

Summary of Sagas Lecture, September 17, 2014

KEYWORDS: SAGAS, HISTORY, PROSE, SKALDIC POETRY, EXPLORATION, FIRST CONTACT, WOMEN

Eirik the Red's Saga is one of the Icelandic sagas, which are prose narratives that tell of the Viking Age, from about 870 to 1000

These were written several centuries after the events they record

Like *Beowulf*, then, the sagas are recording a time of warriors that has passed, and they are sometimes, like *Beowulf*, nostalgic in tone

But the sagas are more overtly concerned with “real” history, and their warrior-heroes are independent Viking-farmer-settlers; many of the texts are called “family sagas”

Unlike *Beowulf*, the sagas are in prose: *saga* is related to the verb “to say,” and the sagas favour a straightforward, plain style; description is rare, and so can be a useful guide to what is particularly important to the teller

The first recorded Viking raid was in 793, on the island of Lindisfarne: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for this year reports that

“Here terrible portents came about over the land of Northumbria, and miserably frightened the people: these were immense flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine immediately followed these signs; and a little after that in the same year on 8 June the raiding of heathen men miserably devastated God’s church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter.”

Like *Beowulf*, the sagas show a world poised between “pagan” religion and Christianity, but the tension occurs within the world of the saga, rather than between the (pagan) story being told and its Christian author: for example, the Christian Gudrid is reluctant to take part in a pagan ceremony, and the pagan Thorhall asserts that his god is better than Christ

The sagas are in prose, but they include bits of skaldic poetry (skald is the word for poet): these may be intended as authenticating devices, because poetry was thought to preserve historical truth. We looked at the words of Snorri Sturlson (1179-1241):

“When Harald Fair-Hair was king of Norway, Iceland was settled. At the court of King Harald there were poets, and people still remember their poems and the poems about all the kings who have since been in Norway; and we have taken the greatest amount of information from what is said in poems that were recited before great men or their sons. We consider everything as true that is found in those poems about their exploits and battles.”

The skaldic poems in *Eirik the Red's Saga* use kennings, as in Old English poetry: for example, “the skilled hawk of the sand-heaven” in one of Thorhall's poems is a kenning for “ship”

Eirik the Red's Saga records Viking attempts to explore and settle in “Vinland,” now thought to be North America; the saga sometimes pauses to describe the land being explored and claimed, and emphasizes this colonial aspect through the characters' naming of the lands they come across

The “skraelings” are the native peoples of North America encountered by the Viking settlers: they could be the ancestors of the Innu of northern Labrador

The descriptions of the skraelings suggest that the Vikings see the skraelings as partly like them, and partly as the Other; for example, trade turns quickly to hostility and war

Women are much more prominent in the sagas than they are in *Beowulf*: we discussed the roles of Aud the Deep Minded, Freydis, and Gudrid, as well as the importance accorded to the wise woman by the long descriptive passage attached to her

