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“*Hvorki glansar gull á mér /  
né glæstir stafir í línum*”

Some observations on *Íslendingasögur* manuscripts  
and the case of *Njáls saga*

## I. Introductory remarks

Texts of *Njáls saga* – the best known and most highly acclaimed of the medieval Icelandic *Íslendingasögur* – survive in 18 parchment manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts produced in Iceland in 14th, 15th and 16th centuries.<sup>1</sup> No other saga assigned to the *Íslendingasögur* cor-

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<sup>1</sup> The two fragments AM 162 b β fol. and AM 162 b δ fol. are counted separately here but since they are thought to have belonged to one manuscript (Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and

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The quotation in the title is the first half of a verse which is, according to Jón Helgason (1958: 27), found in the margin of a parchment manuscript. The second half of the verse is “fegurð alla inniber / eg í menntum fínum”; on the source of this verse see Gunnlaugur Ingólfsson (2014). I thank the following for comments on aspects of this paper and/or for giving me access to unpublished material: Karl-Gunnar Johannsson and the anonymous *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* reviewers, Beeke Stegmann, Bergdís Þrastardóttir, Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, Már Jónsson, Susanne Arthur, Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir. Thanks are also due to Bart Besamusca and the HERA-funded “Dynamics of the Medieval Manuscript” research group for inviting me to present parts of this research at their closing conference in Utrecht, April 2013.

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**Abstract:** This article surveys the extant pre-Reformation parchment manuscript evidence for the *Íslendingasögur*. The first half of the article focuses on the manuscript tradition of *Njáls saga*, noting how the preservation of this saga in some manuscripts – where it is the sole text – seems to be anomalous when compared with that of other *Íslendingasögur* in pre-Reformation parchment manuscripts. In the second half of the article, the focus is broadened and the extent to which the nature of the material preservation of *Íslendingasögur* has a bearing on the modern critical reception of individual narratives, and on notions of genre and ‘the canon’ more widely, is considered. Finally, some ways in which the manuscript evidence can give us insights into how the sagas have been read and understood over time are touched on.

**Keywords:** *Íslendingasögur*, *Njáls saga*, Icelandic manuscript production and reception, intertextuality, genre.

pus survives in as many pre-Reformation parchment manuscript witnesses. In addition to these, there are four further parchment manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts from the 17th century; 17 paper manuscripts from the 17th century; 21 paper manuscripts from the 18th century; and one paper manuscript from the 19th century.<sup>2</sup>

The oldest of the *Njáls saga* manuscripts and fragments have been dated to around 1300, making them almost contemporary with the time that the saga is thought to have been first set down on parchment as a written, literary composition (around 1280, or at any rate during the final decades of the 13th century; see Einar Ólafur Sveinsson ed. 1954: lxxv–lxxxiv). As is often pointed out, none of the *Íslendingasögur* survives in an ‘original’ or autograph copy and the chronological gap between the posited date of any single saga’s first written composition and the oldest surviving manuscript text of it is often centuries rather than decades (see further Örnólfur Thorsson 1990; Vésteinn Ólason 2007: 114–115; essays in Mundal ed. 2013). Despite their fragmentary condition, these oldest *Njáls saga* manuscripts are additionally interesting for the way that they demonstrate how distinctive textual or scribal variation manifested itself very early on in this saga’s written tradition. The manuscript evidence for *Njáls saga* as a whole is not so divergent that different versions of the saga can be identified but each manuscript witness presents subtly differing interpretations or understandings of individual characters and of the action that the saga narrates.<sup>3</sup>

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Ludger Zeevaert, forthcoming 2014), they are counted as one manuscript elsewhere, so the total number of pre-Reformation parchment manuscripts of *Njáls saga* is given as 17, e.g. in Table 1 below. Throughout this article, I use the term ‘pre-Reformation’ rather than ‘medieval’ to refer to the longer period in Iceland during which parchment was the primary writing support, i.e. from the time when manuscript production began up until around the mid 16th century when the Catholic Church was superseded by the Lutheran Church. While a few vellum manuscripts produced in the 1600s are extant, by the 17th century, paper had become the standard writing support both for copies of texts intended for domestic, secular consumption and for texts copied out by professional scribes working for commissioning patrons.

<sup>2</sup> Three of the 17th-century parchment manuscript fragments (plus a fourth, now apparently lost fragment), most likely belonged to the same book (see Arthur 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Guðrún Nordal (2005, 2008) has drawn attention to variation between manuscript texts of *Njáls saga* with regard to the number of skaldic verses incorporated into the narrative; forthcoming and projected studies by members of the “Breytileiki Njálu” / “Variance of *Njáls saga*” research group explore other types of textual variation (linguistic, stylistic, narrative). The “Breytileiki Njálu” project was funded by RANNÍS (The Icelandic Centre for Research) between 2012 and 2014 and led by Dr Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir at the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Reykjavík, Iceland. The project website is at [http://www.arnastofnun.is/page/breytileiki\\_njalu](http://www.arnastofnun.is/page/breytileiki_njalu).

The pre-Reformation manuscript tradition of *Njáls saga* is unusual in another respect too. It is the only saga for which extant manuscript evidence exists that shows it was copied out and circulated independently of other sagas, that is, as the sole text in whole books. As far as can be seen from the extant evidence for other sagas (if the manuscripts are not too fragmentary to draw a conclusion one way or the other), all other pre-Reformation parchment manuscripts that preserve *Íslendingasögur* texts are compilation or multi-text manuscripts. Even given the major caveat of the fragmentary nature of the surviving manuscript evidence, this is a striking anomaly.<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, *Njáls saga* is the longest of all of the *Íslendingasögur* and one obvious and pragmatic explanation for the phenomenon of it being copied out unaccompanied by other texts is, quite simply, its considerable length. It is nonetheless worth exploring whether or not other factors had an influence on the seemingly atypical textual preservation of *Njáls saga*, as will be attempted in this article. In order to contextualise these research questions, the extant pre-Reformation manuscript evidence for the *Íslendingasögur* more generally will be reviewed. Since this surveying exercise both highlights certain issues and questions of genre and corpus definition that are pertinent to modern saga scholarship and discourse, and also gives certain insights into the practical processes and ideological impulses behind secular manuscript production and consumption in pre-Reformation Iceland, it is hoped that the study will make a contribution to our understanding of Icelandic manuscript culture more broadly.

## II. *Njáls saga* in pre-Reformation manuscripts

None of the pre-Reformation manuscripts of *Njáls saga* contains a complete, undamaged text of the whole saga.<sup>5</sup> Many are classified as fragments, being badly damaged and comprising only a few leaves whose texts correspond (often discontinuously) to different parts of the *Njáls saga* narrative. This damage means it is impossible to know whether *Njáls*

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<sup>4</sup> It has been estimated that what is extant from the pre-Reformation period – some 750 parchment manuscripts or fragments of manuscripts containing a wide range of texts in the vernacular (Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2007a: 249) – may represent only 5% to 10% of manuscripts produced in Iceland during these centuries (Driscoll 2004: 21).

<sup>5</sup> Shelfmarks of *Njáls saga* manuscripts are formatted in bold type in Appendix 1; see Jón Þorkelsson 1889, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1953, and handrit.is for overviews of the manuscript tradition and details about individual manuscripts.

*saga* was originally copied out as the sole text in these manuscripts, or preserved alongside other material as part of bigger compilatory projects.

This uncertainty is also present in the cases of the more complete manuscript texts in Kálfalækjarbók (AM 133 fol., c. 1350) and Skafinskinna (GKS 2868 4to, c. 1350–1400). Although the quire arrangement and the disposition of the text of the opening chapter of the *saga* in these manuscripts suggests that nothing else preceded them, both manuscripts end defectively and therefore the possibility that other texts did once follow *Njáls saga* cannot be ruled out. The beginning of the *saga* is copied out on 1v in Skafinskinna, suggesting that this was most likely the first quire of the book; 1r, the outer page, may have been left blank on account of it being most susceptible to sustaining damage from rubbing, particularly if the quires were loose. In Kálfalækjarbók, undamaged quires are made up of four conjoint leaves; the first quire of the book, however, comprises three conjoint leaves (ff. 1 + 6, 2 + 5, 3 + 4) and a singleton (f. 7). The beginning of the *saga* is copied out on 1r as the manuscript is foliated today but the possibility that the last leaf of the first quire (f. 7) was once conjugate with a (blank) leaf that functioned as a flyleaf at the beginning of the book, so that the *saga* text originally began on 2r, is not implausible. This seems to have been the case with AM 468 4to, Reykjabók, as noted below.

The codicology of Reykjabók (AM 468 4to, c. 1300–1325), Gráskinna (GKS 2870 4to, c. 1300) and Oddabók (AM 466 4to, c. 1460) suggests that despite some damage, these books as they are extant today represent the original intentions of their producers and never contained texts other than *Njáls saga*. Reykjabók only lacks two leaves on which text was copied out (after f. 6 and f. 33 respectively). The outermost leaves of the first quire have been lost but since the opening of the *saga* is preserved on the leaf now foliated as 1r, the first leaf must have functioned as a flyleaf (see further Jón Helgason (ed.) 1962: v).<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the binding cannot be used as evidence to support the argument that the book as it is today was originally a complete unit. The two oak boards into which the manuscript is bound and which define it as a single unit have been subjected to dendrochronological analysis in order to establish their age: that of the upper board is uncertain (an initial date of c. 1390 has been retracted) while the lower board dates to after 1570 (see Bonde and

<sup>6</sup> The present flyleaf at the end of the manuscript (f. 94), on which a Latin hymn to the Virgin Mary and musical notation is found, seems to have been taken from a Catholic liturgical manuscript, perhaps after the Reformation (Jón Helgason (ed.) 1962: v).

Springborg 2005, 2006). The disposition of the *Njáls saga* text at the end of the manuscript, however, lends weight to the supposition that *Njáls saga* was the sole text in this book from the start: the saga ends on 93r and the originally-blank 93v has been filled with so-called ‘additional’ verses in a hand other than that of the main scribe but thought to be contemporary (see Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1953: 6). This may have been an afterthought, though, with the blank leaf thereby being put to convenient use; other ‘additional’ verses are copied into the margins at earlier points in the manuscript (at 24r-v, 29r, 31v, 32v, 33r, 37r, 39r, 40v, 47v and 52r; see further Guðrún Nordal 2005 and 2008).

Neither the beginning nor the end of *Njáls saga* as preserved in Gráskinna in the 14th-century scribal hand is extant: one leaf is lost from the beginning and the last three quires of the manuscript (ff. 99–121), which preserve text corresponding to the last part of the saga, are the work of a 16th-century restorer. However, the Gráskinna manuscript has a rare limp wrap-around cover made out of seal-skin which is thought to be medieval and may even be contemporary with the time of the manuscript’s production. If the cover is as old as the manuscript itself, it must have been taken off the book and re sewn onto it again in the 16th century when the repairer was carrying out his work (which included adding whole replacement quires) but it is nonetheless reasonably safe to assume that the book is whole and that only *Njáls saga* was ever copied out in it.

In Oddabók, text corresponding both to the beginning and to the end of the saga survives in the original scribal hand. The first quire comprises four conjoint leaves; since the text begins on 1r but there is no lacuna between the first and second quire (if the assumption that the book contained nothing but *Njáls saga* is correct), 1r may originally have been preceded by a hooked-in singleton that acted as a flyleaf. The seventh and last quire of this manuscript (ff. 48–57) is now made up of four conjoint leaves (49 + 57, 50 + 56, 52 + 55, 53 + 54) and two singletons (48 and 51). F. 51 must originally have been a conjoint leaf since text is missing between ff. 55 and 56 (i.e. where the leaf’s corresponding half would have been). On 57v (the outermost page of the manuscript), the *Njáls saga* text ends three-quarters of the way down the page and the last quarter has been left blank. It is most likely that f. 48, too, was originally a conjoint leaf; its conjugate – which would have followed f. 57 – may either have been left blank or could have contained some short text on the recto-side the verso-side acting as a flyleaf. Originally, therefore, the last quire most likely comprised six conjoint leaves. Elsewhere in the manuscript, however, complete quires with continuous text are made up of four conjoint

leaves: presumably, if other texts followed, or were intended to follow *Njáls saga*, the final chapters of *Njáls saga* would have been copied into a new quire larger than this last quire being expanded so that the saga could be concluded in it, making it larger than average as a consequence. On this basis, it is plausible to assume that *Njáls saga* was always the sole text in this manuscript.

Two further manuscripts (as opposed to fragments) containing texts of *Njáls saga* need to be considered. These are the 14th-century compilation manuscript known as *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.) and the late 15th-century manuscript known as *Bæjarbók í Flóa* (AM 309 4to). While both of these manuscripts do contain other texts alongside that of *Njáls saga* (and as such, are the only extant pre-Reformation manuscripts which do not only contain *Njáls saga*), closer examination suggests that in their current state, they do not reflect the original intentions of their producers.

*Bæjarbók* (or at least the first part of it) has been dated unusually precisely to 1498 on the basis of a scribal colophon on 2r (see further Scott (ed.) 2003: 110\*).<sup>7</sup> The book now comprises 48 leaves arranged into 8 (defective) quires and contains texts of *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* (1r–26v), *Laxdæla saga* (27ra–34va, with lacunae), *Eyrbyggja saga* (34va–38vb, with lacunae) and, last of all, approximately one-third of the *Njáls saga* narrative (39r–48v, with lacunae). The manuscript seems to have been written by one scribe (Scott (ed.) 2003: 110\*) but although the hand is the same throughout, variation with regard to the layout of the text area and the number of lines per page, for example, suggest that its component parts may not originally have been intended to be bound together into one volume.

The text is copied out in two columns with the exception of ff. 6, 13, 29, and 38–48 (i.e. the *Njáls saga* text). The *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* extracts (which derive from *Flateyjarbók*) are written out much more densely than the other parts of the manuscript, with 56–57 lines per page; the number of lines per page for the parts of the manuscript that contain texts of *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* is around 46–47 lines; the *Njáls saga* leaves contain only 42–43 lines per page. Thus it seems that while *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* were clearly copied out together as a pair, *Njáls saga* was probably not originally intended to accompany these two *Íslendingasögur* as part of the original compilation. Whether or not *Njáls saga* was (before being bound into *Bæjarbók*) part of another compilation cannot be determined.

<sup>7</sup> “*hann* [i.e. Óláfr Hákonarson] *var konungr er su bok uar sk[rifu]d er þessi bok uar epter skrifud þa var lidit fra hingad burd uors h[er]ra iesv christi .M.CCC.LXXX ok siau r. enn nu erv fra hans hingadburd er sia bok er skrifud .M.CCCC. nivtiger ok atta ar*”.

In Möðruvallabók, one of the best known extant saga compilation manuscripts, *Njáls saga* is the first of 11 texts. The manuscript is dated 1330–1370 or more specifically to the mid 14th century (see Stefán Karlsson 1967; van Weenen 2000: 1). It originally comprised 26 quires of 8 leaves (see further van Weenen 2000: 20–21); the contents of the book as it is extant are as follows:

1. *Njáls saga* (1ra1–61rb8)
2. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (62va1–99ra41)
3. *Finnboga saga ramma* (100ra1–114ra41)
4. *Bandamanna saga* (114rb1–120vb21)
5. *Kormáks saga* (120vb22–129rb7)
6. *Víga-Glúms saga* (129rb8–141va32)
7. *Droplaugarsona saga* (141va33–147vb4)
8. *Ólkofra saga/þáttr* (147vb5–149va31)
9. *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds* (149va32–156rb10)
10. *Laxdæla saga* (156rb11–198rb8)
11. *Fóstbræðra saga* (198rb9–201vb41)

Attempts have been made to rationalise the selection and order of the texts in Möðruvallabók and some critics have suggested that a certain geographical logic may govern the arrangement of texts in it. Margaret Clunies Ross, for example, writes that “the first seven [sagas] are arranged in a significant geographical order, following the Quarters of the island of Iceland, beginning in the south and ending in the east, the same trajectory as was followed by the original *Landnámabók*. Thus the collection begins with *Njáls saga*, set in the south, and was to have continued with another now lost southern saga that was never copied into the manuscript, \**Gauks saga Trandilssonar* ... It continues tracking west, then north, then east ... then, breaking the geographical order, come ‘The saga of Ale-hood’ ... *Hallfreðar saga*, *Laxdæla saga* with *Bolla þáttr* ... and *Fóstbræðra saga*” (Clunies Ross 2010: 144). This is an attractive interpretation but closer examination of the codicology of the manuscript appears to undermine it – largely because it seems that neither *Njáls saga*, \**Gauks saga* nor *Egils saga* were, in fact, originally intended to be part of the compilation – and \**Gauks saga*, furthermore (which is nowhere else extant), may never actually have existed as a written narrative.

The text of *Njáls saga* in Möðruvallabók begins on 1r (in the hand of a 17th-century repairer whose text fills the first two quires) and it finishes on 61rb8. The rest of the leaf is blank as is 61v and 62r; 62r is the first leaf

of a new quire. *Egils saga* starts at the top of 62v; on the blank leaves (61v and 62r), there are traces of marginalia and drawings. A bearded figure in armour fighting another figure fills most of 61v, with a bird of some kind top-right; a smaller drawing and various scribbles fill 62r. In a study first published in 1939, Jón Helgason claimed he could read a caption on 61v which explained that the image was of Egill Skalla-Grímsson fighting the berserkr Ljótr (an episode related in *Egils saga*); Jón also claimed to be able to read the sentence “lattu rita her *vid gauks sogu trandils sonar . mer er sagt at [herra] Grimir eigi hana*” at the bottom of the leaf (1959: 102). Jón Helgason identified this ‘Herra Grímur’ as a certain Grímur Þorsteinsson who was *lögmaður* in the south and east 1319–20 and in the north and west 1330–37, also possibly again 1346–49. He was knighted in 1316 and died around 1350 (Páll Eggert Ólafsson 1949: 108).<sup>8</sup>

Gaukr Trandilsson is a character in *Njáls saga*: chapter 26 of *Njáls saga* notes how Gaukr is killed by his foster-brother, Ásgrímur Elliða-Grímsson, and this incident is referred to again later on in chapter 139.<sup>9</sup> This intersection would make *\*Gauks saga* a good one to pair with *Njáls saga* and Jón Helgason suggested that the Möðruvallabók scribe’s original intention was to copy out *Njála* and *\*Gauks saga* together in one codex, with *Egils saga* being the first text in a second codex: “Hann [skrifari M] virðist þá hafa gert ráð fyrir að Njála og Gauks saga yrði codex út af fyrir sig [...]; fyrir því byrjar hann næsta kver (þar sem Egla hefst) þannig að ljóst er að hann hefur ætlazt til að þar yrði upphaf annars codicis” (1959: 103; “The scribe of M appears to have made provision for *Njáls saga* and *\*Gauks saga* being in a codex by themselves [...]; for this reason he begins the next quire (where *Egils saga* begins) in such a way that it is clear he intended this would be the beginning of another codex”).

However, this marginalia is now almost entirely illegible. Andrea de Leeuw van Weenen notes in her description of the manuscript that

<sup>8</sup> Jón’s dating of Möðruvallabók to the period 1316–1350, a little earlier than the date commonly agreed on by most scholars today, was made on the basis of this identification of Grímur Þorsteinsson, taking the year of his death as a *terminus ante quem*; this is clearly methodologically problematic.

<sup>9</sup> Gaukr “í Stöng” is also named in *Landnámabók* and in Haukr Valdísarson’s *Íslendingadrápa* (verse 19). Furthermore, he seems to be the Gaukr whose name is carved in runes along with other 11<sup>th</sup>-century runic inscriptions on the walls of the Neolithic tomb at Maeshowe, Orkney “Þessar rúnar / reist sá maðr, / er rýmstr er / fyrir vestan haf, / með þeiri öxi, / er átti Gaukr / Tran[d]jils sonr / fyrir sunnan land” (see further Barnes 1994), and whose farm, at Stöng in Þjórsárdalur, has been reconstructed on the basis of archaeological excavations (see <http://www.thjodveldisbaer.is/>).

“hardly anything [of the scribal note about \**Gauks saga* and herra Grímr] can be made out now, although I could make out part of it in 1980 [with ultraviolet light]. Stefán Karlsson told me that he had scrutinized this passage and could not confirm the reading ‘herra’, and in fact was rather sure that it was not that. He thought it might be a name with the second part -grímr, but none of these names fitted in with the still visible parts of letters” (2000: 27). Unfortunately then, the theory about the intended inclusion of the ‘lost southern saga’ is now impossible to corroborate though the arguments for *Njáls saga* and *Egils saga* at least being intended as separate units are still convincing and accepted and developed by Michael Chesnutt (2010: 152, 155). Furthermore, van Weenen notes (2000: 19) that the standard number of lines per page in *Njáls saga* is 42 but 41 for every other text in the manuscript; this could be taken as another small piece of evidence that supports the theory that *Njáls saga* was not intended on first principles to be the first text in the Möðruvallabók compilation – and that the quires containing it may instead at first have been conceived of and executed as a complete and independent *Njáls saga* unit, like Reykjabók, Gráskinna and Oddabók.

Other recent studies have examined aspects of Möðruvallabók’s codicology and provenance and drawn attention to ways in which the book as it is extant today differs in certain respects to supposed earlier states. On the one hand, while Möðruvallabók may not, at first, have been intended to preserve copies of *Njáls saga* or *Egils saga*, on the other hand, it may have contained other texts that are no longer part of the extant collection. Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson (1994: 110, 113) calculates that *Fóstbræðra saga* would not have filled the posited final 27th quire (now missing) so other texts could have been copied after it (he also notes that original opening of *Njáls saga* alone would not have filled the first quire of the book, so perhaps *Njáls saga* was not unaccompanied in this part of the book). Michael Chesnutt has also drawn attention to the fact that damage to leaves throughout the book is often worst at quire boundaries where a new text begins (2010: 149–52) and he suggests that parts of the book show signs of having been kept stacked in loose quires in one place – perhaps in the place where the book was produced, if it was made ‘on spec’ rather than on commission (assumed to be the most usual course of action), and that what is extant comprises the remains of two or even three books (2010: 154–55).

With regard to the book’s binding, Sigurgeir Steingrímsson notes that the sturdy wooden boards which form its cover are actually too small for

it and do not protect the edges of the leaves (1995: 63). He suggests that the leaves may not have been brought together before the 17th century when the manuscript was taken to Denmark by Björn Magnússon (*sýslumaður* of Munkaþverá in Eyjafjörður) and given to Thomas Bartholin as a gift in 1684.<sup>10</sup> Árni Magnússon acquired the book after Bartholin's death in 1690, and after Árni's death, the book became part of the Arnarnagænan Collection, housed at the University of Copenhagen. Then, around 1890, the quires (bound together as one volume between wooden covers, according to Kristian Kálund's 1889 catalogue entry) were taken out of their binding and arranged into three volumes; in the late 1920s, these three volumes were taken apart and subsequently re-sewn together as a single unit, and only laced into the wooden boards which form its cover today as late as 1928 by the Danish bookbinder Anker Kyster (Sigurgeir Steingrímsson 1995: 63).

Möðruvallabók often appears in photographs alongside other manuscripts with similar bindings and is presented as one of the foremost examples of 14th-century Icelandic compilation manuscripts. The fact that the book's contents do not necessarily reflect the original intentions of its producer, and that its iconic appearance is due to modern modifications, is often overlooked. Similarly, the work of Möðruvallabók's 17th-century restorer, who seemingly aimed to make good damage to the book by filling in the lacunae in *Njáls saga* and elsewhere with recopied text corresponding to missing material, deserves further attention and is one of a number of examples of such later attempts at restoration. Something comparable is found in the 16th-century 'Gráskinnuauki' additions to the Gráskinna manuscript of *Njáls saga*. Understanding the dynamic processes of change and reconfiguration that these pre-Reformation parchment books and the texts preserved in them have been subject to over time (i.e. not just physical decay or deterioration) gives us insights into their material and ideological significance to different parties at different points in time. This is relevant, too, when – as I argue – the modern, critical reception of certain sagas is often contingent to a significant degree on the circumstances and nature of their manuscript preservation.

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<sup>10</sup> See Bartholin's letter to the Icelander Torfæus (Þormóður Torfason, 1636–1719), January 16th 1686, preserved in AM 285 b I fol.: "Her var ellers i Sommer en gammel Islænder Biörn Magnussen. Hand foræret mig et Manuskript paa Kalfveskin, men der var ickun particulæres Islandicæ historix, og en smuch der ibland, nemlig Kormaks saga, som er heel fuld af Antiquiteter"; see also Árni Magnússon's description of his acquisition of the manuscript in AM 435 a–b 4to.

### III. Defining the corpus

#### i) The manuscripts

Stopping to examine what, in fact, comprises ‘the corpus’ of manuscripts on the one hand, and *Íslendingasögur* narratives on the other hand, draws attention to a number of practical and theoretical issues that have a bearing on our understanding of the *Íslendingasögur* as a genre. As already mentioned, *Njáls saga* is preserved in an exceptionally large number of witnesses compared to other *Íslendingasögur*. *Egils saga* comes closest with 13 manuscript witnesses (many of which are fragmentary); *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds* is extant in 9 manuscripts (some of whose particular characteristics will be described below); *Laxdæla saga* and *Þórðar saga breðu* are extant in 6 manuscripts each; *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Fóstbræðra saga* in 5 each. Most *Íslendingasögur* survive in a single pre-Reformation parchment; some in none at all. Table 1 on the next page summarises this information.

Information about individual sagas and the manuscripts that preserve texts of them is, of course, routinely included in introductions to text and facsimile editions and found in familiar reference works and catalogues, both printed and online (e.g. Kålund 1889–92; Kålund 1900; Gödel 1897–1900; Páll Eggert Ólafsson *et al.* 1918–90; ONP vol. I; www.handrit.is). On the basis of published catalogue records, I count 64 pre-Reformation parchment manuscripts or manuscript fragments in which texts of *Íslendingasögur* are preserved.<sup>11</sup> Appendix 1 lists these manuscripts by century and classmark. Inevitably, any such total count of manuscripts will be provisional; there is always the possibility (albeit unlikely) of hitherto uncatalogued manuscripts coming to light. More often, totals will also vary depending on the criteria for inclusion or the chronological parameters set. Thus Stefán Karlsson (2006: 492) counts 59 manuscripts containing *Íslendingasögur* in a survey article about medieval Icelandic manuscripts but his chronological parameters, 1200 to 1500, are slightly narrower than those used in this study.

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<sup>11</sup> This total counts as one manuscript instances where books have been broken into multiple parts and these parts given individual shelfmarks; see further below. It does not include lost manuscripts known to have contained saga texts such as the \*Vatnshyrna codex which burnt in the 1728 Great Fire of Copenhagen (see Stefán Karlsson 1970); the so-called \*Membrana Regia Deperdita (see Loth (ed.) 1960: lxxix–lxxx); the so-called \*Gullskinna manuscript of *Njáls saga* (see Már Jónsson 1996); and another parchment saga-compilation that the scribe and priest Jón Erlendsson at Villingaholt (d. 1672) used to make copies of the sagas and *þettir* that are preserved in his paper manuscript AM 156 fol..

Table 1. Number of extant pre-Reformation manuscript copies of individual sagas. The notation + \*1 indicates copies of sagas believed to have been preserved in now-lost manuscripts. Gull = Gullskinna, JE = Jón Erlendsson exemplar, MRD = Membrana Regia Deperdita, Vatns = Vatnshyrna; see further footnote 11 above.

0	1	2	3	4	5+
Fljótsdœla saga	Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa	Droplaugarsona saga	Bandamanna saga	Bárðar saga Snœfellsáss (+ *1 Vatns)	Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar (5)
Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls	Flóamanna saga (+ *1 Vatns)	Gísla saga Súrssonar (+ *1 MRD)	Eiríks saga rauða	Eyrbyggja saga (+ *1 Vatns)	Fóstbrœðra saga (5 + *1 MRD)
Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings	Grœnlendinga saga	Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu	Finnboga saga ramma	Króka-Refs saga (+ *1 Vatns)	Þórðar saga hreðu (6 + *1 Vatns)
Valla-Ljóts saga	Gull-Þóris saga	Harðar saga ok Hólmverja (+ *1 Vatns)			Laxdœla saga (6 + *1 Vatns)
Þorsteins saga hvíta (+ *1 JE)	Heiðarvíga saga	Kormáks saga			Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds (9)
Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallsonar (+ *1 MRD)	Hrafnkels saga	Ljósvetninga saga			Egils saga Skalla- Grimssonar (13)
	Hœnsa-Þóris saga (+ *1 Vatns)	Víga-Glúms saga (+ *1 Vatns)			Njáls saga (17, + *1 Gull)
	Kjalnesinga saga (+ *1 Vatns)	Víglundar saga			
	Reykðœla saga				
	Svarfdœla saga				
	Vatnsdœla saga (+ *1 Vatns)				
	Vápnfirðinga saga				
	Qlkofra saga				

The history of the collection of Icelandic manuscripts from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, and the subsequent treatment of these manuscripts as parts of book collections around Scandinavia and occasionally beyond, is of course key to understanding how they are classified in catalogues. As is apparent from Appendix 1, there is not always a straight one-to-one ratio or relationship between classmarks and manuscripts. The lion's share of the parchment manuscripts extant today were gathered together by Árni Magnússon (1663–1728; see Már Jónsson 2012 for a recent overview of Árni's life). Much of the material Árni acquired was in poor con-

dition and comprised little more than single, often badly damaged parchment leaves. Árni sometimes managed to reunite leaves that had once belonged to the same manuscript but had become separated; in a few cases, he reconstructed more considerable parts of whole books that had been broken up into smaller units at some point in their history prior to collection. The late 13<sup>th</sup>- and early 14<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript known as Hauksbók, now in three parts with three respective classmarks (AM 371 4to, AM 544 4to and AM 675 4to) is one such example (Lethbridge 2013).

Modern paleographical and codicological studies have identified other cases (see e.g. Stefán Karlsson 1970 and McKinnell 1970 on the lost \*Vatnshyrna manuscript and the ‘Pseudo-Vatnshyrna’ manuscript; see also Már Jónsson 1997). Árni employed scribes to make paper copies of the parchment manuscripts he obtained (and also copies of those which he could not obtain), and in some cases he himself was responsible for the breaking up whole books into smaller units so that they could be shelved in his collection according to their subject matter (Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir 2013: 24). In these cases, two or more catalogue shelfmarks together represent a single manuscript. In other cases, a single catalogue shelfmark conceals the fact that originally separate manuscripts were bound together into a single volume, either prior to or after becoming part of a collection; AM 309 4to, Bæjarbók (discussed above), seems to be a good example of this.

## ii) The sagas

There is no argument over what *Njáls saga* ‘is’ or its place in the *Íslendingasögur* canon but in the case of some other narratives, things are not always so clear-cut. In some cases, I suggest that a direct relationship can be detected between the manuscript evidence for the *Íslendingasögur* narratives on the one hand, and on the other, judgements about which texts belong, or do not belong, to the *Íslendingasögur* corpus. Factors such as whether or not pre-Reformation parchment witnesses are extant; if so, how many and how old they are; how the narrative in question is rubricated and how complete the text of it is in these manuscripts might be seen to have an impact on the degree of critical attention and acclaim that a saga has (or has not) received.

Typically, in survey articles or encyclopedia entries, the *Íslendingasögur* corpus is said to consist of some 35 to 40 narratives. An open-ended answer (“at least X”) to the question “how many *Íslendingasögur* are there?” is arguably the only useful one, not only because of the

nature of the textual evidence for these narratives and their treatment in extant manuscripts – as will be elaborated on below – but also because we do not know the extent of what has been lost. \**Gauks saga Trandilssonar* has already been discussed; references are made in texts of *Laxdæla saga* to a certain \**Porgils saga Höllusonar*, for example, for which no text now is extant, and also to \**Njarðvíkinga saga* (though this may be *Gunnars þátrr/saga Þiðrandabana*). Then there are sagas which are not named anywhere but which scholars have posited as once-extant written sources for other sagas or written material: one example here is Sigurður Nordal's \**Þorsteins saga Kuggasonar*, which he proposed as a source for *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa* (see Sigurður Nordal 1938, lxxxi–iii; see also Jesch 1982–85).

Correlating the number and kind of extant manuscript copies of individual sagas with the critical accord granted to them, their inclusion (or not) in the corpus, and their typical placement in the centre or on the periphery of the 'canon' gives pause for thought. Sagas such as *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, *Þorsteins saga hvíta* and *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, which are not preserved in any pre-Reformation parchment manuscripts although they are believed to be medieval compositions, are not always included in survey lists of sagas (e.g. Schier 1970; Clunies Ross 2010). *Gunnars saga* is generally deemed to be late and fantastic in terms of its subject-matter and narrative style; *Þorsteins saga hvíta* and *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* are relatively short narratives which are seen as supplementary to other more 'mainstream' sagas (e.g. *Vápnfirðinga saga* in the case of *Þorsteins saga hvíta*) with which they have geographical, genealogical or other connections or overlap. No pre-Reformation witnesses for *Fljótsdæla saga*, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* or *Valla-Ljóts saga* (also all believed to be medieval compositions) exist either. These sagas, although they are included on lists of *Íslendingasögur* narratives, cannot be said to be amongst the better regarded or relatively well-studied of the sagas.

Similarly, those sagas that survive in only a handful of fragmentary pre-Reformation leaves belonging to one manuscript might be said to have suffered on account of this unlucky circumstance as far as their critical reception is concerned. Editors of *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*, *Flóamanna saga*, *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, *Svarfdæla saga* and *Vápnfirðinga saga* are forced to supplement the fragmentary pre-Reformation witnesses with texts from more complete post-medieval paper copies; these sagas have not been the subject of much sustained literary-historical scrutiny either, arguably at least partly on account of their patchy preservation. An exception here, however, is *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*: although the pre-Reformation evidence for this saga comprises a single parchment leaf

dated to around 1500, it is nonetheless one of the most praised and critiqued of the sagas and has been at the centre of the bookprose/freeprose debate over saga origins (see e.g. Byock 2001 for a survey and further references). At the other end of the spectrum, many of those sagas that survive in more numerous but younger 15th- and 16th-century copies have not been granted much attention on balance either. The proportionally greater number of extant manuscripts of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Króka-Refs saga* and *Þórðar saga hreðu* suggests their popularity in pre-Reformation times (if, as is sometimes postulated, extant numbers of manuscripts can be taken as an index for this). It is only relatively recently, though, that saga scholars have begun to examine these narratives on their own terms, rather than seeing them as representative of degenerating literary tastes and skill (see e.g. Arnold 2003).

How sagas are rubricated in manuscripts (by the original scribes rather than later owners or users, though this is also interesting from a reception perspective) is an aspect worth drawing attention to here. Rubrication is not found in all pre-Reformation manuscripts; where rubrics are present, the formulation within individual manuscripts is not always consistent, and the same narrative might well be rubricated differently elsewhere. The rubrication of *Möðruvallabók* is illustrative: variation as far as the formulation of introductory and concluding rubrics, and their presence/absence is the norm, as demonstrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Original rubrication of narratives in *Möðruvallabók*.

Text	Opening rubric or incipit	Explicit
Njáls saga	<i>beginning missing</i>	<i>ok</i> lyk ek þar brennunials sogu
Egils saga	her hefr upp egils sogu	endir egils sogu
Finnboga saga	–	<i>ok</i> lyk ek þar finnbogasogu
Bandamanna saga	saga ofeigs banda kals	lykr þar þessari sogu
Kormáks saga	kormags saga	lykr þar sogu þessi
Víga-Glúms saga	her hefr víga Glums sögu	<i>ok</i> lyk þar sogu Glums
Droplaugarsona saga	af katli þrym <i>capitulum</i>	... vetri síðarr en þangbrannr prestur kom til islandz fell helgi droplaugarson
Ólkofra saga/þáttr	aukofra saga	<i>ok</i> lyk þar sogu olkofra
Hallfreðar saga	hallfredar saga	<i>ok</i> lyk her sogv hallfredar
Laxdæla saga	laxdæla saga	[merges with so-called <i>Bolla þáttr</i> whose beginning is marked with the rubric ‘af bolla bollason’ and ends with the explicit <i>ok hofum ver eigi heyr þessa sogu lengri</i> ’]
Fóstbrœðra saga	saga þormod <i>ok</i> þorgeirs	<i>end missing</i>

Some of these rubrics are the titles commonly used today; others are less familiar (e.g. *saga ofeigs banda kals* for *Bandamanna saga*; *saga þor-mod ok þorgeirs* for *Fóstbræðra saga*). Of immediate relevance for the present consideration of ‘the corpus’ is the rubrication of the short narrative about Þórhallr ‘Ölkofri’ which is not generally included in survey lists of *Íslendingasögur* but is nonetheless given the title ‘Ölkofra saga’ in *Möðruvallabók*, the sole pre-Reformation textual witness for it. In other later paper copies, the titles ‘Ölkofra þáttur’ and ‘Ölkofra saga’ are used interchangeably, as in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript AM 455 4to, where ‘Ölkofra þáttur’ is given as the title rubric at 70v but the explicit on 72r reads ‘Og lýkur þar sögu Ölkofra’. The *Íslensk fornrit* edition calls the story ‘Ölkofra þáttur’ – though the editor, Jón Jóhannesson, notes that “Þar [in *Möðruvallabók*] er hann kallaður saga, og hefði ef til vill verið rétt að halda því” (Jón Jóhannesson 1950: xxxviii; “there, in *Möðruvallabók*, it is called a saga, and it may be right to think of it as such”). In English translation, the story is just called ‘Ale Hood’ in Hermann Pálsson’s 1971 Penguin translation but it is given the title ‘Ölkofri’s saga’ in the *Complete Sagas of Icelanders* series (Viðar Hreinsson (gen. ed.) 1997).

This variation with regard to the rubrication of *Ölkofra saga/þáttur* underlines an issue that is central to the question of medieval and modern generic distinctions as far as medieval Icelandic prose narratives are concerned. Is the narrative about Ölkofri a saga or a *þáttur*? Does the decision, one way or another, affect how the narrative is regarded by modern critics? The generic dividing line between saga and *þáttur* in this case is clearly a very fine one: where length is often taken as one of the criteria used to distinguish sagas from *þættir*, the narrative about Ölkofri is arguably just as much a short saga as a longer *þáttur*. Modern critics deciding on one or the other generic type (i.e. *saga/þáttur*) may well be implicitly perpetuating certain hierarchical value judgements founded on assumptions about the relative lengths and narrative value or complexity of sagas (longer, more sophisticated) and *þættir* (shorter, less sophisticated). The manuscript evidence shows clearly that the distinction is sometimes not obvious, however (see further Ármann Jakobsson 2013 and Bergdís Prastardóttir 2014). In addition to rubrication and this kind of explicit generic labelling, the arrangement of a text in its physical manuscript context (i.e. its disposition on the page alongside the textual company that it keeps in any single manuscript), is another type of evidence that can be looked to for insights into how these texts were conceived of and understood by those who copied them.

### iii) The sagas in their manuscript contexts

In the case of some sagas, nowhere is a continuous text to be found in the extant medieval parchment record. This is not because of damage to the manuscripts but because of the way in which some sagas are copied out in *þættir*-like instalments rather than as uninterrupted ‘whole’ textual units. The narrative usually referred to as *Grænlandinga saga*, for example, is only preserved in one pre-Reformation parchment manuscript. This is the late 14th-century Flateyjarbók manuscript (GKS 1005 fol.), in which the saga is copied out in two instalments inserted at two points into the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta* narrative; it might also be noted that it is in fact rubricated “Eireks þátr rauða” in Flateyjarbók (see further Rowe 2005: 271–75). *Grænlandinga saga* has been criticised for ‘lacking’ a conventional *Íslendingasögur* opening comparable to its Vinland counterpart *Eiríks saga rauða* (or it is thought to have lost this material), that is, a prelude with genealogically-framed character introductions and geographical scene-setting in Norway followed by land-claims in Iceland. Sverrir Tómasson notes that the circumstances of its preservation mean that considering it as an independent or discrete narrative is problematic (2001: 35–36; see also comments in e.g. Ólafur Halldórsson 1985: 369 and Ólafur Halldórsson 2001: 43–44). Invariably, the nature of the narrative’s non-continuous preservation is viewed in a negative light.

*Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds* and *Fóstbræðra saga* are two further examples of this phenomenon of discontinuous or intermittent textual preservation. These sagas are extant in a relatively large number of pre-Reformation manuscript witnesses: 9 in the case of *Hallfreðar saga* and 5 in the case of *Fóstbræðra saga* as already noted. In both cases, however, many of these manuscript witnesses preserve the sagas in a discontinuous way with episodes from them woven *þættir*-like into texts of other narratives, mostly the *konungasögur Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta* and *Óláfs saga helga* (e.g. in Flateyjarbók; AM 53 fol.; AM 54 fol.; AM 61 fol.; AM 62 fol., Holm perg 1 fol. (Bergsbók)).<sup>12</sup> Sigurður Nordal writes about *Fóstbræðra saga* as preserved in Flateyjarbók that “[það] vantar að vísu ekki neitt, en undir lokin eru sögurnar svo fléttaðar saman, að von-

<sup>12</sup> *Fóstbræðra saga*, or a part of it, is also referred to as a *þátr* by the Flateyjarbók scribe Jón Þórðarson in his prefatory material: “þikir af þui tilheyrligt at setia her nockurn þatt af hirdmonnum hans tuæimr Þorgæiri Hafarssyne ok Þormode Bessasyne” (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and C. R. Unger (eds) 1862: 9; “it seems thus appropriate to include here a *þátr* about his [Óláfr’s] two retainers, Þorgeir Hávarsson and Þormóðr Bessason”).

laust er að greina heillagan texta Fóstbræðra sögu frá” (1943: lxx; “certainly nothing is lacking but towards the end, the sagas are so entwined that there is no hope of distinguishing a whole text of *Fóstbræðra saga* [from that of *Óláfs saga*]”) – a point which highlights the complexity of genre definition and distinction.

Related to this is the phenomenon of what might be described as accretive *þættir*, that is, *þættir* or additional narrative units which function as prologues, epilogues or generally as supplementary narrative material alongside ‘primary’ saga narratives, and which are found in some manuscripts but not in others that preserve the same sagas. The text of *Ljós-vetninga saga* as preserved in the late 14th- or early 15th-century AM 561 4to (alongside *Reykðæla saga* and *Gull-Þóris saga*) does not include the so-called *Sörla þáttur*, *Ófeigs þáttur*, *Vöðu-Brands þáttur* or *Þórarins þáttur ofsa* episodes which are inserted at certain points into the saga narrative in the other pre-Reformation parchment that preserves it, the 15th-century AM 162 c fol. (see further Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2007b). Here, the presence or absence of these *þættir* is key to different versions of this saga being distinguished between. The opening and closing sections of *Grettis saga*, rubricated in some manuscripts as *Önundar þáttur tréfóts* and *Spesar þáttur*, respectively, are not included in every manuscript copy of that saga either but are invariably considered to be integral parts of the saga as a whole (see Lethbridge 2012a: 362). While not considered to be a fundamental structural part of *Laxdæla saga* in the same way, the so-called *Bolla þáttur Bollasonar* is sometimes found copied after *Laxdæla saga* in both pre-Reformation manuscripts (e.g. *Möðruvallabók*) and post-Reformation ones, as a kind of continuation to the narrative. *Kjalnesinga saga* and *Jökuls þáttur Búasonar* is yet another example.

Manuscripts are thus a good starting point for considering questions of genre and generic fluidity or ‘movement’ (see Mitchell 1991: 21–22; 29–30). *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Hallfreðar saga* arguably read quite differently in the *Íslendingasögur*-dominated frame of *Möðruvallabók* on the one hand, and the *konungasögur*-dominated frame of the other manuscripts in which they are discontinuously copied on the other hand, with regard to which common generic markers stand out. Structural, thematic, or motivic features that ally *Íslendingasögur* narratives and distinguish them from, say, *konungasögur* or other saga narratives, are reinforced when *Íslendingasögur* are found copied out together in manuscripts in which no other texts assigned to different genres are preserved alongside them.

This is the situation with *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* as found together in the 13th-century AM 162 e fol.; *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Egils saga* as found together in the 14th-century Wolf Aug 9 10 4to; *Bjarnar*

saga and *Kormáks saga* as found together in the 14th-century AM 162 f fol.; *Reykdale saga*, *Gull-Þóris saga* and *Ljósvetninga saga* as found together in the 14th-century/early 15th-century AM 561 4to<sup>13</sup>; *Þórðar saga breðu* and *Króka-Refs saga* as found together in the late 15th-century Holm perg 8 4to; *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Víglundar saga* and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* as found together in the late 15th-century/early 16th-century AM 551 a 4to; *Króka-Refs saga* and *Bandamanna saga* as found together in the 16th-century JS frg 6 4to. There are obvious connections between the sagas in some of these collections (geographical overlap or proximity for example, or thematic or stylistic similarities) but there is also a large caveat here: the fragmentary nature of these manuscripts means that the possibility that texts typically assigned to other genres (and not necessarily only saga genres) might also originally have been part of these compilations cannot be ruled out.

The strongest pattern that emerges when the contents of all compilation manuscripts containing *Íslendingasögur* texts are analysed, however, is their decidedly mixed or generically heterogeneous character. Much more often than not, *Íslendingasögur* are found copied into manuscripts alongside texts assigned by modern critics to other prose genres. In the so-called Pseudo-Vatnshyrna manuscript from the late 14th or early 15th century (AM 445 b 4to + AM 445 c I 4to + AM 564 a 4to), texts of *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Flóamanna saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Þórðar saga breðu* and *Harðar saga* are preserved, and in addition to these, some *þættir* (*Bergbúa þáttur*, *Kumlbúa þáttur*, *Draumur Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*) and the Melabók version of *Landnámabók*. This material is relatively homogenous in that it pertains (predominantly) to Iceland and the settlement age but since the manuscript is badly damaged, other types of text may once have been part of it. And it is not at all uncommon to find *Íslendingasögur* (often, but not always, those thought to be younger or ‘post-classical’) copied alongside texts assigned to *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* genres.

In AM 586 4to (*Arnarbælisbók*) from the 15th century, for example, *Þórðar saga breðu* and *Króka-Refs saga* are found together with some exempla or *ævintýri* (*Af þremur kumpánum*; *Af þremur þjófum í Danmörk*; *Um bryta einn í Þýskalandi*; *Af meistara Perus*; *Af Vilhjálmi bastarði og sonum hans*; *Roðberts þáttur*); and the *fornaldarsögur* and

<sup>13</sup> A text of *Úlfhams rímur* was added at 23v–24r and at 16r in this manuscript at some point in the 17th century (see Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir ed. 2001: xlvi–xlix). This is a good example of the dynamically accretive nature of these manuscripts over time, with texts or parts of texts being added (or sometimes scraped away) as the respective users or owners of these books from one generation to the next saw fit or desirable.

*riddarasögur Flóres saga konungs og sona hans, Bósa saga ok Herrauðs, Vilmundar saga viðutan, Hálfðanar saga Eysteinssonar, Hrings saga ok Tryggva, and Ásmundar saga kappabana.* Two scribes seem to have produced this manuscript, working in tandem and “shar[ing] out between them the writing of pages and even of lines” (Loth (ed.) 1977: 17). Similarly, in the 15th-century AM 471 4to + AM 489 I 4to, *Þórðar saga hreðu, Króka-Refs saga, Kjalnesinga saga* and *Bárðar saga* are copied along with the three ‘Hrafnistumannasögur’ *fornaldarsögur* (*Ketils saga hængs, Gríms saga loðinkinna, Örvar-Odds saga*; as a trio, these narratives have strong genealogical connections) and two *riddarasögur* (*Viktors saga ok Blávus* and *Kirijalax saga*). The late 15th-century AM 556 a 4to + AM 556 b 4to (Eggertsbók) contains the three outlaw *Íslendingasögur* *Grettis saga, Gísla saga* and *Harðar saga* alongside one *fornaldarsaga* (*Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*) and three *riddarasögur* (*Sigrgarðs saga frækna, Mágus saga jarls, Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*). *Grettis saga* and *Þórðar saga hreðu* are also found in the large compilation manuscript AM 152 fol. from the early 16th century, along with *fornaldarsögur* (*Hálfðanar sögu Brönufóstra; Göngu-Hrólfss saga; Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar; Hrólfss saga Gautreksssonar; Gautreks saga*) and *riddarasögur* (*Flóventis saga; Sigurðar saga þögla; Ectors saga; Mágus saga jarls*). In the 15th-century GKS 2845 4to (seemingly the work of two scribes, see Jón Helgason (ed.) 1955: viii), *Bandamanna saga* accompanies *þættir* (*Norna-Gests þátr, Orms þátr Stórolfssonar, Rauðúlfs þátr*) and *fornaldarsögur* (*Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka, Göngu-Hrólfss saga, Yngvars saga víðförla, Eiríks saga víðförla, Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*).

In the 15th-century manuscript AM 557 4to (Skálholtsbók), as well as *riddarasögur* (*Valdimars saga, Dámusta saga*), a *fornaldarsaga* (*Eiríks saga víðförla*) and *þættir* (*Rögnvalds þátr ok Rauðs, Hróa þátr heimiska, Stúfs þátr, Karls þátr vésela, Sveinka þátr Steinarssonar*), a contemporary *samtíðarsaga* (*Hrafnis saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*) is copied together with two of the *Íslendingasögur* sometimes sub-categorised as *skáldasögur* (*Gunnlaugs saga* and *Hallfreðar saga*) and *Eiríks saga rauða*. This book seems to have been written by two scribes and although the order of the quires as the manuscript is extant now has been altered at some point in its history – it seems likely that the eighth and last quire, containing *þættir*, may originally have been at the beginning of the book – the distribution of texts over pages and quires suggests that it was conceived of and executed as a whole (see Mårtensson 2011: 49–53). Another example of a *samtíðarsaga*-*Íslendingasaga* combination is found in the 15th-century AM 551 d β 4to, which preserves *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar* and then *Þórðar saga hreðu*. Similarly, the 16th-century AM 510 4to,

produced by three scribes (a father and two sons) working together (see further Karl Óskar Ólafsson 2006), brings together the *Íslendingasögur Viglundar saga* and *Finnboga saga* with *Jómsvíkinga saga*, as well as *fornaldarsögur* (*Bósa saga ok Herrauds*, *Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns*, *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna*) and *riddarasögur* (*Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, *Draumma-Jóns saga*).

#### IV. Concluding remarks: *Njáls saga* and how the *Íslendingasögur* were ‘read’

It is difficult to posit any kind of clear-cut development or trend over time in terms of differing combinations of saga-texts as brought together in compilation manuscripts, principally because of unknown factors such as the ravages of time and vagaries of chance with regard to what survives of all those pre-Reformation Icelandic manuscripts that once existed. The earlier examples of compilation manuscripts are generally fragmentary and thus direct comparison of this evidence with the more complete compilation manuscripts that survive from the later medieval period is problematic – like is not necessarily being compared with like. Despite the loss of the great proportion of manuscripts once produced, however, it does seem possible to say that from early times, the general impulse seems to have been one of compilation. Manuscripts containing types of texts other than sagas also demonstrate this (e.g. GKS 2365 4to Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda* from the late 13th century; the 14th-century manuscripts of the *Prose Edda* (DG 11 Codex Upsaliensis, GKS 2367 4to Codex Regius, and AM 242 fol. Codex Wormianus) with their varying combinations of the component parts of *Snorra Edda*, Grammatical Treatises, and in the case of the Codex Regius, *Jómsvíkingadrápa* and *Málsháttakvæði*). Hauksbók, Haukur Erlendsson’s early 14th-century compilation volume – which has been variously described or interpreted as a personal encyclopedia or as a private library within the covers of one volume (see e.g. Simek 1991, Sverrir Jakobsson 2007, Rowe 2008) – exemplifies the extreme end of the spectrum.

Since manuscripts were time-consuming and expensive objects to produce, and accordingly must have been highly-prized and rare possessions rather than common and numerous ones, some degree of pragmatism may also have been a factor when they were commissioned by their prospective owners. An explicit desire or need for copies of particular sagas

or other texts may have motivated the commissioning and production of a manuscript book in the first instance but other items may have been included on a more ad hoc basis along with these specified texts, if not exactly “for the sake of it”, at least because they were available for copying and of interest. Once texts had been assembled together as part of a bigger whole though, their material context clearly had a direct influence on how those texts were received and understood from the perspective of their themes and genre, and the ways in which they intersected or interacted with other texts/narratives. The manuscript book as a whole can be seen as framing each narrative, and – whether deliberately planned or not – the co-existence of several narratives together within the single framed material unit forced dynamic, intertextual reading, and generated countless connections between narratives that modern critics would most likely approach as discrete texts (see Lethbridge 2012b).

Intertextuality is thus a fundamental characteristic of saga narratives and their transmission. The way in which the texts of some *Íslendinga-sögur* were broken up and recombined or reassembled with other texts in different manuscript contexts – in conjunction, moreover, with the way in which these narratives lived in the Icelandic landscapes and were accessible through place-names, for example, which functioned as mnemonics that prompted the recall of saga characters and events – explicitly draws attention to this and illustrates one way in which these *Íslendinga-sögur* narratives were not conceived of as discrete entities but rather as flexible and often overlapping constituent parts of a bigger whole or narrative world, the immanent saga world (see Clover 1986; Gísli Sigurðsson 2004, 2007; also Cochrane 2010). This flexibility (in combination with certain other impulses and circumstances surrounding their composition) also encouraged the continuous rewriting which is a fundamental characteristic of their dissemination (see Quinn and Lethbridge (eds) 2010).

What then, are the implications here with regard to *Njáls saga*, if it was – going against the grain of the compilatory impulse – more often than not deliberately copied and circulated as a stand-alone text, the sole content of whole manuscripts, as some of the extant manuscript evidence suggests? If the material circumstances of a saga narrative’s textual preservation directly and indirectly affect how it is ‘read’, was *Njáls saga*, then, read or consumed from the earliest times of its transmission in different kinds of ways to other saga narratives, copied as they were in varying textual constellations that meant that they would have been accessed and digested in a more cumulative, overlapping manner? The answer to this question, I would argue, is “probably, yes”.

But why was *Njáls saga* transmitted as a stand-alone text when other sagas do not seem to have been? As already mentioned at the beginning of this article, doubtless, logistics must have come into play here, to some degree at least. It cannot be a coincidence that *Njáls saga* is easily the longest of the *Íslendingasögur*. Copied out on its own, *Njáls saga* would require a similar amount of parchment as that needed for several shorter sagas copied out consecutively. But books such as Hauksbók and Möðruvallabók are proof that certainly from the end of the 13th century, larger volumes were being produced; ultimately, therefore, the amount of parchment required for a text of *Njáls saga* alone need not have dictated its unaccompanied status in manuscripts. One might think that once the investment in terms of time and expense had been made and *Njáls saga* had been commissioned and copied out, the inclusion of some *þættir* at least (perhaps those set around the south, for example, or associated with individual characters from other parts of the country who appear in *Njáls saga*) might have been an appealing supplementary option. Perhaps it was – but the fragmentary state of most copies we have of *Njáls saga* does not allow us to pursue this speculation much further. One clear direction for the future development of this study would be to look to the post-Reformation paper tradition, however; limitations of time and space did not allow these manuscripts to be taken into consideration here but it could be illuminating to chart which texts assigned to other genres (e.g. *fornaldarsögur*, *riddarasögur*, *samtíðarsögur*?) *Njáls saga* is copied alongside in these younger manuscripts.

What, then, is the relationship between the exceptionally rich manuscript tradition of *Njáls saga* and the saga's status as one of the cornerstones of Icelandic literature, a narrative of huge ideological importance to Icelanders and one which has played an important part in constructions of Icelandic identity over time (see Jón Karl Helgason 1995 and 1999)? In some ways, it is difficult to unravel this. Either, initially the length of the saga dictated the unusual circumstances of its transmission as a single text in manuscripts, and this resulted in it being set apart or regarded as different in some way to other *Íslendingasögur*. Or, from the earliest times of its dissemination, *Njáls saga* was perceived as having a particular intrinsic worth and a different symbolic significance, and because of this, it was transmitted in this unusual fashion – unaccompanied by other texts.

Narrative themes and motifs such as the importance of the law and legal procedure (and, by extension, the conversion to Christianity), Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi's fatally emotional attachment to the fertile slopes of Fljótshlíð, and the independence and success of those characters who

travel abroad and spend time at royal courts, certainly later became highly idealised metaphors for Icelandic nationalism, and contributed to the saga becoming a kind of literary emblem for Iceland. Perhaps these narrative elements or motifs seemed more prominent and invited ideological appropriation because of the self-contained nature of the saga's preservation in manuscripts such as Reykjabók and Gráskinna: unlike *Hallfreðar saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*, it was always possible to define the narrative as a whole, to hold up the volume and to say "This is *Njáls saga*". While the textual variation that exists between manuscript copies testifies to differing interpretations of infinite aspects of the *Njáls saga* narrative, this variation and the rewriting impulses behind it is demarcated or bounded in a sense; the fact that dramatically diverging versions of *Njáls saga* do not exist could be significant, though this ought not necessarily be seen as a mark of greater status or 'respect' accorded to the saga during the course of its transmission, with people being more hesitant about actively intervening and altering the text.

The great geographical sweep of the *Njáls saga* stage all around Iceland must be recognised as fundamental to the nationally-acclaimed status of the saga – the physical reach or extent of the narrative (see Appendix 2) meant that most Icelanders, in most parts of the country, could find some direct connection between it and their locality. Other sagas, copied, read or told in tandem, complement each other and cover wider districts around Iceland; the inclusion of other sagas alongside *Njáls saga* in manuscript copies perhaps seemed unnecessary because it already covered such a great part of the country. The only other saga comparable in this respect is *Grettis saga* – interestingly, the only other saga with a similarly wide geographical reach (see Appendix 3), one which has enjoyed enduring popularity at a national level over time (see Hastrup 1990), and one which also survives in more pre- and post-Reformation manuscript copies than most other sagas.

It is significant with regard to understanding the place of the *Íslendingasögur* in Icelandic cultural history over time that geography is the ordering principle behind the 14-volume Íslenzk fornrit set of *Íslendingasögur* editions. But where authority, completeness and uniform order with regard to discrete texts and 'the corpus' is the general impression that this printed series and others implicitly convey to their users, the manuscript evidence for the sagas tells a different story as has been shown. The state of the preservation of *Íslendingasögur* in these books and fragments is often anything but complete or ordered and their complex manuscript paradosis (and that of other kinds of saga texts) forces us to question our

assumptions about what these narratives are in terms of narrative unity and wholeness, and from generic perspectives. Charting and attempting to better understand the variation in the manuscript evidence is the most productive way of building up a more nuanced picture of the nature of these medieval Icelandic narratives, and of the dynamic ways in which they were disseminated and received in Iceland, right up until the 20th century.

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## Appendix 1

Pre-Reformation parchment manuscripts containing *Íslendingasögur* texts

The date of each manuscript follows that given on *handrit.is*; in the ‘State’ column, ‘frg’ = fragmentary; ‘–’ = more complete though in many cases with lacunae; in the ‘Type’ column, ‘mt’ = multitext; ‘st’ = single text; ‘–’ = unknown on account of fragmentary condition; in the ‘Contents’ column, titles of texts other than *Íslendingasögur* are indicated in italics.

Shelfmark	Date	State	No. of leaves	Type	Contents
<i>13<sup>th</sup> century</i>					
AM 162 a γ fol.	1275–1300	frg	2	–	Egils saga
AM 162 a δ fol.	1290–1310	frg	8	–	Egils saga
AM 162 a ζ fol.	1250–1300	frg	4	–	Egils saga
AM 162 a θ fol.	1240–1260	frg	4	–	Egils saga
AM 162 d I fol.	1290–1310	frg	5	–	Laxdœla saga
AM 162 d II fol.	1250–1300	frg	1	–	Laxdœla saga
AM 162 e fol.	1290–1310	frg	7	mt	Laxdœla saga Eyrbyggja saga
AM 371 4to	1290–1360	–	18 + 107 + 16	mt	Fóstbræðra saga
AM 544 4to					Eiríks saga
AM 675 4to (Hauksbók)					<i>Landnámabók; Kristnisaga; Geographica qvædam et physica...; Theologica qvædam...; Völuspá; Trójumanna saga; Seven Precious Stones; Cisiojanus; Breta sögur; Two Dialogues; þættir; Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks; Algorismus; Skálda saga; Af upplendinga konungum; Prognostica temporum; Elucidarius</i>
<i>14<sup>th</sup> century</i>					
AM 53 fol.	1375–1400	–	72	mt	Hallfreðar saga <i>Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta; Færeyinga saga; þættir</i>
AM 54 fol.	1375–1400/ 1500	–	76	mt	Hallfreðar saga <i>Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta; Færeyinga saga; þættir</i>
AM 62 fol.	1375–1400	–	53	mt	Hallfreðar saga <i>Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta; Færeyinga saga; þættir</i>

Shelfmark	Date	State	No. of leaves	Type	Contents
AM 132 fol. (Möðruvallabók)	1330–1370	–	200	mt	Njáls saga Egils saga Finnboga saga Bandamanna saga Kormáks saga Víga-Glums saga Droplaugarsona saga Qlkofra saga/þátrr Hallfreðar saga Laxdæla saga Fóstbrœdra saga
AM 133 fol. (Kálfalækjarbók)	1350	frg	95	–	Njáls saga
AM 162 a β fol.	1340–1360	frg	1	–	Egils saga
AM 162 a ε fol.	1390–1410	frg	3	–	Egils saga
AM 162 a κ fol.	1390–1410	frg	2	–	Egils saga
AM 162 b β fol. AM 162 b δ fol. (Þormóðsbók)	1300	frg	1 + 24	–	Njáls saga
AM 162 b γ fol. (Ossbók)	1315–1335	frg	5	–	Njáls saga
AM 162 b ε fol. (Hítardalsbók)	1350–1375/ 1500	frg	8	–	Njáls saga
AM 162 b ζ fol.	1315–1335	frg	5	–	Njáls saga
AM 162 b η fol.	1340–60	frg	3	–	Njáls saga
AM 162 b θ fol.	1315–1335	frg	2	–	Njáls saga
AM 162 b κ fol.	1340–1360	frg	2	–	Njáls saga
AM 162 f fol.	1350–1400	frg	3	mt	Bjarnar saga Kormáks saga
AM 325 VIII 2 e–f 4to	1375–1400	frg	1 + 1	mt	Hallfreðar saga <i>Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar</i>
AM 445 b 4to AM 445 c I 4to AM 564 a 4to (Pseudo-Vatnshyrna)	1390–1425	frg	11 + 5 + 7 = 23	mt	Vatnsdæla saga Flóamanna saga Eyrbyggja saga Víga-Glúms saga Gísla saga Bárðar saga Pórðar saga hreðu Harðar saga <i>Þettir; Landnámabók</i>
AM 468 4to (Reykjabók)	1300–1325	–	93	st	Njáls saga

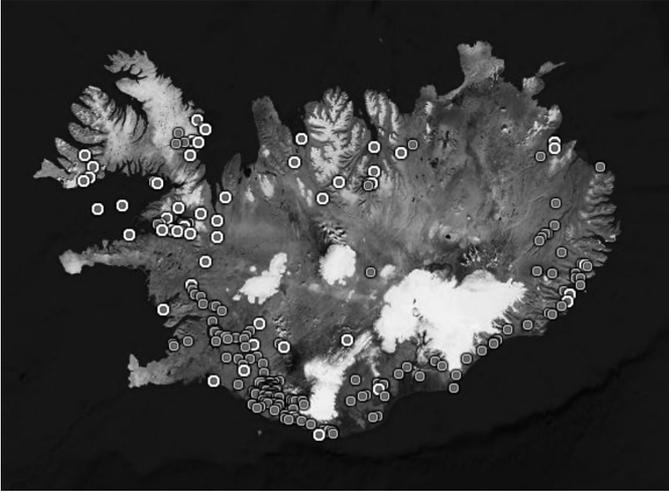
Shelfmark	Date	State	No. of leaves	Type	Contents
AM 561 4to	1390–1410	–	41	mt	Reykðæla saga Gull-Þóris saga Ljósvetninga saga <i>Úlfhams rímur</i>
GKS 1005 fol. (Flateyjarbók)	1387–1394	–	225	mt	Hallfreðar saga Eiríks saga Grænlandinga saga Fóstbræðra saga <i>Konungasögur; þættir;</i> <i>Orkneyinga saga; Fereyinga</i> <i>saga; Jónsvíkinga saga</i> (see handrit.is for full details of contents and foliation)
GKS 2868 4to (Skafinskinna)	1350–1400	–	45	–	<b>Njáls saga</b>
GKS 2869 4to (Sveinsbók)	1400	frg	11	–	<b>Njáls saga</b>
GKS 2870 4to (Gráskinna)	1300/1500	–	121	st	<b>Njáls saga</b>
Holm perg 7 4to AM 580 4to	1300–1325	–	58 + 34	mt	Egils saga <i>Konráðs saga keisarasonar;</i> <i>Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar;</i> <i>Jónsvíkinga saga; Ásmundar</i> <i>saga kappabana; Örvar-Odds</i> <i>saga; Elis saga ok Rósamundu;</i> <i>Bæringa saga; Flóvents saga;</i> <i>Mágus saga jarls</i>
Lbs frg 1 Holm perg 18 4to	1300–1350	–	1 + 54 = 55	mt	Heiðarvíga saga Gunnlaugs saga
Holm perg 10 IX 8vo	1350–1375	frg	2	–	Laxðæla saga
Wolf Aug 9 10 4to	1330–1370	–	54	mt	Eyrbyggja saga Egils saga
<i>15<sup>th</sup> century</i>					
AM 61 fol.	1400–1449	–	132	mt	Hallfreðar saga <i>Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin</i> <i>mesta; Ólafs saga Haralds-</i> <i>sonar</i>
AM 75 e V fol.	1400–1500	frg	15	mt	Fóstbræðra saga <i>Þættir</i>
AM 162 a η fol.	1450–1475	frg	2	–	Egils saga
AM 162 a ι fol.	1400–1500	frg	1	–	Egils saga
AM 162 b α fol.	1400–1500	frg	2	–	<b>Njáls saga</b>

Shelfmark	Date	State	No. of leaves	Type	Contents
AM 162 b 1 fol. (Reykjarfjarðarbók)	1400–1425	frg	4	–	Njáls saga
AM 162 c fol.	1420–1450	frg	11	mt	Ljósvetninga saga Vápnfirðinga saga Droplaugarsona saga Finnboga saga <i>Þorsteins þátrr stangarhöggss;</i> <i>Sálus saga ok Nikanórs</i>
AM 162 g fol.	1400–1500	frg	2	–	Hænsa-Þóris saga
AM 162 h fol.	1400–1450	frg	2	–	Bárðar saga
AM 162 i fol.	1490–1510	frg	1	–	Hrafnkels saga
AM 309 4to (Bæjarbók)	1498	–	48	mt	Laxdœla saga Eyrbyggja saga Njáls saga <i>Excerpts from Flateyjarbók</i>
AM 445 c II 4to	1440–1460	frg	1	–	Svarfdœla saga
AM 466 4to (Oddabók)	1460	–	57	st	Njáls saga
AM 471 4to AM 489 I 4to	1450–1500	–	108 + 26 = 134	mt	Þórðar saga hreðu Króka-Refs saga Kjalnesinga saga Bárðar saga <i>Ketils saga hængs; Gríms saga</i> <i>loðinkinna; Örvar-Odds saga;</i> <i>Viktors saga ok Blávus; Kirja-</i> <i>lax saga</i>
AM 551 a 4to	1490–1510	–	53	mt	Bárðar saga Vígundar saga Grettis saga
AM 551 d β 4to	1400–1450	frg	8	mt	Þórðar saga hreðu <i>Arons saga Hjörleifssonar</i>
AM 556 a 4to (AM 556 b 4to) (=Eggertsbók)	1475–1500	–	88 + 46 = 134	mt	Grettis saga Gísla saga Harðar saga <i>Sigurgarðs saga frækna;</i> <i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar;</i> <i>Mágus saga jarls; Hermanns</i> <i>saga ok Jarlmanns</i>
AM 557 4to (Skálholtsbók)	1420–1450	–	48	mt	Gunnlaugs saga Hallfreðar saga Eiríks saga <i>Valdimars saga; Hrafn's saga</i> <i>Sveinbjarnarsonar; Dámusta</i> <i>saga; Eiríks saga viðförla;</i> <i>þættir</i>

Shelfmark	Date	State	No. of leaves	Type	Contents
AM 586 4to ( <i>Arnarbælisbók</i> )	1450–1500	–	33	mt	<i>Pórðar saga hreðu</i> <i>Króka-Refs saga</i> <i>Ævintýri; Flóres saga konungs</i> <i>ok sona hans; Bósa saga;</i> <i>Vilmundar saga viðutan;</i> <i>Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar;</i> <i>Hrings saga ok Tryggva;</i> <i>Ásmundar saga kappabana</i>
GKS 2845 4to	1440–1460	–	73	mt	<i>Bandamanna saga</i> <i>Þættir; Göngu-Hrólfs saga;</i> <i>Yngvars saga víðförla; Eiríks</i> <i>saga víðförla; Hervarar saga</i> <i>ok Heiðreks</i>
Holm perg 1 fol. ( <i>Bergsbók</i> )	1400–1425	–	210	mt	<i>Hallfreðar saga</i> <i>Fóstbræðra saga</i> <i>Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin</i> <i>mesta; Færeyinga saga; þættir</i>
Holm perg 8 4to	1450–1500	–	27	mt	<i>Pórðar saga hreðu</i> <i>Króka-Refs saga</i>
JS frg 6 4to	1475–1500	frg	2	mt	<i>Króka-Refs saga</i> <i>Bandamanna saga</i>
<i>16<sup>th</sup> century</i>					
AM 152 I fol.	1500–1525	–	201	mt	<i>Grettis saga</i> <i>Pórðar saga hreðu</i> <i>Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra;</i> <i>Flóvents saga; Sigurðar saga</i> <i>þögla; Göngu-Hrólfs saga;</i> <i>Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar;</i> <i>Hektors saga; Mágus saga</i> <i>jarls; Gautreks saga</i>
AM 162 a α fol.	1500–1600	frg	3	–	<i>Egils saga</i>
AM 510 4to ( <i>Tómasarbók</i> )	1540–1560	–	96	mt	<i>Víglundar saga</i> <i>Finnboga saga</i> <i>Bósa saga; Jarlmanns saga ok</i> <i>Hermanns; Þorsteins þátrr</i> <i>bæjarmagns; Jónsvíkinga</i> <i>saga; Drauma-Jóns saga;</i> <i>Friðþjófs saga</i>
AM 571 4to	1500–1550	frg	12	mt	<i>Grettis saga</i> <i>Ála flekks saga; Hálfðanar</i> <i>saga Brönufóstra; Þorsteins</i> <i>þátrr bæjarmagns</i>
DG 10	1500	–	55	–	<i>Grettis saga</i>

## Appendix 2

The geographical distribution of places named in *Njáls saga*



## Appendix 3

The geographical distribution of places named in *Grettis saga*

