



Clerics, Kings and Vikings

Essays on medieval Ireland in honour of
DONNCHADH Ó CORRÁIN

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& John Sheehan

EDITORS



Loch Cé Lough Key, Co. Roscommon 10d.

Loch Febail Lough Foyle 11b.

Loch Luigdech Loch Luigheach or Curran Lough at Waterville, Co. Kerry 8d.

Loch nAillinde Loch Allen, Co. Leitrim 10d.

Loch nGabar / Loch Gabar Lagore, townland of Ratoath, near Dunshaughlin, Co. Meath 11c.

Loch nÚair Lough Owel, Co. Westmeath 10c.

Loch Sílend Lough Sheelin, barony of Clonmahon, Co. Cavan 11a.

Lochmag (battle of) = Loch Lúatha, parish Ballyloughloe, barony of Clonlunan, Co. Westmeath 4c.

Mag Slécht it encompasses Ballymagauran, parish of Templeport, barony of Tullyhaw, Co. Cavan 12c.

Mag Técht place in barony of Moygoish in Cos. Meath and Westmeath 5d.

Mide territory encompassing Co. Westmeath, most of modern Co. Meath and north Co. Offaly 10c.

Mumu (In) Munster (province of); sometimes meaning people of 3b.

Tethba territory equivalent to Co. Longford, but also including adjacent parts of western area of Co. Westmeath and north Offaly 7c.

Tír nÉogain territory of the Cenél nÉogain, which corresponds approximately to the modern diocese of Derry 11b.

Torand unidentified tributary of the River Blackwater in south-east Tyrone / north Armagh 12b.

Personal names

Conmáel Conganchnis mac Ébir first Munster king of Ireland 3a, 3d.

Degerne mac Guill 4d.

Eochu Étgudach mac Dáire Doimtig m. Rossa Rúguill 13Ab.

Rochorb mac Golláin 4b.

Tigernmas mac Follaig m. Ethréoil [Preh.] 1a, 13d, 13e, 13Ae, 14e.

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The saga map of Ireland and the British Isles

GÍSLI SIGURÐSSON

As the audiences of the Icelandic sagas, around the time of their writing, listened to them performed or read aloud in their scattered farms in different parts of the country, what kind of picture did they form in their minds of the geography and character of Ireland and the British Isles? One of the functions of stories in an oral tradition, like those that undoubtedly stood behind the Icelandic sagas, is to preserve and pass on information about the outside world. In view of what we know about the oral preservation of poems and stories, it is possible *a priori* to assume that knowledge of historical facts and events of the tenth century must have changed after having been in circulation for several hundred years, in many cases embedded in particular stories. In addition, it is impossible to account for the sagas without assuming the existence of a continuous narrative tradition of these same events up to the time when the sagas were written. This tradition was, of course, subject to influences from its environment at any time and took account of the conditions and interests, curiosity, experience, knowledge and needs of storytellers and their audiences. Those who told the stories could add material to them or drop material from them according to circumstance, but once something was forgotten it was lost forever and could never be recovered.¹

This last point – the possibility of information being lost entirely – is particularly salient in the case of people's knowledge of the lands to the south and west of Greenland, where outside the oral tradition there were simply no sources to be had. Thus, one of the functions of the orally preserved accounts of the Vínland voyages, it seems fair to assume, was to create a picture of the previously unknown lands in the minds of those who remained behind in Iceland and heard the stories told.² The written Vínland sagas are special inasmuch as they describe lands that we must assume no living man at the time of writing had ever seen, and which it was not possible to read about in any other medieval writings. Accounts of the journeys to Vínland can thus only be explained on the basis of an unbroken memory of them that survived intact from the time they took place up until the time the sagas were put into writing.

Things are rather different when we turn to Ireland and the British Isles. Here there is no need to assume an unbroken geographical memory stretching from the tenth century up to the time of the writing of the sagas. In the saga-writing age (loosely, the thirteenth century), direct communication with Britain and Ireland was still possible and there was also information to be had from written texts. So it may be interesting to look at the way Ireland and the British Isles are described in the sagas and try to imagine what kind of picture the audiences of the sagas received of the lands in question. Going on from this, we may ask how this picture may have come about, whether it was based on memories, or on contemporary knowledge of journeys to these places, or whether the saga writers may even have had access to geographical writings from outside Iceland on which to base their accounts.

1 Gísli Sigurðsson, *The medieval Icelandic saga and oral tradition: a discourse on method*, trans. Nicholas Jones, Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature 2 (Cambridge, MA, 2004), pp 253–60. 2 *Ibid.*, pp 268–9.

For the purposes of this article, I intend to limit myself to the 'sagas of Icelanders' *per se* – the 'family sagas' – as in all probability it is these that best reflect the state of local knowledge and ideas within Iceland. I therefore do not intend to consider works such as *The Book of Settlements* (*Landnámabók*), the kings sagas and the Icelandic short sagas (*þættir*). *The Book of Settlements* is a compilation covering the whole country and it is often difficult to say where in Iceland the information given originates, while the kings sagas and the verse embedded in them probably have their origins in courtly circles and among court poets, and so were hardly subject to the same kind of localization of background as the accounts of events and characters on which the sagas of Icelanders were subsequently constructed.³ (Similar considerations apply to the *þættir*, which have in most cases come down to us as episodes preserved within the kings sagas.)

In general, discussion of the geographical knowledge of the medieval Icelanders as reflected in the ancient sagas has focused chiefly on its historicity and on its literary functions. For example, Magnús Fjalldal has shown that we cannot treat the sagas as a reliable source of information on actual historical people and events in England at the time when the events are supposed to take place – as is only to be expected.⁴ Ian Wyatt has, correctly, emphasized the significant role that journeys to other countries play in what we may call plot and characterization.⁵ However, many scholars have been happy to employ material from the sagas alongside, and often on an equal footing to, archaeological evidence and other historical sources in their discussions of Viking-Age history and geography,⁶ or attempted to correlate all the references to some particular aspect from different written sources to come up with an integrated picture of what is said, without necessarily applying the same critical procedures as Fjalldal.⁷ Conventionally, place-names in the sagas are glossed in footnotes with reference to places we are familiar with from modern maps or personal experience, an approach that makes the tacit assumption that the saga accounts are supposed to be referring to real places. So far as I am aware, no one has tried to read the sagas in the way I propose to do here, that is, from the point of view of their audiences, with a view to creating a reconstruction of the setting of these stories as it built up in the minds of their original audiences, and use this to shed light on how ordinary people viewed the world around them. In this, questions of right and wrong, in a historical sense, are largely by the by: the point is rather what kinds of information about foreign countries are communicated through the sagas, how it got there, and what the sagas can tell us about it.⁸

To try to maintain a localized perspective, I intend to discuss the sagas according to the part of Iceland in which, broadly speaking, their main events take place. This can at times be a little problematic: in some cases the settings range widely or the centre of interest is open to dispute. There is, however, a fair element of truth, as well as practical utility, in the division used in the standard

Íslensk fornrit editions, in which the sagas are grouped by geographical region. This provides an excellent overview of the natural, cultural and regional outlook of the inhabitants, if we accept that the written sagas reflect the local oral tradition that lay behind them. Arranging the sagas by regional provenance thus makes sense in the present context.

For the purposes of this article, the British Isles are taken to comprise the regions we now call England, Wales, Scotland, the Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland. Where the identification of a place-name in the texts is secure, the English (Irish, etc.) name is used, often with the Old Norse form given in brackets; where the identification is less secure, the Old Norse form is generally used, often followed by the most likely identification in brackets. However, it must always be remembered that in many cases the original audiences would have known no more than the saga told them: questions of whether, say, 'Kola' should be identified with Coll or Colonsay, or anywhere else, may be of academic interest to us, but would have meant nothing to the early audiences of *Njáls saga*.

Chapter references are based on the complete edition of the sagas of Icelanders, ed. by Bragi Halldórsson et al.⁹

Sagas of the west of Iceland: Borgarfjörður and Snæfellsnes

Turning first to the sagas set mainly in the west of Iceland, we find references to Ireland and the British Isles in *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Bjarnar saga Híttdælakappa*, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða* ('The Saga of Erik the Red'). Ireland and Britain are not mentioned in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, *Hænsna-Þóris saga* ('The Saga of Hen-Thórir'), *Víglundar saga* and *Grænlandinga saga* ('The Saga of the Greenlanders'). In the former group we find a coherent and consistent picture of Ireland and the British Isles and surrounding areas, taking in many of the most familiar place-names – as in the following, from *Egils saga*, ch. 4:

En af þessi áþján flýðu margir menn af landi á brott, og byggðusk þá margar auðnir víða, bæði austr í Jamtaland ok Helsingjaland ok Vestrlönd, Suðreyjar, Dyflinnar skíði, Írland, Norðmandí á Vallandi, Katanes á Skotlandi, Orkneyjar og Hjaltland, Færeyjar.

As a result of this tyranny [*sc.* Haraldr Fairhair's campaign to unify Norway under his control] many people fled the country, and many uninhabited areas were settled, both to the east in Jämtland and Hålsingland [in modern Sweden] and in the lands to the west, the Hebrides, Dublin County, Ireland, Normandy in France, Caithness in Scotland, the Orkneys and Shetland, the Faeroe Islands.

In these sagas, Ireland and the British Isles lie west of Norway. Heading out into the Atlantic from Norway, you come first to Shetland, including 'Mósey' (the island of Mousa) and 'Móseyjarborg' (the Broch of Mousa). The east coast here is dangerous for those approaching from the open sea, with heavy surf in winter. From Shetland it is a relatively short crossing to Iceland once the weather permits in spring (*Egils saga*, chs. 32, 33). Coming the most direct route from Greenland, the first landfall is the Hebrides (*Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 5), while sailing directly east from 'Kjalarnes' (per-

³ Ibid., pp 112–14. ⁴ Magnús Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic medieval texts* (Toronto, 2005). ⁵ Ian Wyatt, 'Narrative functions of landscape in the Old Icelandic family sagas' in John Hines, Alan Lane & Mark Redknap (eds), *Land, sea and home, Proceedings of a conference on Viking-period settlement, at Cardiff, July 2001*, Society for Medieval Archaeology, Monograph 20 (2004), pp 273–82. ⁶ Barbara E. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland, Scotland in the Early Middle Ages 2* (Leicester University Press, 1987). ⁷ Tom Muir, *Orkney in the sagas: the story of the earldom of Orkney as told in the Icelandic sagas* (Haston, Kirkwall, Orkney, 2005). ⁸ For a survey of Icelandic literary allusions to Dublin and Dublinshire, see Howard B. Clarke, "Go then south to Dublin; that is now the most praiseworthy voyage". What would Brynjólfr's son have found there? in Andras Mortensen & S.V. Arge (eds), *Viking and Norse in the north Atlantic: select papers from the proceedings of the Fourteenth Viking Congress, Tórshavn, 19–30 July 2001* (Tórshavn: Annales Societatis Scientiarum Færoensis, Supplementum XLIV), pp 441–5.

⁹ Bragi Halldórsson, Jón Torfason, Sverrir Tómasson & Örnólfur Thorsson (eds), *Íslendinga sögur*, vols I–II (Reykjavík, 1985–6).

haps the north point of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Canada – in any case, a little to the east of Leifr Eiríksson's 'Vínland') brings one to land in Ireland. The route from Ireland to Vínland is also described in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 64, when Guðleifr (cf. the names *Guðríðr* and *Leifr* in the Vínland sagas) is sailing to the west of Ireland and runs into strong easterly and north-easterly winds and is carried far out into the ocean to the west and south-west; eventually he strikes land and is able to get his bearings and sail back to Ireland and be in Dublin by autumn.

People landing in Orkney on their way from Iceland are liable to get caught up in the hostilities between the earls of Orkney, Einnarr Rognvaldsson and Sigurðr Hlǫðvesson, and their neighbours in the Hebridean islands and the Scottish firths (*Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 12, *Gunnlaugs saga*, ch. 12). South of Orkney lie Caithness ('Katanes') and Scotland, including the regions of Sutherland, Ross and Moray ('Meræfi') (*Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 1).

The Hebrides ('Suðureyjar', 'the southern isles') lie between Orkney and Ireland. These islands came under the control of Ketill Flat-nose (*flatnefr*) in the days of Haraldr Fairhair (*hárfagri*) and the Scandinavian settlers were early converts to Christianity (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 1, 5). The authority of the king of Norway extends to Orkney, the Hebrides and all the way to Dublin (*Egils saga*, ch. 33). The Isle of Man lies in the sea to the east of Ireland; here you may expect abnormal wind conditions in autumn. According to *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 29, it pays to show caution about an uninhabited island off the north-east coast of Ireland when travelling north around Ireland from Man, where, the narrator relates, the wind can veer from south-west to south-east and east. This is the direct opposite of prevailing conditions in the west of Iceland, which may account for the precision of the climatic details given here. It is worth noting, from a letter from Alan Hisscott, meteorologist on the Isle of Man to myself, that wind conditions of this kind are not uncommon in autumn when low-pressure systems are passing over the Irish Sea. Going by the account in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 29, Orkney is well off the direct route when travelling from Ireland to Iceland, and it is possible to get from Ireland to Orkney by small boat without running unnecessary risk.

Dublin is in Dublin County¹⁰ in Ireland, at one time ruled by the warrior king Óleifr and his wife Auðr. From here to Iceland the route lies by way of the Hebrides, Caithness and Orkney (*Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 1). To get to Dublin from Norway one travels west (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 64). A ship arriving in Iceland from Dublin carries men of Irish and Hebridean origin as well as a few Scandinavians (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 50), suggesting to audiences a mixed ethnic settlement in these areas.

South of Scotland is England. It is possible to sail to England direct from Norway by going west and 'through the southern seas' (*fyrir sunnan sjó*) (*Bjarnar saga Hítldælakappa*, ch. 5). The direct route from Norway to England is also described in *Egils saga*, ch. 49–50 – south along the coast of Jutland to where 'Denmark and Friesland meet', and then 'south past Saxony and the Low Countries' (*Flemingjaland*, lit. 'Flanders'). The people of England are Christian (*Egils saga*, ch. 49) and the country suffers from Danish raiders (*Gunnlaugs saga*, ch. 10).

The route to England from Iceland passes north of Orkney and then south along the coast of Scotland. Continuing south along the coast of England you can expect to meet the mouth of the River *Humra* (Humber) (*Egils saga*, ch. 60). From here it is a short distance to York (*Jórvík*), which is the main town in Northumbria, which is the northernmost part of England on the eastern side

and is subject to raids from the Scots, Irish, Norwegians and Danes; this is ethnically a highly mixed region with many contenders vying for its overlordship (*Egils saga*, ch. 51, 60). Geographically, Northumbria is marked off from the region to the south by uninhabited and forested heathland. From there you can head west, 'where Britain is' (*Bretland*, i.e., probably, Wales), and then strike out to sea at *Jarlsnes* ('Earl's Ness', perhaps somewhere in south Wales), and so make the crossing over to France (*Valland*) (*Egils saga*, ch. 51–5).

In addition to York, there are three main places mentioned: London, which is 'south of York' (*Egils saga*, ch. 62); here sits the king of England, and this is the only place in the British Isles where these sagas speak of streets (*stræti*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, ch. 7); Dublin, *sú er nú ferð frægst* ('the most auspicious place to make a journey to', according to *Egils saga*, ch. 32), which is north of London; and Orkney (e.g., *Gunnlaugs saga*, ch. 6–8). Gunnlaugr visits all three of these places on his 'grand tour' of Ireland and the British Isles in search of fame and fortune. It is noted specifically that England uses a single language, the same as in Norway and Denmark' (*sem í Noregi ok í Danmörku*, ch. 7), explaining why he found such a ready market for his poetry there. Gunnlaugr encountered no language problems in Dublin either, since *Pá ræð fyrir Írlandi Sigtryggr konungr silkiskegg, sonr Óláfs kvárans ok Kormlaðar drottningar; hann hafði þá skamma stund ráðit ríkinu* ('At the time Ireland was ruled by King Sigtryggr Silky-beard, the son of Óláfr kvaran and Queen Kormlǫð; he had only recently come to power there', ch. 8).

A saga from the Dales of western Iceland: Laxdæla saga

Laxdæla saga merits special consideration, in part because of its unique status as regards connections with Ireland and the British Isles, in part because the Dalir (Dales) region of western Iceland, self-contained between the Snæfellsnes peninsula and north-western peninsula of the Westfjords, fostered a definite local identity among its people. The uniqueness of *Laxdæla saga* among the sagas of the west of Iceland comes out, for instance, in how little it makes of the time spent by Ketill Flat-nose and his daughter Unnr (Auðr) in the Hebrides and Dublin – in comparison to what we are told about Ketill's overlordship of the Hebrides and Unnr's status as wife of the Viking king of Dublin in *The Book of Settlements*, *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. In *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 2, Ketill expresses his wish to leave Norway and go 'west over the ocean; he said that that seemed to be a good place to live' – a situation on which he was presumably well qualified to pass judgment in view of his previous far-flung raiding activities. Iceland, by comparison, is of no interest to him: to him it is just a fishing station (*veidistöð*) – a snub reminiscent of that of another grandee emigrant, Ingimundr the Old, who, in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 10, calls Iceland a 'barren reef' (*eyðisker*) and 'deserted settlements' (*eyðibýggðir*). *Laxdæla saga*'s failure to mention Unnr's having spent time in Dublin may perhaps have something to do with the fact that later in the saga (ch. 21) it is assumed that Mýrkjartan, king of the Irish, had his quarters there, a problematic inconsistency if the town was supposed to have been simultaneously the hub of a Viking kingdom. In chapter 1, it is merely said that Unnr had been married to 'Óláfr the White, son of Ingjaldr, son of Fróði the Bold, whom the Svertlings killed' – a description that leaves it ambiguous as to whether it was Óláfr or Fróði that was killed by the Svertlings, whoever they may have been. It is interesting that in chapter 4 the saga refers to Ari the Learned's *Book of the Icelanders* (*Íslendingabók*) concerning the death of Þorsteinn, 'that he fell in Caithness', while neglecting to

¹⁰ *Dyflinnarskíri* or *Dyflinnarskiði*, lit. 'Dublinshire', is the term customarily used in Old Icelandic sources for the area centred on Dublin under Norse control.

mention many of the more remarkable events in Unnr's long and illustrious career that we find in other sources. Some background information of this sort is, however, necessary to lend credence to the saga's claim that Unnr brought with her to Iceland substantial wealth and a large body of kinsmen and other accomplished and noble followers. The saga gives no clue as to how she managed to attract a following of this kind. Possibly the circumstances were felt to be so universally known that they went without saying.

According to *Laxdæla saga*, in Ketill's day it is possible to win control of half of Scotland and set oneself up as king over it (ch. 4), although the Scots are a perfidious people, ever ready to turn against such authority, no matter how well accepted one might be by the better class of men. In Caithness there are woods suitable for building an ocean-going ship (*knorr*) and the route from here to Iceland goes by way of Orkney and the Faeroes (chs. 4–5).

Ireland is not mentioned again until chapter 20, when Melkorka tells her son Óláfr (later 'the Peacock') that if he goes there it will be useful for him to know Irish because then it will make no difference where he finds himself – suggesting that in some places it is possible to get by with Norse alone. The mixed ethnic background of Ireland is alluded to again in chapter 24 when Qrn the steersman describes how there are harbours and markets in Ireland where foreigners can operate in peace. The route to Ireland from Norway, however, is tricky and ships are liable to lose their way in fogs and calms. These conditions make it impossible to say anything about where it is in Ireland that Óláfr and Qrn eventually come to land in chapter 21, except that there are shallows and submerged reefs offshore, tides that go out a long way, and a pool at the mouth of the river where ships can anchor. Nearby there is a village where the Irish come together and the king uses horses as he makes his royal progress about the country. Later they all make their way to Dublin on horseback. Unlike the earl of Orkney, who launches raids on his neighbours with the valued assistance of such Icelanders as visit him, the king of Ireland attempts to drive vikings and bandits out of his country and Óláfr takes part in this work alongside his grandfather and his retinue.

In chapter 41, Óláfr's son Kjartan wants to leave Norway and go 'to England, because this is now a good place for Christian men to trade'. But King Óláfr Tryggvason has other ideas: rather than go trading, Kjartan shall either go to Iceland (as a missionary) or remain in his service there in Norway. In chapter 43, we are told that Óláfr's colleague Kálfr had 'returned early that autumn ... out of the west from England with his and Kjartan's ship and the trading proceeds', after which Kjartan sets off home to Iceland.

From *Laxdæla saga* alone it is impossible to draw up any overall picture of Ireland and the British Isles, other than that they are west of Norway and south of Iceland. The relative positions of Orkney, Ireland and England are not clear but one can deduce that the wooded Caithness is in Scotland and that by sailing from there you come to Orkney. No mention is made of the Hebrides, despite the fact that according to other sources Ketill Flat-nose is supposed to have spent time there: all *Laxdæla saga* has to say on the subject is that he won control of (part of) Scotland but that his over-lordship was subsequently overthrown. Ireland is ruled by Irish-speaking Irishmen who live in villages. Their king is based in Dublin, from where he attempts to defend his country from viking attacks. Here and there there are markets and harbours where foreigners can come and trade in peace. England is a Christian country and people go there on trading ventures.

Sagas of the Westfjords

There is little information to be found in the sagas set primarily in the Westfjords (*Vestfirðir*, the north-west peninsula of Iceland) – a few passing references in *Fóstbræðra saga* ('Saga of the Sworn Brothers'), *Gísla saga* and *Gull-Þóris saga*, nothing at all in *Króka-Refs saga* and *Hávarðar saga Ísfríðings*. What one may deduce from them is that, as in *Laxdæla saga*, people who get lost for many days on the open sea, in this case on their way from Iceland, are likely to make land in Ireland. In Ireland one can expect a hostile reception from the locals, who take weapons to foreign seamen, and it is safer to head straight for England and look for friends among the chieftains there (*Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 8).

England is west of Norway: so says *Gísla saga* (ch. 8 in the shorter version, ch. 5 in the longer, though in ch. 13 England is mentioned without any defining compass specification); so also the account of a journey to England in *Gull-Þóris saga*. Norwegian chieftains can find sanctuary in England, since on the demise of King Haraldr Fairhair Hákon is able to return to Norway 'out of England in the west' (*Gísla saga*, ch. 5).

In Orkney, the earl Rognvaldr Brúsason is engaged in similar activities as those that *Laxdæla saga* ascribes to Mýrkjartan king of the Irish in Dublin, that is, he eschews raiding activities against neighbouring territories in the style of the earls of Orkney in the sagas from Borgarfjörður and the south-west, and instead visits retribution on vikings for their evil deeds in robbing farmers and merchants and upholds the peace for law-abiding folk – with the trusty support of Þorgeirr Hávarsson. Icelanders intent on a bit of plundering are better advised to cross over to Scotland and do their business there (*Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 13).

Sagas of the north of Iceland west: Húnaflói and Skagafjörður

From the sagas set towards the west of northern Iceland – *Bandamanna saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Kormáks saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* – one can construct a fairly clear picture of various aspects of Ireland and the British Isles, though this picture differs in some respects from what we have encountered hitherto. Ireland and Britain are not mentioned in the other sagas from this part of the country, *Heiðarviga saga*, *Þórðar saga hreðu* and *Finnboga saga*.

In Orkney, in the days of Haraldr Fairhair, the king's earl has difficulty maintaining the peace 'because of vikings' and the situation is only rectified with the arrival of Torf-Einarr in the islands (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 9). Earl Sigurður, in his time, does a lot of raiding with the help of Icelanders and launches an attack on mainland Scotland (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 48). The sea crossing to Orkney from north-eastern Iceland is relatively quick. In Orkney one can buy malt and corn, spend a decent time in the islands, and still get back to Iceland in seven weeks (*Bandamanna saga*, ch. 11). People put in there on their way from Iceland to Norway (*Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 11) and it makes a good stopping point for those returning from profitable ventures in England (*Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 1).

The Hebrides, with the island of Barrey (Barra) among them, lie to the west across the sea. In the days of King Haraldr Fairhair this was an area of conflict and turmoil. People from Scandinavia conducted raids against the land defences of King Kjarval and the fighting spread to both Ireland and Scotland, with the vikings able to shelter over the winter on Barra. After the Battle of Hafrsfjord the area took in a lot of refugees from Norway. Some rose to positions of eminence, for

example Eyvindr the Easterner (*austmaðr*), who married Rafarta, daughter of King Kjarval of Ireland (*Grettis saga*, ch. 3–5). When a man ‘of Hebridean extraction’ (*sudureyskr at ætterni*) turns up in Iceland, he is said to be ‘big and strong, unpopular and contrary’ (*mikill ok sterkur, óvinsæll ok lítt við alþýðuskap*) (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 40), indicating that there is something strange and off-putting about him. Generally, men who go raiding in the West have good prospects of returning ‘with wealth and honour’ (*Kormáks saga*, ch. 1, *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 7). Stories are known of people who went raiding in Ireland with King Haraldr Greycloak and came up against large forces (*Kormáks saga*, ch. 19). One can also make a name for oneself by raiding ‘in Ireland, Britain, England [and] Scotland’; to do this, you first establish defenses at *Skarðaborg* (Scarborough, though its location is not specified in the saga) and from there strike out at Scotland, where there are woods (*Kormáks saga*, ch. 27, which mentions a Scottish *blótrisi* – apparently, a giant being conjured up by magic) and where the locals take shelter in a castle built of stone (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 48).

The Scottish firths are rather farther from home than the Hebrides. The sagas are familiar with some of the topography of the region from a naval battle off the island of *Bót* (Bute). By the island there is a narrow strait of deep water between high cliffs from which rocks can be thrown down onto ships. The open sea is only a short distance away and there is a small island nearby (*Grettis saga*, ch. 4). The ocean currents in this part of the world are such that a coffin placed in the sea on the way to Iceland after the death of St Olaf can (with divine intervention) come to land on Holy Island (Iona) in the Hebrides, where there is a community of monks (*Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 11).

Ireland is generally ‘in the west’ and from there one travels ‘out of the west’ across the sea to Norway or ‘out’ to Iceland (*Grettis saga*, ch. 5, 6). People travelling from England to Norway are also going ‘out of the west’ and west from Norway to England (*Grettis saga*, ch. 38, *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 1).

The location of Ireland and the British Isles in these sagas is reasonably clear. Most is known about the Orkneys, the Hebrides and the Scottish firths, with particularly rich details of conditions around the island of Bute. There is a strong historical awareness that the first arrival of Scandinavians in these regions was accompanied by serious turbulence, that control was unstable and that the Irish tried to repel the vikings, even with the support of other Scandinavians. A distinction is made between those who go in for raiding as vikings, using the protection provided by the fortress at Scarborough and the stronghold of Barra, and those who conduct campaigns aimed at maintaining the peace under the suzerainty of the earl of Orkney, or at the behest of the king of Ireland. Little can be gleaned about the features and qualities of the land, except what is said about woods and castles in Scotland and that in Orkney one can buy malt and corn.

Sagas of the north and north-east: Eyjafjörður and Pingeyjarþing

The sagas from farther east in the north of Iceland, from Eyjafjörður and Pingeyjarþing, give only a very hazy picture of Ireland and the British Isles – a few references in *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Svarfdæla saga* and *Valla-Ljóts saga*, nothing at all in *Viga-Glúms saga* and *Reykðæla saga*.

Such information as is given mainly concerns the Orkneys. This is the shortest crossing out from Iceland when Þórir is banished from the country in *Ljósvetninga saga* (C redaction), ch. 18. It is emphasized that it is possible to sail from Orkney to Iceland as early as the beginning of May and from Iceland to Orkney shortly before the start of winter (late October) – though people travelling

so late are unlikely to be able to make it on to Norway in the same year, which is where you need to go to get timber for house-building. In a later fragment of the A redaction of *Ljósvetninga saga* Þórir goes only as far as Shetland on his first winter abroad and spends his second winter in Orkney, returning from there with flour and other goods (cf. *Bandamanna saga*, ch. 11, noted above, regarding Orkney as a source of malt and corn). In this version there is no mention of Þórir going on to Norway in search of timber.

Chapter 22 of *Ljósvetninga saga* (C redaction) reveals knowledge of the Battle of Clontarf (*Brjánsorrosta* in the sagas, i.e., the battle of Brian Bóruma) in wording that suggests that the audience is expected to be familiar with it. Background knowledge of a similar sort appears to be assumed in chapter 31, where we are told that ‘Brandr travelled west with King Haraldr [Hardrada, *harðráði*] to England. And when they left their ships for the very last time, Brandr had a mailcoat but all the rest of the king’s troop had left their mail back on the ships ... Brandr was killed there along with the king’. The account here clearly assumes that audiences will already know what lay before Haraldr and his men as they ventured onto English soil for the final time, i.e., defeat and death at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. On England, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, ch. 8, offers the information that men can go there and become members of the *þingmannalið* – probably the bodyguard of King Canute.

Ireland appears to be a largely unknown quantity in the world of these northern sagas. In *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 29, we are told that ‘Karl sails to Ireland and has news of where Skíði is. By this time he had conquered a large part of Ireland. Karl brought his ship to the place where Skíði was. He had gone up onto the land to fight against the Irish and was intending this to be the final showdown with them ... Karl was there through the winter ... In spring, Karl prepared to leave Ireland and was held in great honour by Skíði and they parted good friends. Karl had Ingvildr with him and turned his ship to Norway and spent a second winter there’. The account is entirely lacking in circumstantial details of the location and geography of Ireland or conditions in it, except that audiences are expected to believe that Skíði had been able to win control over a large part of it.

Sagas of the east of Iceland

The sagas from the east of Iceland have little to say about Ireland and the British Isles: *Droplaugarsona saga* and *Fljótsdæla saga* show a little knowledge of the Hebrides and Shetland; *Hrafnkels saga*, *Þorsteins saga hvíta* and *Vápnfirðinga saga* contribute nothing at all. The location of the Hebrides is nowhere mentioned, but a few ‘historical’ details are given in *Droplaugarsona saga*, ch. 1: that Arneiðr’s father Ásbjörn *skerjablesi* had been earl over the islands after the death of Tryggvi, and that he was succeeded by Véþormr’s brother Guttomr. The genealogical interest here is plainly intended to enhance the status of the character of Arneiðr in the saga.

Richer details of the topography of Shetland are given in *Fljótsdæla saga*, ch. 5, in a style reminiscent of the description in *Grettis saga* of conditions around the island of *Bót* (Bute) in the Scottish firths. A ship from Iceland drifts lost at sea late into the summer and eventually reaches Shetland at night. ‘Here there were wide tidelands and they sail onto a reef and the ship is smashed to smithereens; all the cargo was lost but the people made it to land alive’. The saga speaks of an earl’s residence and gives a detailed description of the nearby coast, with rocks jutting out into the sea, the cliff Geitishamarr and the mountain Geitissúlur, beaches of sand and shingle, and massive

tides. Ships can be pulled up by the River Þórsá, and one can sail direct to the Eastfjords of Iceland, landing at Höfn in Borgarfjörður to the south of Njarðvík. It is noteworthy that the danger posed to ships trying to make land in Shetland from the open sea tallies very closely with the account given in *Egils saga*, ch. 32–3 (see above), when coming from Norway.

Sagas of the south

Turning finally to the sagas set in the south of Iceland, with *Njáls saga* in pride of place, we are presented with a fairly circumstantial picture of the northern and western parts of Ireland and the British Isles. In addition to what is said in *Njáls saga*, there is information to be had from *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* and *Flóamanna saga* (though nothing from *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*). *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* is considered here for convenience though it might perhaps more properly be included among the sagas of the east of Iceland, standing as it does geographically somewhere half way in between.

Ships carried in the ocean far to the south of Iceland may expect to make landfall at 'Eyjar [the Islands] or Scotland or Ireland' (*Njáls saga*, ch. 83). One needs to be prepared for up to two days' sailing through shallow waters, among reefs offshore from a coast cut by bays and creeks – as well as a hostile reception from the local inhabitants of *Dungalsbær* (Duncansby). On one side here we have the Hebrides, on the other 'Hrossey' (Mainland) in the Orkneys (*Njáls saga*, ch. 84).

According to *Njáls saga*, ch. 154, with a good following wind it is a relatively quick crossing from Eyjar (modern Eyraðakki, on the south coast of Iceland) to *Friðarey* (Fair Isle), which 'is between Shetland and Orkney'.

To Orkney there is direct sailing from Iceland. With a good wind it is a quick crossing from Orkney to Eyjar in Iceland (*Njáls saga*, ch. 90). There are problems associated with landing in Orkney because of fogs and heavy surf around the islands; ships can easily be wrecked and break up coming in off the open sea – and then there is some distance to go to get to the residence of the earl of Orkney on Mainland (*Njáls saga*, ch. 153, 155). The islands are ruled by Earl Sigurðr Hlǫðvesson (*Njáls saga*, ch. 89), who is a kinsman of Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallsson (Hlǫðvir was the son of Þorfinnr Skull-splitter, son of Torf-Einarr, son of Rǫgnvaldr of Møre; Þorsteinn's grandmother was the granddaughter of Hrollaugr Rǫgnvaldsson: *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, ch. 1–2).

To the south of Orkney lies *Pettlandsfjörðr* (Pentland Firth), with the island of *Straumey* (Stroma, a couple of miles off John O'Groats) forming an important link between the mainland and the islands. South of the straits on the mainland are Caithness (*Katanes*) and *Þrasvík* (probably modern Freswick, between Wick and Duncansby Head) (*Njáls saga*, ch. 155, 159). Here you enter lands controlled by the earl – *Ros ok Mýræfi, Syðrilǫnd ok Dali* ('Ross and Moray, Sutherland and "Dalir"[perhaps Dalriada, Argyll]') (*Njáls saga*, ch. 84). A short way from Caithness, at *Dungalsnipa* (presumably Duncansby Head), Earl Sigurðr has enemies supported by the king of the Scots at *Dungalsbær* (Duncansby) (*Njáls saga*, ch. 86). Also in Scotland is *Hvítborg* ('Whitborough', location uncertain), which is the residence of Earl Melkólfr (*Njáls saga*, ch. 158). From the safety of the Orkneys, men from Iceland go raiding with the earl around Scotland and the 'Western Lands', killing the rabble and driving them to the forests (*Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, ch. 1–2); they also go south 'around *Qngulsey* [presumably Angelsey, though this seems improbably far south in the present context] and all the Hebrides ... to *Saltíri* ['Saltire', modern

Kintyre] ... and from there ... south to Britain [i.e., Wales] ... and Man ... From there, north to *Kola* [probably either Coll or Colonsay]' (*Njáls saga*, ch. 89). The Isle of Man is east of Ireland; here vikings may be lying in wait to the west, or offshore, in a channel that can be closed off (*Njáls saga*, ch. 155–6).

This description of Earl Sigurðr's domain suggests that his tax-gathering authority over these territories is far from uncontested when one moves south by land and beyond the Hebrides, since here there is a succession of islands and mainland that have to be taken by force. For instance, Man is under a king called Guðrøðr. Sigurðr has a possible ally in Earl Gilli on the island of 'Kola', who Sigurðr manoeuvres into supporting him by giving him his sister in marriage. It is assumed that audiences will be familiar with the names of the places mentioned, since little is done to describe them other than through general compass directions in the account of the journey made by Kári and the Njáls sons south all the way to 'Britain' (i.e., Wales), and then from Man back north to the island of 'Kola'.

Earl Hákon of Lade, ruler of Norway c.975–995, attempts to tax the Hebrides and sends one of his barons (*lendr maðr*) to enforce his claim, with little success initially. Their ship is wrecked on Caithness and they lose their stock. The area is controlled by a certain Earl Óláfr and the king's emissary wins his esteem through his noble conduct and is thereafter able to intimidate the people of the Hebrides and collect tribute from them (*Flóamanna saga*, ch. 15) – hardly suggesting unconditional obedience on the part of the islanders towards the king of Norway. In *Njáls saga*, ch. 157 it takes a week for important news – the outcome of the Battle of Clontarf – to reach the Hebrides from Dublin.

The Scottish firths are on the route from Fair Isle to 'Britain', apparently not far from the Hebrides (*Njáls saga*, ch. 158).

Ireland lies to the south of the Orkneys (*Njáls saga*, ch. 155). Men from Norway go raiding there. There is deciduous woodland and an earl whose Irish mother has ancestors on her mother's side from Vík, the region around the Oslo Fjord. Ships sailing east from Greenland arrive on the west coast of Ireland, but one cannot be sure of remaining there in peace without building up some kind of friendship or alliance with the natives (*Flóamanna saga*, ch. 16, 26). There is a Norse king in Dublin called Sigtryggr, the son of Óláfr kvan and Kormloð, who was previously the wife of King Brian at *Kunnjättaborg* (Cenn Corad) (*Njáls saga*, ch. 156). King Sigtryggr attends a mid-winter feast at the home of Earl Sigurðr in the Orkneys along with Earl Gilli of the Hebrides, suggesting the existence of an alliance between these three men. Conceivably Sigurðr and Gilli are Sigtryggr's earls (*Njáls saga*, ch. 154). The Battle of Clontarf, 'the most celebrated battle there has been west over the sea', took place close to some woods, including a certain celebrated oak tree, somewhere outside Dublin, not far from a place called *Dumazbakki* (*Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, ch. 1–2, *Njáls saga*, ch. 156–7).¹¹

¹¹ A feature of *Njáls saga* is that its accounts of journeys around Ireland and the British Isles are generally accompanied by compass specifications. However, there is a notable exception in chapter 157, in the passage describing Earl Sigurðr's departure from Orkney in the events leading up to the Battle of Clontarf: here we are given no route description or compass references, and it is worth considering whether this anomaly supports the conjecture of Donnchadh Ó Corráin ('Viking Ireland – Afterthoughts' in Howard B. Clarke, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh & Ragnhild Ó Floinn (eds), *Ireland and Scandinavia in the early Viking Age* (Dublin, 1998), pp 421–52 at pp 447–52), that behind this chapter there may have been a written source compiled somewhere in the area where the events took place, implying an audience already thoroughly familiar with the location and for whom geographical specification would have been redundant.

'Britain' (i.e., Wales) lies on the route to Rome from the Hebrides (*Njáls saga*, ch. 157), south of the Isle of Man (*Njáls saga*, ch. 89). There is an inlet where ships can hide unseen and a town with a market (*Njáls saga*, ch. 158). From Britain one can travel north to the home of Earl Melkólfr at *Hvítisborg* in Scotland, putting in on the way at *Beruvík*. Indirectly one may deduce that *Beruvík* is thought of as being in the east of the British Isles, since in chapter 159 it is stated specifically, as if by way of distinction, that Kári sailed the more westerly route: Berwick-upon-Tweed thus becomes an attractive candidate. From Britain there is also a direct sailing route north by way of the Scottish firths to *Þrasvík* (Freswick) in Caithness (*Njáls saga*, ch. 159). South across the sea from Britain lies Normandy (*Njáls saga*, ch. 159).

England is west of Norway (*Njáls saga*, ch. 5). On the north side of the sea over from Normandy is *Dofri* (Dover) (*Njáls saga*, ch. 159).

Conclusion

The fundamental elements of the integrated picture that can be constructed of Ireland and the British Isles from the sagas come from *Njáls saga* and *Egils saga*. Knowledge is most precise for the islands to the west and north of Scotland, then south along the west coast of Scotland and into the Irish Sea. Other than in *Egils saga*, almost nothing is known about the Viking settlements in the north and east of England and the picture we get of them is extremely vague. It is striking that the areas best known to the sagas coincide well with the parts of Ireland and the British Isles that were most frequented by people from Norway in the Viking-Age. Within Iceland, this geographical knowledge is largely restricted to the south, west and north-west – the very parts of Iceland where, according to *The Book of Settlements* and on the evidence of place-names, Gaelic influences were strongest among the early settlers.¹² Where *The Book of Settlements* traces people's origins to places in Ireland and the British Isles, these places are invariably the same as those that are best known in the sagas.

The perspective on the British Isles that we find in the sagas, which clearly view these regions from the standpoint of Norway and Iceland, makes it almost inconceivable that this knowledge was acquired by the Icelandic writers from foreign books about this part of the world. The information recorded in the sagas can thus hardly be anything other than the reflection of a living oral tradition among those who told and listened to sagas that included events set in Ireland and the British Isles. This knowledge was clearly greatest in the parts of Iceland with the largest settlement of people from the British Isles, either because these regions preserved a tradition of memories going back to the settlement period or because communications were maintained with the countries of origins – or a combination of the two, with the memories being reinforced through continued communication.

This knowledge is to a large extent bound up with sea routes and the conditions for landing (or even battle), suggesting that it fulfilled a specific and essential function among mariners. Information is also preserved about forests in Ireland and Scotland, a village in Ireland, a castle in Scotland. The king of England sits in London, where visitors can walk in streets and where in

former times people could make themselves understood in the Norse tongue. In Ireland, there are either two kings – a Viking one in Dublin and an Irish one at *Kunnjättaborg*, or just a single Irish one in Dublin who is kept busy defending his country from predation. There are hostile kings in Scotland and on the Isle of Man and friendly earls in the Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland. Most of the earls of Orkney need to be constantly on their guard against their neighbours in order to hold on to power. England has been Christian for a long time, similarly the Hebrides, where the local population had a monastery on Holy Island after the time of the fall of St Olaf in Norway.

As regards transport and communications, the message of the sagas is clear: British waters are frequently hazardous, with serious dangers of fogs and shipwrecks. The implication, though not spelt out specifically, is that such dangers are commoner here than around the coasts of Norway. Ireland and the British Isles are not peaceful places: the natives take up arms against visitors from the seas, and to maintain control over the Orkneys the earls have resort to repeated campaigns to fend off their neighbours. There are serious language problems in Ireland and it is thus fully understandable that, once any vestigial Gaelic had died out in Iceland, the Icelanders chose to look mainly to Norway for trade and communications. The picture we get of Ireland and the British Isles in the sagas is thus fully in line with what we know of the origins of the Icelanders and at the same time helps to explain why the Icelanders found it harder, as time went on, to maintain as rich contacts with Ireland and Britain as they did with their homelands in Norway.

* This essay was translated by Nicholas Jones.

¹² See Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic influence in Iceland: historical and literary contacts, a survey of research*, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík, 2000).