Preface

The work on this book started more than ten years ago, but the plan for it has changed considerably over the years as the author's views and interests have changed. Originally, my ambition was to show that *Njáls saga*, sometimes regarded as the apex of Germanic folk tradition, was actually more dependent on Christian and "learned" influences than was commonly recognized. The first result of this ambition was a series of intentionally provocative and rather overstated articles, summarized in 1965 as a Swedish doctoral thesis, *European Sources of Icelandic Saga-Writing*. Later, as a teacher of Old Norse literature at the University of California, I began to modify some of my earlier thoughts and to recognize the peculiarly Norse character of the saga as a work of art. The new thrust of my studies led to a series of articles emphasizing native tradition rather than foreign influence. As a result of this Hegelian dialectical process, my book has finally come to include a rather comprehensive introduction to the narrative tradition underlying *Njáls saga*: "native" as well as "foreign," "Germanic" as well as "Christian," "oral" as well as "literary."

Readers familiar with previous scholarship on *Njáls saga* will find that my book presents some new versions of older theories about specific problems which have been discussed many times before: "Who was the author?," "What sources did he use?," "How was the present text composed?," "Why did Gunnarr return to Hlíðarendi?," and so on. My main purpose, however, is not to solve these classical enigmas (if indeed they can be solved), but rather to provide the advanced student of Old Norse with some general guidelines which may enable him to cope with classical saga texts as a critic

and literary historian without getting bogged down in too much philological detail. For this reason, I have emphasized general principles of saga tradition and saga art rather than the particular *Njála* problems, the discussion of which has been largely relegated to footnotes and to the Appendix. In its present form, my book may be said to synthesize a number of modern trends in saga scholarship: the search for a "narrative grammar" that may help us to see how stories were generated, the search for European and Christian influences on the native saga forms, and the renewed search for oral traditions as the ultimate source of the saga genre. Although *Njáls saga* is by no means typical of classical sagawriting, it is the work that most successfully and originally combines the various literary forms and ideas of thirteenth century Iceland, and thus it may serve to illustrate both the general norms and one very gifted artist's departure from them.

I had originally intended to complement my discussion of structure, style, and meaning with a series of "close readings" of select *Njála* passages such as the Burning of Njáll, the Battle of Clontarf, etc., for practically each chapter of the saga presents problems of interpretation which I was unable to deal with in the course of a general discussion. My analysis of "Gunnarr's return" at the end of Chapter IV presents one example of such close reading but I would have liked to provide the reader with more of this sort. Yet I found it impossible to do so at this time because it would have involved repeating myself and also making the book far too voluminous. I hope, however, to have provided the reader with some tools for making such close readings on his own.

The general theory of saga composition emerging from Chapter III and the conclusions of Chapters IV and V owes its origins to my contact with various friends and colleagues who were pondering structural theory and the principles of oral composition long before I started to do so myself. My greatest debt is to Carol Clover, who since 1967 helped me to change my thinking about the sagas and whose doctoral dissertation provided some of the key concepts for this book. Since my stay at Harvard in 1968, my thoughts on structure and saga composition have been much inspired through contacts with Theodore M. Andersson, Joseph Harris, and Albert B. Lord. During the final stages of my work I was also stimulated by the unexpected appearance of Richard Allen's *Fire and Iron*, a book which shares some ideas with my own, although Allen's general approach to the problems is quite different from mine.

Parts of the book were written in Sweden while I was on leave from Berkeley as a Humanities Research Professor in 1969 and 1971 and as a Guggenheim Fellow in 1971-72. Earlier versions of certain parts of Chapters III and IV have been published in *Scandinavian Studies* and *Skírnir*. For

editorial help, criticism, and valuable suggestions I am indebted to Christina Allen, Theodore Andersson, Carol Clover, Patricia Conroy, Marcia Gilfillan, Gesche Kähler, John Lindow, William McClung, and Russell Schoch. Hermann Pálsson and Magnús Magnússon have generously allowed me to make free use of their translation of *Njála* for the Penguin series; in several cases I have departed from their translation in order to bring out some particular feature of the Icelandic text, and I bear the sole responsibility for any errors or awkward phrases which may have resulted from such departures.

Last but not least I should like to acknowledge my debt to Professor Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, whose long-standing authority as a *Njála* scholar I have been battling since I first started my saga studies. As the work on this book proceeded, however, I found myself agreeing more and more often with his conclusions. Although my views on *Njála* still differ from his, my respect for his scholarship and my gratitude for his teaching have increased the more I have learned about the subject.

Lars Lönnroth

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