

**Zeitschrift:** Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien  
**Band:** 72 (2022)

**Artikel:** Double-endings in medieval saga literature : the case of Laxdæla und Sturlunga  
**Autor:** Nordal, Guðrún  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-976355>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)


### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 15.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Double-Endings in Medieval Saga Literature: The Case of *Laxdæla* and *Sturlunga*

Guðrún Nordal (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum)  0000-0003-1519-547

---

**Keywords:** fourteenth century, manuscripts, medieval studies, reception studies, textual criticism

---

The *Íslendingasögur* take their meaning not only from their action taking place within a well-defined narrative structure, but also from their interaction with the larger historical narrative of the settlement of early society in Iceland, as represented in other indigenous saga genres like the kings' sagas and the *fornaldarsögur*. The sagas are furthermore grounded in their time of writing, which took place around the time of the contemporary sagas in *Sturlunga saga*, an account of Icelandic political history in the time in which some of its texts are written. The writers refer implicitly to this 'immanent' saga, to use a term coined by Carol Clover (1986), at all levels in their narratives.<sup>1</sup> This deeply contextual characteristic of the sagas was also emphasised by Kathryn Hume (1973: 606), who notes that the beginning and ending of the saga

invisibly [...] lead back to Norway and the tyranny which sent men to Iceland, and forward to each member of the audience. As modern readers [...] we are neither conditioned to respond to the conventions of this form nor aware of personal genetic connexion to the actors.

Writers using historical material of the kind found in the sagas are challenged by the fact, as Frank Kermode (1967: 176; cited by Hume 1973: 605) noted in his book on endings in fiction, that "relations [...] stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle in which they shall happily *appear* to do so". The ending of each medieval saga is clearly determined by its authors' preferences and aesthetic judgment; they choose where to draw a circle around their narrative, where they take a leave of their main characters, and whether they mention their forefathers or refer at all to their descendants. The beginnings and endings of sagas function as historical pegs, links to a specific time and place. The 'immanent' saga implies that the story could continue in the mind of the reader or the listener of the saga *after* the formal ending of a saga by hinting at stories of the next generation, even though such a continuation is not suggested by the saga itself nor by the company the saga keeps in its manuscripts.

---

1 Clover's concept of the 'immanent' saga is developed further by Gísli Sigurðsson (2004: 102–103) in his book on orality and the sagas.

It is worth stressing that the historical narrative of Iceland and the North, from the settlement (ca. 870) to the time of writing, is clearly not the only historical context within which an *Íslendingasaga* is set or with which it interacts. As with all other medieval narratives, a saga is always placed within the larger frameworks of Christian medieval literature and chronology, as well as the larger timeframe of universal history. The story is but one hook in a larger, more elaborate chain of human activities. Furthermore, the formal characteristic of many indigenous sagas of mixing prose narrative with intricate skaldic or eddic verses implies that the terms of reference are also drawn from the rich metaphorical language of skaldic poetry and the highly developed study of skaldic poetics in the High Middle Ages (see Nordal 2001: 199–236).

In this paper I will be drawing our attention to the ending of the roughly forty sagas of Icelanders, and focus on two sagas, *Sturlunga saga* and *Laxdæla saga*. These can be linked to the Dalir, that is, the west of Iceland, and to the same cultural milieu of the late thirteenth century in Iceland, which present us with fascinating questions as far as their endings are concerned.<sup>2</sup> I will be asking whether each saga's double-ending was motivated by political and cultural concerns, not at the time of writing at the end of the thirteenth century, but rather during the transmission of both sagas in the fourteenth century. It is outside the focus of this paper to discuss their beginnings, yet I would like to point out that the openings of both sagas are also highly suggestive of the context in which they were placed and understood by the audience (see Nordal 2013: 205). The depiction of the migration from Scandinavia and the British Isles to Iceland, and interpretations of the settlement in early works like *Íslendingabók* by Ari Þorgilsson and *Landnámabók*, clearly affected the ways in which a beginning of a saga was framed, steering the reader or listener to a particular entrance by which to enter the narrative. Both sagas begin with elaborate migration stories. *Laxdæla saga* opens with the female settler Unnr djúpúðga (named Auðr in *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*), who is married to Óláfr hvíti.<sup>3</sup> She is widowed, and her son Þorsteinn becomes a king after conquering half of Scotland but dies in battle. After his downfall, Unnr swiftly prepares her departure and leaves the British Isles. On her journey north she marries her daughters to aristocratic men in the Orkneys and the Faroe Islands, before she becomes one of the four main settlers of Iceland, according to Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*. She settles at Hvammr in the Dalir, in the west of the country (on this topic, see Callow 2020: 166–167). Hvammr also became the family home of the Sturlungar family when it was appropriated in the late twelfth century by Sturla Þórðarson, the father of Snorri Sturluson and grandfather of his namesake Sturla Þórðarson; thereafter, Sturla was called Hvamm-Sturla (see Callow 2020: 94). The *Sturlunga saga* compilation also begins with a settlement story, with *Geirmundar þáttur*, the story of Geirmundr *heljarskinn* ("Hel-skin"), the son of King Hjorr Hálfsson and the most distinguished of all the settlers, according to Sturla

---

2 *Sturlunga saga* is thought to have been compiled in the west of Iceland, as is *Laxdæla saga*; see below. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (2021: cxxix–cxxxviii) discusses the creation of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation in her new edition.

3 Óláfr hvíti is said in *Laxdæla saga* to be the grandson of the Danish king Fróði inn frækni (see *Laxd*: 3), but is framed in *Landnámabók* as a descendant of Hiberno-Norse chieftains who became King of Dublin (see *Ldn*: 136).

Pórðarson's version of *Landnámabók* in *Sturlubók*: "Þat segja vitrir menn, at hann hafi gøfgastr verit allra landnámsmanna á Íslandi" (*Ldn*: 156; "Wise men say that he was the most distinguished of all settlers in Iceland"). According to the *þáttr*, Geirmundr chose to settle in Iceland – close to Unnr's farm, in fact – when King Haraldr hárfagri conquered almost all of Norway. These beginnings signal the aristocratic roots of each saga's main protagonists and the ideological and hierarchical perspectives of both narratives.

Unusually for a fictitious medieval genre, the sagas of Icelanders do not contain literary prologues placing the narrative in the context of other medieval genres, nor is there any discussion of the writers' attitudes to the factual or fictive quality of the narrative or its moral message, as we frequently find in romances or legendary literature.<sup>4</sup> This may be because of the anonymous quality of the sagas and the absence of an author. The opening textual boundary, however, is fixed in the transmission of sagas; narrative segments are not added *before* the beginning of a saga.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, I have argued that the beginning of each saga can function as a prologue, in many cases foreshadowing the main narrative, in others comparing or contrasting the forefather or foremother to the main character in the saga (see Nordal 2013: 204). Similarly, there are no epilogues to the sagas, even though the audience is addressed in five sagas at the very end (*Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Harðar saga*, *Reykðæla saga*, and *Víglundar saga*), and in three instances a named source or a *heimildarmaðr* ("authority") is noted (Þorvaldur Ingjaldsson in *Droplaugarsona saga*; Sturla Pórðarson in *Grettis saga*; and Styrmir Kárason in *Harðar saga*). Yet the endings of sagas are more precarious in their transmission and more open to modification than their beginnings, and they too have a bearing on how the text is ultimately understood by the audience. Of particular interest here is the occurrence in some saga compilations of apparent 'double-endings', which I define in more detail below, as these seem to be indicative of tensions about how a narrative should or could be brought to an end.

Hume (1973: 600) notes in her discussion of endings in the sagas of Icelanders that there are no "emotional simplicities" at the end of a saga; the equilibrium at the end "is social rather than personal", and that characters are often left in a state of unresolved tension. This is an important point. The sagas are rooted in specific social circumstances and adhere to a known legal framework; before a saga can conclude, a balance must be achieved through mediation or settlement, often through shrewd manoeuvrings of the law and forced resolution. In addition to these social and legal requirements, the characters are often left with unfilled expectations. Many cut forlorn figures at the end of the narrative, such as Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir in *Laxdæla saga*, Egill Skalla-Grímsson in *Egils saga*, Helga Þorsteinsdóttir in *Gunnlaugs saga*, and Kormákr Qgmundarson in *Kormáks saga*. These endings lay bare the tragic imbalance of the sagas, the tension between the importance of social stability at the expense of personal desires or inner equilibrium. Perhaps it is this ambiguity at the end of the narrative, and the sense of defeat and sadness, that prompted the writers or

4 On this topic, see Sverrir Tómasson's (1988) study of prologues in medieval Icelandic literature.

5 Seventeen sagas open at the time of settlement of Iceland, and thus reflect the author's or the audience's interest in the migration period and in neighbouring countries in the Viking period. The other twenty-two sagas that begin their narrative after the settlement show less interest in the theme of migration from Norway and in relations with Norway in particular; see Nordal (2013: 204–206).



audiences to add narrative segments to the endings of both *Laxdæla saga* and *Sturlunga saga*.

If we take a bird's eye view of the corpus of *Íslendingasögur*, some forty-odd sagas, we discern three ways in which an author relates the ending of a saga to a larger historical context. Some authors are content with ending a saga without referring to external events or the next line of kin, while others are deeply concerned with the Icelandic descendants of the main protagonists, even those alive at the time of writing. Moreover, some authors expand the boundaries of the narrative by breaking out of the geographical confinements of Iceland into neighbouring lands. Three patterns emerge:

1. 16 sagas conclude the narrative in a plain manner without listing the descendants of the protagonists: *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, *Grœnlendinga saga*, *Gull-Þóris saga*, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, *Hrafnkels saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Reykðæla saga*, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Víglundar saga*, and *Þorsteins saga hvíta*.
2. 13 sagas draw attention to known descendants in Iceland: *Bandamanna saga*, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Flóamanna saga*, *Hœnsa-Þóris saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Svarfdæla saga*, *Vápnfirðinga saga*, *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, and *Þórðar saga hreðu*.
3. 10 sagas emphasise that either the protagonist or his descendants lived abroad, most significantly in Norway: *Finnboga saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga* (i.e. Þormóðr's death), *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Hallfreðar saga* (i.e. Hallfreðr's death), *Harðar saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Jökuls þáttr Búasonar*, *Kormáks saga*, and *Króka-Refs saga*.

This grouping gives an idea of different authorial emphases, whether they be on genealogy or on the attractiveness and importance of a reputation outside of Iceland. Some sagas even fall into two categories.<sup>6</sup> The reference to named descendants is clearly directed at the immediate audience and linked to the 'immanent' saga. The same is true of references to the protagonist's connections or those of his descendants in Norway in the thirteenth century, and even more so in the fourteenth century after Iceland became part of the Norwegian kingdom in 1262–64.

The instances where sagas can be proven to interact with specific historical contexts are of particular interest, and it seems helpful to me to identify at least six ways in which this can be achieved at the end of a saga:

1. Only one ending exists, and no additional material about the descendants of the main characters is found in the tradition outside the boundaries of the saga. This does not mean, however, that the 'immanent' saga was not at play in oral storytelling at the time of writing – only that it is now lost.

---

6 It should be noted that this grouping is intended only as a guideline. Some sagas can belong to two groups, such as *Gísla saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, or *Króka-Refs saga*, where a note is made of the descendants of the protagonist or their family members at the end of the saga, but it would have been of relevance to the audience of the sagas in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries whether the protagonist ended his life abroad, with such a reference thus determining the grouping. *Fljótsdæla saga* is not included here as its ending is missing.

2. Two possible endings are preserved in the medieval manuscripts of a saga. Below I will discuss the implications of two such examples, *Laxdæla saga* and the other from the historical corpus, *Sturlunga saga*. Both these ‘double-endings’ suggest an unresolved emotional or even cultural tension at the end of the saga.
3. A saga is preserved both as a closed unit and as an integral part of a larger historical narrative of a king, with the ending of the ‘original’ saga being annulled in the second context. *Hallfreðar saga* is also preserved as part of the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, and *Fóstbræðra saga* as part of the saga of Óláfr helgi Haraldsson; in these cases, we can compare the varying effect of the versions. This is also true of *Grœnlendinga saga*, preserved only in Flateyjarbók, and to some degree of *Laxdæla saga*, where we find chapters from within the sagas preserved in the Flateyjarbók and Bæjarbók manuscripts (also from *Bjarnar saga*) of the long saga of Óláfr helgi Haraldsson.
4. A saga is preserved in manuscripts in a sequence with other sagas that take up the thread of the next line of kin. This happens particularly in the *Austfirðingasögur* material (see Hume 1973; Gísli Sigurðsson 2004: 128–132) and may be part of the special ‘oral’ nature of the corpus of sagas from the East, as I have indicated in my work on the use of skaldic poetry in the sagas (see Nordal 2007).
5. A *þáttr* about the son of the saga’s protagonist is preserved directly after the saga in its paper manuscripts, but it is unclear whether the *þáttr* was ever part of the wider saga. An example is the *þáttr* of Jökull Búason, the son of the hero of *Kjalnesinga saga*.
6. A *þáttr* about the son of the main hero of the saga is preserved in the historical material, but not preserved in the context of the saga itself, such as the *þáttr* of Halldór Snorrason, the son of Snorri goði, the protagonist of *Eyrbyggja saga*. This *þáttr* is preserved in relation to *Haralds saga harðráða*.

In some *Íslendingasögur*, the final chapters are played out outside the main scene of events in Iceland, either in different parts of the country from the main narrative or even abroad, which reveals their *þáttr*-like nature. *Spesar þáttr* in *Grettis saga* is a well-known example, but this *þáttr* is obviously an integral part of the saga narrative and is found in all manuscripts. Kathryn Hume (1973: 593) called such an ending a “post-ending”, but I disagree with her claim that these endings fall outside the plot of the saga.

Let us now turn to our two examples. The ending of *Sturlunga saga*, the great historical narrative of political life in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, is in line with those sagas of Icelanders where the ending is characterized by an unresolved tension, by a sense of defeat and loss. At the time (ca. 1260), the Sturlungar family had been defeated in the final phase of the power-struggle between the ruling chieftains in Iceland, when Gizurr Þorvaldsson in 1258 received an earldom over Iceland from the Norwegian King Hákon Hákonarson. Gizurr delegated regional authority over the western part of Iceland, the traditional stronghold of the Sturlungar family, to Hrafn Oddsson. Hrafn was married to one of Sturla Sighvatsson’s daughters and rose to the office of *hirðstjóri* (“king’s steward”) and *riddari* (“knight”) at the Norwegian court. This left Sturla Þórðarson, the well-known chieftain, poet, and saga-author, sidelined and humiliated by what he regarded as Gizurr’s betrayal. Sturla famously composed a shrewd verse about Gizurr, in which he compares him to the deceitful Óðinn, the name Gizurr being one of Óðinn’s poetic names; the stanza is cited in the final part of the compilation (*Stu*: 260, st. 153).



The text of *Sturlunga saga* is by no means straightforward, particularly towards the end of the compilation. The compilation is not preserved in manuscripts from the time it was put together (ca. 1300), but in two major compilations from the late fourteenth century, now defective: Króksfjarðarbók (AM 122 a fol.) and the slightly later Reykjarfjarðarbók (AM 122 b fol.). Króksfjarðarbók is more complete, containing 110 out of 141 leaves of the original book, yet both the beginning and the end of the codex are missing; there are also lacunae in the saga (see Jakob Benediktsson 1958: 7–8). Reykjarfjarðarbók contains only 30 out of its original 180 leaves; *Sturlunga saga* is found on 24 leaves (see Stefán Karlsson 1970: 120–121), with fragments of *Árna saga* and Bishop Guðmundr Arason's *Jarteinir* on the remaining six. Paper copies of both codices from the seventeenth century and onwards, when they were more complete than now, give us information about their original structure. Reykjarfjarðarbók is alone in integrating *Þorgils saga skarða* in the compilation, but there are also significant divergences in the rendering of the text, abbreviations, or expansions. It is therefore legitimate to speak of two versions of *Sturlunga saga*. The compilation in Króksfjarðarbók seems to have concluded with the depiction of Gizurr Þorvaldsson's killing in 1264 of Þórðr Andrésson, the chieftain of the Oddaverjar family who was the last of the local chieftains to remain defiant to Norwegian rule and the election of Abott Brandr Jónsson as biskhop at Hólar. Reykjarfjarðarbók is apparently alone in adding a *þáttr* of Sturla Þórðarson at the end of the compilation (see Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 2021: cxxii).

*Sturlu þáttr* addresses the emotional instability at the end of *Sturlunga saga*, where Sturla Þórðarson has been crushed by Gizurr Þorvaldsson and humiliated and discarded by the king. The first part of the *þáttr* depicts typical quarrels between two factions in Iceland, with the second half of Sturla's critical stanza about Gizurr being repeated, but the latter part of the *þáttr* is cast in the mould of the so-called *Íslendingaþættir* contained in the kings' sagas, which depict Icelanders' often unrealistic successes at the Norwegian court (see Phelpstead 2020: 98). The narration of the *þáttr* takes place at the court of Magnús lagabæti, the son of Hákon gamli. Sturla arrives at the court as a disreputable member of the Sturlungar family, with no chance of an audience with the king. He is cast in a role known in saga literature, analogous to that of Egill Skalla-Grímsson when he arrives at the court of Eiríkr blóðøx in York. Egill had a trusted friend at court in Arinbjörn; similarly, Sturla has a trustworthy ally in Gautr from Mel, one of the king's courtiers who proved a staunch supporter of Sturla and helped him to obtain an audience with the king and the queen. Contrary to the depiction of Queen Gunnhildr's evil influence on Eiríkr in *Egils saga*, it is here the queen who recognises Sturla's storytelling skills and actively secures him an audience with the king to deliver his praise poems. Eventually Sturla is commissioned to write the sagas of the king himself and of Hákon gamli. The balance at the end of *Sturlunga saga* is clearly changed by inserting *Sturlu þáttr* to the Reykjarfjarðarbók version the focus of the narrative shifts from Gizurr's firm rule in Iceland to the rise of Sturla as the official historiographer of the Norwegian court. Gizurr Þorvaldsson may have attained an earldom in Iceland, but Sturla Þórðarson controlled the way events were recounted posthumously in the historical material, both in *Íslendinga saga*, part of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, and the two kings' sagas, in *Hákonar saga gamla* and the now-lost *Magnúss saga lagabætis*.

*Sturlu þáttr* is one of the most noteworthy sources for oral entertainment in Scandinavian medieval society. Its significance is equal to that of another important narrative segment in

*Sturlunga saga* about the storytelling at the wedding at Reykjahólar in Iceland in 1119 (see Meulengracht Sørensen 1993: 42–50). *Sturlu þáttr* tells the fairytale-like story of Sturla's rise at the court. His success in Norway is based on his extraordinary storytelling gifts, which are revealed when he captivates the audience in telling the story of Huld on board the royal vessel. His accomplishment is dependent on the approval, and even patronage, of the queen, who is culturally astute and instrumental in securing his advancement at the court. Sturla goes to Norway alone, but when he secures his position at court, he interestingly sends for his wife Helga and their sons to join him, as noted in the *þáttr*: “var hon þar fyrir sakir Sturlu tekin í ina mestu sæmð af dróttningu” (*Stu*: III, 251; “she [Helga] was for Sturla's sake greatly honoured by the queen”). It is likely that the sons gained much from the royal favour; as it turned out, Sturla's son Þórðr became a priest at the royal court (see *Stu*: III, 251).

Helga Þórðardóttir's association with the queen at the Norwegian court reminds us that the relationship between Norway and Iceland in the thirteenth century was not only played out by men. Some women of high status joined their husbands or fathers on trips to Norway and even went alone with their children, staying there for long periods, with some at the royal court, if the testimony of *Sturlunga saga* is to be trusted. Arnórr Tumason takes his wife Ásdís, daughter Arnbjörg and son Kolbeinn ungi with him to Norway; Arnórr dies there, and the children return later (see *Stu*: II, 134). Widows were afforded more authority than married women, and Solveig Sæmundardóttir, who was married to Sturla Sighvatsson, takes matter into her own hands when she becomes a widow and travels abroad. Solveig claimed kinship with the Norwegian king through her grandfather Jón Loftsson, whose grandmother was the illegitimate daughter of King Magnús berfœttr. She takes her two daughters and son Jón with her to Norway after the death of her husband Sturla Sighvatsson in 1238, probably intending to secure their future abroad and possibly some recompense after the killing of Sturla Sighvatsson, who had been acting on the Kings' behalf in Iceland (see *Stu*: II, 359). Her endeavours seem to have born no fruit, as they returned to Iceland three years later (see *Stu*: II, 393). Despite these isolated examples, it should be noted that the luxury of foreign travel and life at the court was afforded only to a few women. One recurring theme in *Laxdæla saga* is the prejudice shown to powerful women by their men when they are denied the chance to travel abroad with their husbands or boyfriends (on this topic, see Johanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013: 131). Kjartan Ólafsson refuses to take his girlfriend Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir with him to Norway, despite her passionate plea: “vil ek fara útan með þér í sumar [...] því at ekki ann ek Íslandi” (*Laxd*: 115; “I want to travel abroad with you in the summer [...] because I do not love Iceland”). Instead, he refers her to her duty to take care of her brothers (see *Laxd*: 115). The Norwegian Geirmundr intends to leave his wife Þuríðr, daughter of Óláfr pá, behind when he returns to Norway, but she has other ideas: she slips their daughter onto the ship, and in her place grabs his sword Fótþítr (see *Laxd*: 82–83). Geirmundr dies at sea, and the sword is later used by Bolli Þorleiksson to kill Þuríðr's brother Kjartan Ólafsson. Both women are largely powerless to bring about changes in their lives.

Helga Þórðardóttir grows up with her mother Jóreiðr Hallsdóttir in Sælingsdalstunga in Dalir, where Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir lived many centuries earlier as a widow with her young children. Jóreiðr was the daughter of the priest Hallr Gunnsteinsson and Hallbera, the sister of Einar Þorgilsson at Staðarhóll. Jóreiðr was married to Þórðr Narfason, the son of Snorri



from Skarð; one of his descendants, Þórðr Narfason, has been suggested as the compiler of *Sturlunga saga*.<sup>7</sup> It seems that Jóreiðr's husband died after only a short-lived marriage. Helga was their only child, and Jóreiðr guarded her daughter's interests ferociously (see Nordal 2013: 208–210).<sup>8</sup> Jóreiðr lived as a widow in Sælingsdalstunga for at least thirty years, first with her daughter and then later also with her son-in-law Sturla Þórðarson, whom we know from *Sturlu þáttr*.

The killing fields of *Laxdæla saga* where Kjartan and Bolli were slain are in the vicinity of Sælingsdalstunga. Guðrún and Bolli moved from Laugar to Sælingsdalstunga after Bolli killed Kjartan, but a year after Bolli's killing Guðrún exchanged estates with her friend Snorri goði Þorgrímsson, the main protagonist of *Eyrbyggja saga*, and moved to Helgafell, later the site of the Augustinian monastery. Jóreiðr passed the land in Sælingsdalr to her granddaughter Ingibjörg Sturludóttir in 1253, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Helga and Sturla Þórðarson, when she was to be married to Hallr Gizurarson, the son of Gizurr Þorvaldsson. Their marriage was negotiated at Jóreiðr's farm and was part of a plot to secure peace between the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir (see *Stu*: III, 77). Jóreiðr was probably instrumental in bringing about this settlement, which went up in flames when Gizurr's farm at Flugumýrr in Skagafjörður was attacked and burned to the ground in the days after the wedding.

The account of the three generations of women at Sælingsdalstunga in *Sturlunga saga* is very unusual, and the story of an attack on their farm in 1244 found its way into compilation in the thirteenth century, as it is preserved only in Króksfjarðarbók. It contains the only stanza recited in *Sturlunga saga* by a woman, an unknown woman at Jóreiðr's farm. The attackers were bent on killing Jóreiðr's son-in-law Sturla Þórðarson, who had fled; when they realized that their visit was to no avail, they turned their weapons on the workers at the farm. Helga had given birth only four weeks earlier to her son Snorri and sought sanctuary in the church. The memory of this unique experience was passed on, and the story may have been cemented by the anonymous stanza. *Sturlunga saga* and *Laxdæla saga* come together in the account of this event in Dalir. I have argued elsewhere that the patrons of *Laxdæla saga* may have been Helga Þórðardóttir, her daughter Ingibjörg Sturludóttir, or other women in their company, even though the saga could have earlier roots, as Callow (2020: 219) suggests. These women were born and bred in Sælingsdalr and knew the oral stories of powerful women in their district, including Unnr djúpúðga, who lived at Hvammr – where Helga's grandfather Þórðr Sturluson, Snorri's brother, was born – and had the opportunity, denied so dramatically to Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, to travel and be inspired by the wider world.

The ending of *Laxdæla saga* is usually presented as unequivocal, ending with the passing of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and with a brief account of her son Gellir Þorkelsson. The ending of the saga is clearly stated: “ok lýkur þar nú sögunni” (*Laxd*: 229; “thus the saga ends”). Yet this is not the ending that has come down to us in the principal manuscript of the saga from the

7 In her introduction to the new edition of *Sturlunga saga*, however, Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (2021: cxlii) concludes that the evidence for Þórðr Narfason as the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* “hvílir á veikum grunni” (“rests on weak grounds”), and suggests Sturla Þórðarson as its main creator (*yfirsíðingur*).

8 On this topic, see also Philadelphia Ricketts's (2010: 378–389) discussion and listing of Icelandic widows in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

fourteenth century, Möðruvallabók and copies of the now lost Vatnshyrna, which was written at the end of the same century, where a *þáttr* of Bolli Bollason is added at the end.<sup>9</sup>

*Laxdæla saga* is one of the most popular of the *Íslendingasögur*, preserved in a great number of manuscripts. Six vellum manuscripts date from before 1550; all are fragments, save for Möðruvallabók. The saga exists in two versions: the Y text, represented by Möðruvallabók, Vatnshyrna, and the fragment AM 162 D1 fol. (ca. 1300); and the Z text, which exists in four vellum fragments, including the oldest fragment, as well as paper copies. Whilst the Z text has been considered by editors to be closer to the original than the Y text, and the addition of *Bolla þáttr* to post-date the original written version of the saga, Möðruvallabók has generally been chosen as the main text for editions, given that it is the oldest complete manuscript of the saga (see, for example, Kålund 1889: xliii; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: lxxix).

Why was *Bolla þáttr* added as early as 1300? We can surmise, just as we did in the case of *Sturlu þáttr*, that the audience felt the ending to be emotionally or socially unfulfilling. The persistent emphasis in the saga on the mannerisms of the court and on exterior attributes, such as colourful clothes and expensive things, as well as the text's prevailing female perspective may have seemed objectionable to the saga's later audiences. There is also reason to think that the *þáttr* may have been added so that the saga could conclude with its focus on a member of the Laxdælir family. Möðruvallabók does not conclude the saga of the Laxdælir with the story of Guðrún and her son Gellir Þorkelsson (Ari Þorgilsson's grandfather), but with an account of Guðrún's impressive son Bolli Bollason, a direct descendant of the settler Unnr djúpúðga, who travelled all the way to Constantinople and returned home dressed in the finest golden clothes. The saga then proceeds to tell an odd tale about Bolli where he is not cast in the role of a Varangian knight, but rather fulfils the essential and everyday duties of a typical Icelandic chieftain; he gets messed up in his kinsmen's affairs in the north of Iceland, and at one point even stoops to stealing hay. The cinematic story of the golden heroes of the Dales is transposed here quite violently into a gritty drama dealing with the more mundane conditions of life in Iceland, as if a reality check were needed after the aristocratic extravagance of the preceding saga.

This ending to *Laxdæla saga*, like the ending of *Sturlunga saga* in Reykjarfjarðarbók, reveals the emotional tensions at the end of the narrative that seem to have been relevant to the fourteenth century audience, but they are resolved in a completely different way. Sturla Þórðarson, who suffered a humiliating defeat in Iceland, gains surprising success at the heart of the Norwegian state. Gizurr Þorvaldsson had clearly been the victor in the political rivalry between the leading families in Iceland, but the tables are turned at the end of the compilation in Reykjarfjarðarbók by focusing on Sturla's literary success at the court, his writing of the two royal chronicles and his family's enduring reputation at the court. The shift in *Laxdæla saga* is of different kind. Bolli, who enjoyed almost legendary success in Constantinople, is hauled down from his golden saddle and thrust into everyday rural conflict in the North of Iceland, far away from his home in the Dalir which suggests a rejection of his travels abroad which in the context of *Laxdæla saga* had brought much turmoil to the main characters, such as Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir. Bolli is revealed as a chieftain who could be depended upon by his kinsmen and followers in Iceland.

9 On Vatnshyrna, see Stefán Karlsson (1970: 279–283).

What do these double-endings tell us? I suggest that these new endings clearly reveal an active audience that did not accept the ending presented to them, for cultural or political reasons, but chose instead to extend the boundaries of the texts to present alternative conclusions that shifted the balance of their original finales. The effect is, however, of an opposite kind in each case. In *Sturlunga saga*, the focus is shifted from Gizurr to Sturla; from the earl to the poet and royal chronicler; from the Haukdælir to the head of the Sturlungar family; from Iceland to Norway. By contrast, the emphasis in *Laxdæla saga* shifts from a great reputation at the most glamorous court in Constantinople to the mundane reality of farming in Iceland; from Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Gellir Þorkelsson, the son of Guðrún's last husband, to Bolli Bollason, the descendant of Unnr djúpúðga; from mother to son.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

- Laxd* = Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.) (1934). *Laxdæla saga*. In: *Laxdæla saga* (= Íslenzk fornrit 5). Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, pp. 1–248.
- Ldn* = Jakob Benediktsson (ed.) (1986). *Landnámabók*. In: *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók* (= Íslenzk fornrit 1). Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, pp. 29–397.
- Stu* = Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.) (2021). *Sturlunga saga*. 3 vols (= Íslenzk fornrit 20–22). Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.

### Secondary Sources

- Callow, Chris (2020). *Landscape, Tradition and Power in Medieval Iceland: Dalir and the Eyjafjörður Region c.870 – c.1265*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Clover, Carol (1986). “The Long Prose Form”. In: *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 101, pp. 10–39.
- Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934). “Formáli”. In: Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.). *Laxdæla saga* (= Íslenzk fornrit 5). Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, pp. v–xcvi.
- Gísli Sigurðsson (2004). *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method* (= Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature 2). Jones, Nicholas (trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (2021). “Formáli”. In: Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.). *Sturlunga saga*, 3 vols (= Íslenzk fornrit 20–22). Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, pp. v–cc.
- Guðrún Nordal (2013). “Skaldic Citations and Settlement Stories as Parametres for Saga Dating”. In: Mundal, Else (ed.). *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions*. Copenhagen: Museum of Tusculanum Press, pp. 195–212.
- Guðrún Nordal (2007). “The Art of Poetry and the Sagas of Icelanders”. In: Heslop, Kate/Quinn, Judy/Wills, Tarrin (eds.). *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross* (= Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 18). Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 219–237.
- Guðrún Nordal (2001). *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the 12th and 13th centuries*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hume, Kathryn (1973). “Beginnings and Endings in the Icelandic Family Sagas”. In: *Modern Language Review* 68:3, pp. 595–606.
- Jakob Benediktsson (1958). “Introduction”. In: *Sturlunga saga: Manuscript No. 122 A fol. in the Arnarnagmagnæan Collection* (= Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile 1). Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, pp. 7–18.



- Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013). *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words and Power*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kålund, Kristian (1889). "Indledning". In: Kålund, Kristian (ed.). *Laxdæla saga* (= Samfund til udgivelsene af gammel nordisk litteratur 19). København: Møllers bogtrykkeri, pp. i–lxx.
- Kermode, Frank (1967). *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. London and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben (1993). *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islændingesagaerne*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Phelpstead, Carl (2020). *An Introduction to the Sagas of Icelanders*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Ricketts, Philadelphia (2010). *High-Ranking Widows in Medieval Iceland and Yorkshire: Property, Power, Marriage and Identity in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Stefán Karlsson (1970). "Ritun Reykjarfjarðarbókar. Excursus: Bókagerð bænda". In: *Opusculum* 4, pp. 120–140.
- Stefán Karlsson (1970). "Vatnshyrnu". In: *Opusculum* 4, pp. 279–303.
- Sverrir Tómasson (1988). *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum: Rannsókn bókmenntahefðar* (= Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi Rit 33). Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar.



