**Sturlunga Saga**

*The compilation*

*Sturlunga saga* (or *Sturlunga*) is a collection of sagas dealing with the contemporary or nearly contemporary history of Icelanders during the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries. It was compiled about 1300 by one of the sons of Narfi Snorrason from the manor Skarð on Skarðs-strönd, probably Þórðr Narfason, Lawman at Skarð (d. 1308). It represents a tendency, increasingly common during the fourteenth century, to collect within one manuscript as many sagas of one type—or as much miscellaneous matter—as possible. *Hauksbók* is a miscellany from about 1330 compiled by Lawman Haukr Erlendsson; *Flateyjarbók* (ca. 1390) is a compilation of kings' sagas; *Möðruvallabók* (ca. 1350) a collection of family sagas.

In such compilations the individual sagas were often left more or less intact, though many a scribe—Haukr among them—was given to shortening and turning into his own style.

The compiler of *Sturlunga saga* was interested in the history of his country during the last two centuries. Hence he took all the individual sagas dealing with it, arranged them in chronological order, cut them if they overlapped, or entered them in alternate bits into his text. If he had hoped to give a rounded and well-proportioned history of the country—somewhat like Snorri's *Heimskringla*—he failed miserably. His work is in reality a *rudis indigestaque molis* and even more so because of his attempts to scramble the individual sagas into a chronological whole.

To unscramble the individual sagas from this scrap heap has been no easy task, and the work of editors has not been made easier by the fact that the collection has been preserved in two different manuscripts (*Króksfjarðarbók* (I), ca. 1350 and *Reykjafjarðarbók* (II), ca. 1400), both of which are now very defective. Fortunately, both were copied while still relatively intact, but the two manuscript classes were too often mixed up.
A few short items in the collection are by the collector himself, namely the introductory Geirmundar þáttir, Haukdæla þáttir and some genealogies. Otherwise the sagas are as follows, in the chronological order of the collection:

 prost saga ok Haflíða

This saga of Þorgils Oddason and Haflíði Másson deals with a feud, arising ca. 1120, between two mighty chiefs of the Northwest, and with the success of the churchmen in composing the quarrel. The scene where the two lords ride with their forces to the Althing expecting a fight, won the applause of W. P. Ker. The story of the bridal at Reykhólar in 1119 is not only well told but is, in many ways, an important document of literary history (see p. 123). Since the author goes on to quote King Sverrir's views on "such lying tales" as were on the program of entertainment at Reykhólar, he could not have written the saga before the last quarter of the twelfth century. The last editor of Sturlunga saga is even tempted to put credence in the contested reference to 1237 as a terminus post quem for the composition of the saga.

Sturlu saga

It deals with Snorri's father, Sturla Óðarsson in Hvammr (Hvamm-Sturla), his quarrels and feuds with his neighbors in 1148–83. It is overloaded with detail, but the author succeeds in giving several anecdotes and situations that not only show up the rather shady character of his subject but also reveal him as a grim humorist. The author must have been very close to the events and if he was a friend of his hero he did not spare him in the least. The saga is too badly written to be credited to Snorri. It might date from the first quarter of the thirteenth century.

The Priest's saga of Guðmundr góði has been treated with the bishops' sagas (pp. 103–104).

Guðmundar saga dýra

The saga of Guðmundr dýri or the saga of the Burning of Önundr is laid in the years 1185–1200; the burning of Önundr by Guðmundr occurred in 1197, after which the arsonist entered the monastery of Þingeyrar, where he died in 1212. This saga looks more like a collection of material than an articulated composition. Perhaps it was never finished, but such as it is, it was probably put together after 1212. It is an apology for the firebrand, the next one in Icelandic history after Flosi in Njála.
Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar

The Life of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson has been preserved as a separate work, but only the latter half of it (1203–13) was incorporated in Sturlunga saga. The author, a contemporary friend of Hrafn, writes the story to clear his memory of slander. He may not be equally fair to Hrafn’s opponent and killer (1213), described as a man who cannot control his wickedness. The author is obviously a clerk; like the hero, he is interested in medicine. Hrafn may have been the greatest medicus of Scandinavia in his time. The saga was probably written not long after 1228.

Islendinga saga

The Saga (or Sagas) of the Icelanders forms the backbone of the Sturlunga collection. It was written by Sturla Þórdarson, probably as a part of a grand history of Iceland, beginning with his Landnáma and Kristni saga and supplementing such historical works as existed in his day: Þorgils saga ok Hafljóta, Sturlu saga, Prests saga Guðmundar góða, Önundar saga dýra, and Hrafns saga. That this is so seems clear from the fact that he avoids repeating matter from these sagas. To begin with, that is to say during the years 1184–1200, his saga is thus very sketchy, it is chiefly a history of Sturla’s sons, Þórðr, Snorri, and Sighvatr, but it gains in breadth and scope as the years roll by. The end is in dispute, some (B. M. Ólsen) setting it at 1242, others (F. Jónsson, P. Sigurðsson) at 1255, where there is a gap of three years in the saga. But the latest editor (Jón Jóhannesson) believes that Sturla skipped these three years because they were fully treated in Þorgils saga skarða. He believes that the end of Islendinga saga is sketchy for the same reason as the beginning is, namely, that Sturla in both cases was only supplementing existing sagas, here Þorgils saga skarða (1241–58), written (by a certain Þórðr Hítnesingr) 1275–80, and Þóðrar saga kakala (1242–49), written shortly after 1271. If this is true, Sturla must have written his Islendinga saga during the last years of his life (1271–84) and very likely left it unfinished. This theory would explain a certain unevenness of the composition: omissions here, too many details there. Sturla’s artistic instinct was not quite up to par with that of his famous uncle Snorri; he suffered too much from the common Icelandic fault of not seeing the wood because of the trees; besides, the wealth of the contemporary material was much harder to handle than Snorri’s writings or traditions of the past. And this is not to say that he does not write well,
for he does—and has left us many a brilliantly executed scene, many a moving tale, and some highly humorous anecdotes. His characters breathe real life. In the foreground are full-scale portraits of the actors of the tragic drama, the Sturlungs. There is his quiet but efficient father Þórðr, the brilliant, ambitious, but weak-kneed Snorri, and the humorous realistic man of action, Sighvatr, who loves to take the wind out of the sails of his ambitious brother. But Snorri's ambitious intrigues never put the mark as high as the foolhardiness of his nephew Sturla Sighvatsson. Aiming to subdue the country in one fell swoop, heounedered on the determined resistance of the prudent and cunning Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who all but wiped out the Sturlungs: father and son, Sighvatr and Sturla, and the greatest of them all, Snorri Sturluson. Gizurr did succeed in making himself the master of the country, but only as an earl under the king's sovereignty (1262). There are hundreds of others, great and small, but all, somehow, endowed with a strange life. Sturla, himself, was one of the actors of the drama, and he describes himself with the same seeming detachment as his worst enemies. If he was biased he studiously avoids showing it.

In connection with Sturla and his Islendinga saga one must mention the so-called Sturlunga-prologue, by the collector, but perhaps based on an older prologue by Sturla. It states: "Most sagas, taking place in Iceland before Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson died (1201), were written, but sagas taking place after that were to a small extent written, before (i.e. until) Sturla the Poet Þórðarson dictated the Sagas of Icelanders, for which he utilized information from learned men, those who lived while he was young, but some things from letters written by people contemporaneous with the heroes. Many things could he himself observe and hear of great events in his own day . . ."

In this prologue, "most sagas" was long mistakenly interpreted as referring to the family sagas (Islendinga sögur), so e.g., Finnur Jónsson, who for that reason dated most of them before 1200. Actually the statement concerns the Sturlunga collection only and was first correctly interpreted by Guðbrandur Vigfússon.

Svinfellinga saga

Of the other sagas of the collection Svinfellinga saga, recording the events of 1248–52, is especially noteworthy not only because it alone of the sagas of Sturlunga takes place in the Southeast but also because it is the only saga colored by a certain manly sentimentality, reminding
in that respect of *Njáls saga*, which hails from the same district. It was probably written towards 1300.

*Arons saga*

The saga of Aron Hjörleifsson, chronicling the life of a thirteenth-century hero, was actually later than the *Sturlunga* collection, though often included in it by editors. It was probably written towards 1350. Much of the matter was already recorded by Sturla Þórðarson in his *Islendinga saga*; the fourteenth-century author has somewhat increased the dimensions of his hero.

*The style*

The style of most of the sagas in the *Sturlunga* collection, notably the style of Sturla himself, was almost always secular. Only when he describes the fate of Bishop Guðmundr the Good does he momentarily succumb to the ecclesiastical point of view, revealed in a devotional flavor of the style. Otherwise he is the hard, detached humanist observer, studiously neutral, but obviously an admirer of the great men of his age and their great deeds. To us these deeds may appear in a dubious light and, indeed, the wisdom of the family feuds must have seemed dubious even to the actors themselves. Often enough they must have felt like Paul that they did not do the good they wanted to do but the evil they did not want to do. Thus, in the Norwegian court—and in order to prevent an invasion of Iceland—Snorri may have suggested that it would not take him long to turn the Icelanders to a friendly submission to the Norwegian crown. But in *Heimskringla* he wrote that famous speech of Einar Þveræingr epitomizing the resistance of the people to foreign encroachment, a speech still ringing in Icelandic ears during and after World War II.

And here, incidentally, we have the salient point. The actors of the great drama of the Sturlung Age were fighting for the noble ideals of heroic life: independence and greatness in the individual. They lost this fight in the arena of everyday life and sold their ancient birthright of freedom for a dangerous security, a deadening peace. But they succeeded in making their literature, the sagas, a flaming torch of these ideals, destined to illuminate the dark centuries to come in the nation's life—and to flare up afresh in mighty revivals under more favorable circumstances.