



BEFORE HISTORICAL 'SOURCES' AND LITERARY 'TEXTS'

The presentation of saga literature in Tormod Torfæus' *Historia rerum Norwegicarum* (1711)

By Lars Boje Mortensen

The monumental four-volume Historia rerum Norwegicarum (1711) by Tormod Torfæus is the first modern attempt to capitalize on the rich Old Norse saga-literature of the 13th and 14th centuries in order to construct a narrative of Norwegian medieval history. The present paper makes the point that Torfæus's project should be seen in its proper context of the early modern learned republic and its antiquarian framework. Torfæus did not share the modern concepts of medieval 'sources' or medieval literary 'texts': in line with contemporary usage he spoke of 'monuments' which were to be represented through his Latin paraphrases – to emulate a number of other 'national' collections of medieval chronicles. This gave the monuments of the past their proper voice.

The subject of this paper is the first major early modern narrative of Norwegian history which was written by the Icelander Tormod Torfæus and published in four folio volumes in 1711 in Copenhagen with the title *Historia rerum Norwegicarum*. Representing a life's work, the four volumes offers a full-scale Norwegian history from the origins up to 1387 when Norway came into a dynastic union with Denmark. Apart from its sheer size, the work is epochal especially through the new-found abundance of information on the 10th- to 13th-centuries (vol.s II & III) and the sustained attempt to harmonize Norwegian chronology with hints given in foreign texts, particularly English chronicles. Needless to say, much of Torfæus's edifice was dismantled in the nineteenth century, but he was the first to have access to an almost full range of Old Norse texts of the literary crucial thirteenth century which still heavily frame any modern attempt of reconstructing early and high medieval Norwegian history, and make up the main material of the linguistic and literary history of medieval Iceland and Norway.

I would like to reflect on how a seventeenth-century antiquarian discovery of a medieval vernacular literature re-invested it with Latin authority for the benefit of securing the medieval heritage both locally and for the wider *res publica litterarum*. I also hope to draw attention to some of the modern concepts we will have to divest ourselves of in order to reach a better understanding of an early modern project of textual recuperation and representation.¹

The rediscovery of Old Norse

Let me first say a few words about the rediscovery of Old Norse literature in the seventeenth century. There was never a complete lacuna in the knowledge of Old Norse, traditional texts still being produced and copied in the fifteenth century in Iceland and antiquarian interest being shown to some extent in sixteenth century Iceland, Norway and Denmark.² And when the interest blossomed in the seventeenth century, learned Icelanders, like Torfæus himself, were able to understand the prose texts without any specialized training or handbooks. For practical purposes, however, it is fair to say that the few abridged and translated texts that were known to the learned world before ca 1640 were so insignificant that we are allowed to speak of a lacuna in the interest in Old Norse literature. At the time when Torfæus published his *Historia* in 1711, on the other hand, the great age of textual discovery and collection was over.

I shall not dwell on the fascinating story of this heroic age, it has been told before,³ but just point to a parallel case, more well-known outside of Scandinavia, namely the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century discovery of Anglo-Saxon texts. The linguistic lacuna here was complete – there were no native Anglo-Saxons living on a far-away island – and the political and ideological background was somewhat different, not least owing to the fact that the Anglo-Saxon texts were Christian and could be used in the services of an Anglican reshaping of local Christian mythology, whereas Old Norse texts often dealt explicitly and unashamedly with pre-Christian heroes and mythology.⁴ Nevertheless, both vernacular discoveries followed a common seventeenth-century antiquarian momentum which was unstoppable once it had set off: origins were too interesting to turn down and the study of one

¹ For help and discussions on this theme I am grateful to Michael Harbsmeier, Else Mundal, Lene Dāvøy, Graham Caie and the editors of the present volume.

² For which see in particular Jenson's and Akhøj Nielsen's articles in the present volume.

³ The introduction in Kålund 1900, iii-lxv is fundamental. See also Petersen 1929, 597-609 & Holm-Olsen 1981, 12-38.

⁴ Cf. the discussion in Tulinius 2002, 65-69.

text re-inforced interest in and search for others. With the spectacular exception of Beowulf, the series of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse texts known around 1700 were roughly the same as those known today.⁵ The driving force behind this activity was partly the internal dynamic of a nascent scholarly field being guided by the strong current of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century antiquarian medievalism which was responsible for putting the bulk of local medieval *Latin* historiography into print and discussing it in commentaries and treatises. But partly the development was driven by a political desire to appropriate the new pasts made possible by such an abundance of recently found medieval narratives. In England a framing into ecclesiastical history was initially dominant, whereas in the Nordic countries interest in pre-Christian valour and belief prevailed – additionally spurred on by national rivalry between Denmark-Norway on the one hand and Sweden on the other, employing each their own Icelanders in an attempt to define Old Norse mythology into their particular past.⁶

Torfæus and his *Historia*

In the course of the 1690s Torfæus had presented a number of Old Norse ‘historical’ sagas in Latin, namely those that did not deal directly with Norwegian history such as the Orkney, Greenland and Vinland sagas. In these minor works he was basically following, and presenting, one medieval narrative for each, but for the Norwegian History he faced the difficult task of weaving together a host of kings’ sagas, family sagas, as well as Latin works of Nordic and other origins. The title is telling, and difficult to translate: *Historia rerum Norvegicarum*: ‘An account of Norwegian matters’ certainly conveys the meaning better than the tempting and convenient ‘History of Norway’. ‘Historia’ naturally connotes ‘chronological narrative’, but also ‘investigation’. The *res Norvegicae* reminds us that this is a *Materialiensammlung* of the Norwegian medieval past rather than the critical exposé we automatically expect. I shall return to this distinction, but so far it is important to stress the dangers of naming the work ‘History of Norway’ which drags along with it a the modern conceptual constellation of ‘territory’, ‘people’, ‘state’, ‘nation’ and ‘government’ that more or less automatically spring to mind now when we hear the name of a country.

The title imitated that of Johannes Pontanus’ *Historia rerum Danicarum* from 1631 – a voluminous antiquarian work which also served as an important reference tool for Torfæus.⁷ But the concepts Torfæus entertained about his own undertaking were, I would like to suggest, also shaped by the large

⁵ On the discovery of Beowulf around 1800, see e.g. Frantzen 1990, 190ff.

⁶ See e.g. Skovgaard-Petersen 1993.

⁷ For the antiquarianism of Pontanus, see Skovgaard-Petersen 2002.

text collections for other countries or regions that came out in the later sixteenth century and, especially, during the seventeenth century. Among the most important ones that Torfæus used were (see bibliography below) Andreas du Chesne's (1584-1640) *Historiæ Normannorum scriptores antiqui* from 1619 which included the works of Dudo, William of Jumièges and Ordericus Vitalis, and the same scholar's five volume *Historiæ Francorum scriptores* from 1636 to 1649; more important than French and Norman historical writers were the English, of which Torfæus often referred to, among others: Simon of Durham, William of Malmesbury, Matthew Paris, John Brompton, and Henry Knighton. Editions of these he found in the authoritative collections *Rerum Anglicarum scriptores post Bedam præcipui* (London 1596), and *Historiæ Anglicanæ scriptores X* (London 1652); Matthew Paris was edited together with some other historians by William Wats in London 1641. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle would have been especially interesting to Torfæus with its contemporary chronology of ninth- to eleventh-century English events, often involving Danes and Norsemen, but the first complete presentation of the Chronicle text with a Latin translation was published by Edmund Gibson in Oxford only in 1692, apparently too late for Torfæus to take notice in his isolated one-man research centre on Karmøy on the western coast of Norway.⁸

Torfæus's project was similar to these collections of *scriptores* because he no doubt regarded the *presentation* of his exotic medieval vernacular chronicles central to his work. Indeed, he had at one point been explicitly told by the Danish-Norwegian king – who had placed a number of the famous and invaluable Old Norse manuscripts at his disposal – to compose a *corpus historicum*, a vague formula that pointed more in the direction of a selection of original works in Latin translation than that of a critical digestion of the material. A slightly different wording is found in the preface to the history (Prolegomena Gr), perhaps reflecting the inherent ambiguity of the assignment:

Et quidem primo ante omnia officii nobis demandati ratio exigebat, ut plenum ac perfectum Historiæ Norvegicæ opus (quantum quidem in nobis erat) orbi erudito communicaremus.

(And, indeed, the most important part of the task given to me is to share (as far as possible) the full and complete work of Norwegian history with the learned world).

The question is in what sense his work is to be seen as the Icelandic-Norwegian collection of historical *scriptores* published in translation for the

⁸ A partial edition with Latin translation had already been published by Wheeloc in 1643, but it hid in an edition of Beda and its text did not extend beyond the 10th century.

benefit of the learned republic? Did he intend his work as a definitive presentation of medieval texts, a philological point of departure for historical inquiry, or rather as the completion of that inquiry?

Egil Skallagrimsson's saga

Let us take a look at one of the texts Torfæus presented and fitted into his overall chronological scheme, in order to get an idea of the complexities involved. The case I have chosen is the Saga of Egil Skallagrimsson or *Historia Egili Skallagrimii* as Torfæus calls it – a detailed narrative of about 200 modern pages.

If you consult a modern handbook of literature, you will probably learn that two of the important saga genres were the Kings' sagas and the Family sagas (or Icelanders' sagas), the former belonging to medieval historiography the latter more to be read like romances or historical novels.⁹ This is not the place to discuss complicated questions of the rise of fiction in the thirteenth century.¹⁰ It should be clear, however, that the truth claims on the surface level are the same for both genres: due to skaldic and other poetry taken to have been transmitted orally for centuries the story line in the prose narratives, occasionally interspersed with the old poems, pose as reporting a series of real events of, e.g. the ninth and tenth centuries, even if they were only taken down in writing in the thirteenth century. The Kings' sagas tell of events on the government level, whereas the family sagas tell of families and individuals mainly from Iceland who now and then take part in royal business or in other great historical events like the unification of Norway by Harald Fairhair in the ninth century or the Christianization of Iceland around the turn of the millenium.

The saga of the moody warrior-cum-poet Egil Skallagrimsson, dating probably from around 1230, is often praised today as the most satisfying of the family sagas, not least because it culminates with several long poems,

⁹ E.g. Lars Lönnroth in Hertel 1985, vol. 2, 284-295. - p 291: "Det hører nemlig til den klassiske sagas natur at den skal virke historisk troværdig, selv om den slet ikke er det." See also Helgason 1934, 107-108 and Peter Hallberg in Brøndsted (ed.) 1972, 60-85, p.75: "I det perspektivet ter sig dessa sagor som ett slags historiska romanar - låt vara att propotionerna mellan historia och fiktion säkert växlar starkt från den ena till den andra."

¹⁰ Tulinius 2002 thinks that it is feasible to speak of the rise of fiction in Iceland during the period ca 1190-1230, cf. pp. 63-65. Similarly Harris 1986 explores the family sagas as historical novels, concluding (p.218): "Sagas are not historical novels, but it is remarkable that six centuries before Walter Scott a species of historical fiction grew up in Iceland that anticipates the historical novel in its ambiguous retrospective view of the passing of heroic ages ..." These discussions, however, are limited to an internal understanding of Icelandic literature and the whole field would benefit from a confrontation with the comparative and highly useful approach by Green 2002 and also from a comparison to the ancient 'historical novel' as discussed by Hägg 1987.

the most famous of which is the old and decrepit Egil's lament of the loss of his favourite son. The deeds of Egil and his ancestors span the reigns of three Norwegian kings and is also related to one Anglo-Saxon king from approximately the late ninth to the mid tenth century, namely Harald Fairhair, Eric Bloodaxe, Håkon the Good and Athelstan. In Torfæus's scheme this means that Egil's story belongs at the beginning of the second part of Norwegian medieval history which began with Harald Fairhair's establishment of a unified Norway under one man's rule (ninth century) up to the introduction of Christianity around the turn of the millenium.¹¹ Of the ten books in this second part, Egil's story is spread out over Books 1, 3, 4 and part of 5. Of these books Egil's and his ancestors' story as told in the saga take up a very substantial part, approximately 90 of the 200 pages making up the first five books. Torfæus has in other words abbreviated the saga somewhat, especially by leaving out the poems, cut it into pieces, and fitted it into his chronological frame. That was not a simple operation, because the story of the family often veers off from royal Norwegian history. Torfæus was left with some difficult decisions, as is also clear from some of his explanatory remarks.

At the introduction of Book 3, the one about King Erik Bloodaxe, he says that many of Egil Skallagrimsson's feats must have been accomplished during the reign of Harald Fairhair, but without specific reference to the king; therefore he has postponed them, but nor do they belong to the reign of Harald's son, Erik Bloodaxe; as we are told many memorable tales about Egil, however, they must be related here all the same.¹² Similarly, the last part of Egil's Saga is retold, but followed by an apology: So far Egil's deeds have kept me away, says Torfæus, from my aim; but it was required, I think, because I should relate his death.¹³ It is obvious that Torfæus felt obliged not to let go of Egil's saga, even when it had little relevance to Norwegian matters. It was inherent in his project to mediate the whole saga. He also kept formal features such as direct speech and the terse style in many cases. For long stretches his version reads as a fairly close Latin translation of the original work.¹⁴ On the other hand, his rendering is broken into pieces often

¹¹ For the overall structure of Torfæus's work, see Skovgaard-Petersen 2003 & 2004.

¹² Part II, Book III, 1 (p. 151): "Cum autem regnante Pulchricomo gesta sint, sed absque ulla ejus mentione, Eirici rebus in imperio gestis ea inserere nequeo: sed omittere sustineo, cum ad plura, quæ de hoc viro memoranda sunt, illustranda faciant. Vitæ igitur ejus partem, ab ipsis incunabulis repetitam, ad faciliorem sequentium intellectum, lectoris oculis breviter subjicio."

¹³ Part II, Book V, 6 (p. 214): "Hucusque me a scopo Eigilis gesta abriperunt; exitum namque ejus ut exponerem, requirere videbantur. Nunc unde digressi sumus, redibimus."

¹⁴ Torfæus (Part II, book V, 6 (p.212)) mentions some of the celebrated poems (on the loss of the son and on Arinbjørn) but does not paraphrase them. The manuscript in his

without clear markers where the text of Egil's saga resumes. In addition Torfæus incorporated a lot of commentary into the translation – of place-names, topography, local habits, etc. also often without an indication of who was now speaking. This ambiguity between presenting a text in translation speaking with its own voice and digesting it for a narrative of another order, is underscored by his avowal in the preface that he is letting the old texts speak for themselves wholesale:

For one should not immediately assume as false what deviates from the customs and mind of our own age. Often a deep truth hides in the garments of fable; often false is mixed with the obviously true; sometimes they can be told apart easily, sometimes hardly with the greatest effort. I have therefore preferred to let the entire stories stand as we have received them rather than withhold them from the reader should any one part of them happen to be less credible. I have limited myself to put up a warning in some places and to insert my own opinion – not as my fancy takes me but on the basis of comparison with authentic monuments from the fatherland.¹⁵

A little further on he says:

In translating the old monuments of the fatherland I have taken no liberties, adhering faithfully to their very words.¹⁶

possession, probably 'M' (Reykjavik, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 132 fol.) does not contain all the known poems. Roggen 2006 analyses another of Torfæus' saga paraphrases (the fornaldarsaga of Orvar-Odd in part I of Torfæus' work) and stresses the stylistic changes made by him in that case. More work on his translation techniques needs to be done before we can make a safe evaluation of his practice. The general point here, though, is simply Torfæus' wish to include the main bulk of each saga narrative.

¹⁵ *Prolegomena Gr*: “Neque enim statim pro falsis habenda sunt, quæ a moribus et geniò hujus nostri seculi abludunt. Sæpe etiam sub fabularum involucro abstrusa latet veritas; sæpe apertè veris falsa miscentur; interdùm levi negotiò, interdum vix magno labore discernenda. Maluimus ergò integras narrationes, prout accepimus, legendas sistere, quàm, quia parte sui aliquâ minus fortè erant credibiles, lectorem iis defraudari; contenti suis quæquæ locis monuisse, nostrumque judicium, ex collatione avthenticorum patriæ monumentorum, nec temerè, interposuisse.”

¹⁶ *Prolegomena Hv*. The passage goes on to excuse the lack of Latinity and Roman adaptation of names etc: In vertendis antiqvīs patriæ monumentis, nihil nobis sumsimus libertatis, verbis adstrictissimi; inprimis ubi vel regnorum eo tempore status vel antiqvi ritus accuratiùs erant notandi. Unde non est, quod miretur lector, occurrere passim in hoc Opere tam res quàm verba, foro latiali inusitata. Id enim res ipsa exegit; et satiùs duximus, quæ gentibus hisce Borealibus affectatâ Latini sermonis elegantia, a nativo suo geniò abalienare. Incidentally there is the same apology in Gibson's foreword to his translation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (1692) b2v: “Ego equidem ita mecum constitui, nihil prius mihi esse ducendum, quam ut Annalium Saxoniorum mentem sensumque, quin et ipsum (quantum fieri posset) Linguæ Saxonicæ geniū, versio mea repræsentaret. Quæ mihi caussa fuit, ut

Torfæus's project

So what was Torfæus doing? As suggested, I think to some extent that Torfæus' project can be explained in terms of a *scriptores* collection, although it was a mediated and much more problematic one than editing medieval *Latin* chronicles for an early modern Latin *res publica litterarum*. We cannot call Torfæus an historian without subscribing to the standard dismissal of him as one who on almost every page is undecided whether he publishes sources or uses them. Nor can we make him into a literary historian, his interest in the textual unity and the poetic qualities of the Old Norse originals being equally superficial. He also fails as a philologist because of the careless way he merges commentary, paraphrase and translation – and, of course, omits editions of the original texts.

All these judgements of him certainly make sense, but I think one should still try to evaluate the practical circumstances and conceptual framework of his undertaking on their own terms. We can begin in reverse order, starting from his concepts of philology, proceeding to literary history and finally to history.

Philology. If I am right in assuming that Torfæus saw his work as a collection of Old Norse *scriptores*, we must ask questions about the status of his translations. Rita Copeland's useful distinctions may apply here, even if they were worked out for the medieval context of the rise of the vernacular literatures from the Latin basis and we are here looking at the reverse process. She speaks of a spectrum ranging from primary translation to secondary translation.¹⁷ The primary translation is exegetic and points explicitly to the original text as the source of authority, whereas the secondary translation is more informed by rhetorical creativity and does not typically point to an original text. The latter does not concern us here, because Torfæus is certainly providing primary translations. He makes a point of extolling the originals, and in his entire treatment of them he yields service to them. Although we have seen that he inserts commentaries, that he dismisses the verse passages and cuts and tailors the texts to fit into a regnal scheme, he also goes to great lengths to salvage the full original story and, indeed, much of the narrative microstructure as well. These procedures accord well with some of the medieval academic practices described by Copeland as primary translation. As she also points out, however, the primary translation is situated within a paradoxical dynamic between enhancing the significance of

nec temere ab ipso ordine recederem, in quo sua vocabula idiotismus Saxonicus disponit; etsi istum Romanis scriptoribus inusitatum esse cognoverim.”

¹⁷ Copeland 1991, esp. 87-97.

the original and substituting it with a new text in the target language: “even as they [i.e. the primary translations] proclaim themselves to be serving and supplementing the text, they work in effect to contest and supplant that text.”¹⁸ In the intellectual setting around 1700, I think there is little reason to doubt that Torfæus saw his Latin translations as the definitive presentation, and the primary mode of existence of the Old Norse texts. Even if to us Torfæus represents a curious station in the history of Old Norse philology, he could hardly himself envisage scholarly collections of Old Norse texts, and if he could they would be no more than the point of departure for very few learned Icelanders. His own experience as the privileged mouthpiece of manuscript evidence that he sat on personally for decades without any imaginable claims from other scholarly institutions must have confirmed his view on the definitive status of his Latin presentation of the material. The manuscripts were to be returned to the king, but his textual substitution had the air of finality.

Literary history. If Old Norse philology was embryonic so was, necessarily, Old Norse literary history. There is no doubt that Torfæus highly appreciated the stories told in his rich manuscripts, and that he attached ‘literary’ value to them. But the difficulties with understanding the verse were one serious stumbling block (as it still is for non-specialists), and he had hardly arrived at a fixed notion of a text or œuvre as separate from each manuscript version (this was intuitive new philology before the secure establishment of the old one). The sagas had not yet been sufficiently compartmentalized to make for an easy grasp of the ‘family sagas’ as one group that we had better read as romances or historical novels. He had not misunderstood the ‘family sagas’ because they had not been grouped under a label and a hermeneutic approach yet.

History. These observations go some way to exculpate Torfæus from the charge of historical naivety. His discussion of different levels of fables and truth, oral transmission etc in the preface is also quite acceptable given that the critical tools of the nineteenth century were still more than a century away. But the modern historian might still press Torfæus by asking: ‘how could you confound a source collection with a proper historical account *based on the sources*’. But that would also be an anachronistic question because the crucial metaphor of ‘source’ was not yet operative for historians. By the mid eighteenth-century it started to appear in historical manuals, but

¹⁸ Copeland 1991, 94.

it only became the key cognitive metaphor for historical scholarship in the later nineteenth century (Droysen, Bernheim).¹⁹ The source metaphor brings along with it a host of approaches and points of view, and it is taken so much for granted that the implications are rarely discussed. As Ludolf Kuchenbuch has pointed out recently, it implies purity, but also the directedness of the past towards the historian's work. One could add that the metaphor leads us towards an acceptance of the historian's monopoly of telling the past: sources are pure in their origin but they flow together in rivers and further on into seas. Only the historian possesses the right tools to blend the sources properly, and in his account, i.e. in the river or the sea, the individual sources are indistinguishable with no colour or sound of their own.

Torfæus and his contemporaries never spoke of sources in this sense, flowing together under the guiding hand of the historian, they invariably talked of *monumenta* and *scriptores (antiquitatis)*. The big collections of the seventeenth and eighteenth century passed under these names, and Torfæus systematically named his Old Norse manuscripts *monumenta* (as in the above quoted passages). *This* metaphor guided him to the insight that the monuments of the past were not to be obliterated or substituted by the historian but to be re-erected and made more visible by him.

To conclude: Torfæus's work can be described as one particular point in the philological line leading up to modern Old Norse text editions and literary history. It can equally well be described as a point in the development of Norwegian and Nordic historiography. But the ensemble of his work is something different than a certain stage in each of the disciplines.²⁰ To the modern philologist or literary historian the transmitted material is a continuity of texts to be sorted out in their versions, interdependences etc. To the modern historian they are sources that flow into the ocean of the modern narrative and are meant to lose their distinctiveness in the process, the voices from the past are to be subsumed under the historian's voice. For Torfæus and his contemporaries, the landscape of the past was adorned with monuments each speaking with an individual authoritative voice, but to do so effectively they had to be polished by commentary and Latinity.

¹⁹ Kuchenbuch 2000, 328-30.

²⁰ Cf. the point made by Pagden 1997, 233: "... from the point of view of a history of a discipline it is important not merely to identify the shape of the development, the genealogies, the origins and so on of recognizable intellectual enterprises. It may also be important to look more attentively than we perhaps do at the objectives that, in the course of time, those projects have been compelled to shed."

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Tomus I: Ab ipsius gentis origine, ad Pipinum usque regem. Quorum plurimi nunc primùm ex variis codicibus mss. in lucem prodeunt: alii verò auctiores et emendatiores. Cum epistolis regum, reginarum, pontificum, ducum, comitum, abbatum, et aliis veteribus rerum Francicarum monumentis. [GREGORIUS TURONENSIS, Historiæ Francorum libri X, pp. 251-459 et al.].

Tomus II: A Pipino Caroli M. Imp. patre usque ad Hugonem Capetum regem. [Annales, EINHARD, NITHARD, FRODOARD etc.].

Tomus III: A Carolo Martello Pipini regis patre, usque ad Hugonis et Roberti regum tempora.

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