9 General Conclusion

My aim in this book was to read texts known in modern scholarship as the 'comic-adventurous' *fornaldarsögur* as mediums of cultural memory. My intention was to reinterpret their 'fictional' qualities as windows into the changing relationship between medieval Icelanders and their legendary histories. That is, I wanted to more closely study their 'derivative' use of other texts and 'fantastic lore', their proximity both to 'folklore' and romance, their self-conscious narration, and, perhaps most interestingly, their apparent implausibility.

To do so, I drew on various theoretical and methodological insights from the fields of cultural memory studies, media studies, and philology, in addition to those from scholars of Old Norse literary culture. While the principal question with which I began this book centred on the variability of the *fornaldarsögur*, this memory and media lens has, I would argue, enabled me to arrive at more meaningful conclusions about the status and function of the *fornaldarsögur* in late medieval Iceland. Using Lachmann's intertextual framework to study the 'memory of literature' helped illuminate how the manuscripts' creators were engaged in a dialogue about their culture's memory and drew attention to the multivocality of the texts they produced – how they drew others into them through reference and adaption, and how their various redactors and scribes added their own voices through rearrangement, alteration, and the addition of *apologiæ* and other metatextual comments. Studying the manuscripts as 'mediums of cultural memory' helped me to conceptualise the relationship between text and context with more nuance than viewing the former as a 'reflection' of the latter. Situating the manuscripts within their creation and reception contexts, has allowed me to suggest how they, as channels for a plurality of voices, responded to and bore upon matters of significant historical import, such as the Icelanders' relationships with the Kalmar monarchs, their local manorial and dynastic politics, and the moral worth and plausibility of 'pre-Christian' magic. By exploring both their intertextual and extratextual relations, I have tried to show how 589a–f and 586, were not just texts in contexts, but nexuses for those contexts.

It is worth returning now to the more specific research questions I posed in Chapter 1. Some of those questions related to the *fornaldarsögur*'s literary aspects and 'fictional' qualities: how did saga compilers respond to the versions of the legendary past they had inherited? Why did they reuse so many of the same motifs? And to what effects? What was so appealing about the translated *riddarasögur* that they chose to write legendary histories that looked so much like romances? How and why did they fit material that we would call 'fantastic' into those

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111338651-009

histories? And if they were so concerned that their sagas might be perceived as unbelievable, such that they would need an *apologia*, why write them down?

Over the course of this book, I have argued that these sagas' 'derivativeness' can be understood as a mechanism through which the later medieval elite could tap into culturally dominant representations of the past and decentre them. One key example of this process is their frequent reference to *Völsunga saga*, which is used across many of the sagas discussed here as a chronological anchor that lends, as Rowe (2013, 212–213) writes, "some credibility or legitimacy" but also functions as what Rigney (2008, 351) describes as a "literary monument" – a text that acts as "a benchmark for reflecting critically on dominant memorial practices". Since the *fornaldarsögur* of 589a–f and 586 construct pasts that are defined by their difference to *Völsunga saga*, by referencing it they also displace it; their borrowings from it are, from this perspective, evocative not of a degenerating literary tradition, but of a desire to critically reflect on and *change* its narrative of history.

When it comes to the hybridity of the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, I have shown how romantic lexis is used in the texts discussed here with intent and historical specificity. As Larrington (2012, 265) has argued in relation to *Völsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, genre is not politically neutral, and the translated *riddarasögur* were part of a political project in Norway when King Hákon Hákonarson initiated their translation in the thirteenth century (Bagge 2010, 170–174). Medieval Icelanders knew this: the king's centrality is made clear in several of the translations' opening and closing lines which name him as patron.[238] In Chapters 3–5, I demonstrated how material from those texts is deployed in the sagas of 589a–f in a way that responds to this inherently political nature: 589a–f reasserts the Europeanised kingly politics the translations promote but also re-contextualise those politics to create a legendary past that was relevant to an Icelandic elite who looked to the Kalmars in Denmark instead of Hákon's legacy in Norway. Rather than some kind of novel surface dressing, these texts borrow from the translated *riddarasögur* to construct a 'useful past'.

I have also argued that, far from evidence for fictionality, these sagas' use of 'fantastic lore' (or 'folklore') may well have enhanced their 'referentiality' and thus their popular appeal. The positive reception of this lore is evident if we turn to the poetry of later centuries. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir's (2018) survey shows that much of it memorialised the *fornaldarsögur*'s 'small gods' in addition to their human heroes. Verses were written about Arinnefja and Brana in the seventeenth

238 For example, see *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, 1999, p. 28; *Möttuls saga*, 1999, ch. 1, p. 6; *Ívens saga*, ch. 16, p. 98; *Strengleikar*, 1979, pp. 4–5.

century, one about Goðmundr of Glæsisvellir in the nineteenth century, and a set of *kappavísur* (hero's verses) by Bergsteinn blindi Þorvaldsson (1550–1635) mentions Hreggviðr and Möndull alongside Hrólfr and his antagonist Vilhjálmr. In a group of mock-heroic poems known as *ýkjukvæði* (exaggerated poems) which were recorded in the nineteenth century, mention is made of Arinnefja, Alba, and Hreggviðr (*Íslenzkar gátur*, *IV*, 1898, pp. 328 and 331); Busla is mentioned in another contemporaneously recorded poem called *Ellakvæði* along with Grímr Ægir (*Íslenzkar gátur*, *III*, 1894, p. 403); and a *lánglokur* (rigmarole) by Sigurður Ketilsson (1689–1730; *ÍÆ*, *IV*, 1951, 244) begins with the words "Víst var Brana væn, kæn" (*Íslenzkar gátur*, *IV*, 1898, p. 377) (Brana was surely kind and clever). In fact, in Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir's (2018, 48–49) calculation, the troll-woman Brana was more popular in later poetry than many of the *fornaldarsögur*'s actual heroes – Göngu-Hrólfr being a notable exception. These verses show that the *tröll*, giants, and members of the waking dead who populate 589a–f and 586's diverse cast of characters clearly lived on in the minds of their audiences and thus surely played a significant role in enhancing the ideological value of those manuscripts' sagas.

I have, moreover, put forward the case that these characters provide a crucial insight into the saga as a medium and help to understand the presence of the *apologiæ*. Here, it is worth returning to the other questions I posed in Chapter 1 about media: 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?

I have contended that, in their mediation of oral traditions or 'vocality', these sagas were participants in oral culture: that they contributed to the transfer and development of knowledge that was, for the most part, transmitted by word of mouth. That is, knowledge of the 'unseen' – of *jötnar*, *tröll*, *dvergar*, *álfar*, and the living dead, and of the capabilities and ethics of magic spells and rituals that lay outside the bounds of usual church teachings. Within these sagas, knowledge that was, for some more zealous clerics, subject to "an endless effort at exorcism" is canonised and validated, while also being mocked and pushed back into "the pagan past, in the foolish minds of babbling 'old wives'" (Ostling 2018, 10). As a result, these manuscripts, became sites for the development of this knowledge as they were performed over the course of the late medieval and early modern periods.

By honing in on these texts' participation in those traditions, we can begin to see the boundaries of the form emerge. No eyebrows are raised when the woman-stealing *jötnar* are pushed to the fringes, to Jötunheimar or some other world, and are defeated by a noble hero. Even when those heroes depend on magically empowered marginal figures for their success there is no cause for concern. However,

when questionable forces make the kingdom of Denmark their arena of action, when a conventionally devilish figure (a grave-dwelling watchman) becomes the champion of good against evil, or when a witch utters suspicious, pagan spells to save a mistreated protagonist, we find ourselves on unstable ground. At these points, the narrators of our sagas produce defences: they acknowledge the controversy of their narratives but permit themselves to tell them anyway, alluding to and hopefully minimising the unflattering interpretations of their potential critics. In doing so, they reveal one of the constraints on the saga as a medium – that constraint being how 'pagan' or folk beliefs are represented. There are other constraints that are revealed by the *apologiæ*: the contradictory accounts of Sturlaugr starfsami's death are similarly treated with trepidation, as argued in Chapter 7.5.

At this stage it is worth asking whether or not it is possible (or worthwhile) to describe these sagas as a 'historical form of writing' at all. The answer depends, of course, on how we define the term 'history', and I am still inclined to take the view of O'Connor (2005; 2022) that these texts were (like other saga subgroups) written within a historical mode because of the concerns they display about plausibility, acceptability, and contradiction. Their function as entertainment does not, in my view, contradict this: entertainment and learning are not mutually exclusive categories and the intertextual connections these sagas have to other more conventionally historical texts brings them into a dialogue about the past. Undoubtedly, they shaped how many (if not all) of their audiences thought about it.

But nevertheless, these manuscripts' 'rhetoric of historicity' is, undeniably, incredibly slippery, and, as the discussion in Chapter 7.5 highlighted, the compilers seemed to have lacked confidence in the written word's ability to convey historical truths about the distant past at all. Their sagas are (supposedly) based on old stories and books written by learned men, but they also say that books can be contradictory and subject to misinterpretation, while eyewitnesses (usually the gold standard of authentication) are themselves fallible and subjective. Our compilers provide contradictory accounts of Sturlaugr starfsami's death but cannot say which one is 'truer' let alone correct. Through their truth defences and gaps in knowledge, the legendary past they depict becomes murkier; it is filled with an ever-growing cast of characters and adventures, but at the same time it is fundamentally unknowable.

Therefore, I think it would be fair to argue with O'Connor (2005, 168) and Mundal (2012, 185–186) that, while evidencing adherence to the traditional historical mode, the *apologiæ* were also symptomatic of a desire to move away from it – or, at least, 'history' as it was defined by the powers that be in the fifteenth century. Although the compilers of these texts position their sagas as works of history, they were clearly interested in exploring subjects that occupied a contentious position in relation to the interpretation of history mandated by the church (or at least some members of it). These sagas' 'medium theory' also revealed an

ambivalence towards both the written word and the clerical sphere associated with it. As Iceland's secular elite attempted to carve out a space for themselves in the turbulent political climate of the fifteenth century, sagas were one of their most important tools. The self-conscious narrators they introduced into those sagas – which poked fun at clerical standards of acceptability and made light of the practice of writing – may well have provided a means through which that elite could distance themselves from the clerics whose technology they shared. The flexibility that those narrators created within the form – by pushing the boundaries of 'history' – also meant that they could explore more fundamental, and clearly controversial, questions about the mysteries of the world in which they lived.

How the historical and moral value of these experimental texts was assessed over time we cannot say for now. What Bjarni Bjarnason and Björn Þorleifsson thought in the seventeenth century was surely different to what 589a–f and 586's compilers did two centuries earlier. In the interim, these manuscripts likely provoked much debate and discussion as they were read, copied, and (occasionally) erased. But, as Rigney (2008, 346) writes again, "'memory sites,'[. . .] only stay alive as long as people consider it worthwhile to argue about their meaning", and the discussions that likely took place during the evening storytelling sessions where these sagas were told surely helped them 'stick' in the minds of their audiences. Such is suggested by the enduring popularity of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, which, in addition to being one of the most 'chivalric' of the *fornaldarsögur*, also seems to have been one of the most controversial; far from putting audiences off, this likely only enhanced its appeal and efficacy as a shaper of cultural memory.