts (i.e. written texts that were read out loud), but rather this duality seems to be at the core of their self-conceptualisation or 'medium theory': they were written texts with popular appeal that were distinct from both the narratives circulated by the church and those of the general population.

Returning to the questions posed of the sources at the beginning of this chapter – what are they mediating? For whom? And for what purposes? – it is possible, at this stage, to suggest a broad answer for the first two: these sagas act as meeting places for a variety of oral and written sources which aimed to reach and appeal to a broad cross-section of society, the extreme ends of which were the unlearned populace (who were to be entertained) and the clergy (whose standards were to be upheld).