The Medieval Saga

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In 1908 the folklorist Axel Olrik drew up a list of “epic laws” or general principles of folk narrative. One of his points, the law of single-stranded narration, cites Icelandic saga practice as a counterexample:

Modern literature is fond of entangling the threads of the plot. Folk narrative holds the single strand fast: it is always single-stranded. [Its plot proceeds steadily forward to the nearest point both in time and in the logical chain.] Folk narrative does not double back to pick up missing links in the narration. [It does not break off in order to return to prior events, and it does not shift scenes unless the course of the plot requires such a shift.] When one encounters, in the Icelandic sagas, such phrases as “Now the two stories run along together” (Nú ferr tvønum sogum fram), one has left the realm of oral narrative—this is literature. [The art of the Icelandic saga verges on that of the modern novel or story, and by its very nature differs fundamentally from oral narrative.] The folktale tells only one story at a time. [Its linear nature is the defining characteristic of genuine folk narrative.]

This formulation has figured prominently in the few general attempts—there are surprisingly few—to relate Orlrik's set of "epic laws" to the sagas. Walther Heinrich Vogt, a contemporary of Orlrik's, detected multi- ply narration in the first half of Egils saga and judged it to be literary on that account; conversely, he felt that the single- ply second half was reflective of oral tradition. Walther Heinrich Vogt, Zur Komposition der Egils saga Kpp. I-LXVI (Görlitz: Hoffmann and Reiber, 1909). Ole Widding tempered Vogt's judgment: "Perhaps it is not as sharp a difference as Vogt suggests, but that the sections [are] woven together to a greater extent—completely in keeping with the medieval rules of literary borrowing." See his "I slrendingesagaer" in Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Thorkil Damsgaard Olsen, and Ole Widding, Norrøn fortellekunst (Copenhagen: Akademisk forlag, 1965), p. 85.


Knut Liestøl, Upphavet til den islendske ættesaga (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1929), pp. 101-2. Liestøl does not, however, address directly the degree and complexity of the practice in the sagas.


Einar Ólafur Sveinsson refers to the composition of *Njáls saga* as a "web" or "network of events" and distinguishes it from the more straightforward patterns of biography or chronicle. Anne Heinrichs has recently termed "intertexture" the technique of binding together the narrative mass by a system of "forecasts and concordances" (as Frappier described the same phenomenon in the Vulgate Cycle). Lee Hollander, in an ingenious essay on the "exceedingly multifarious" composition of *Eyrbyggja saga*, charted the interweaving of plots and concluded that because the device could easily be eliminated, it must be deliberate. He compared it with the practice of sentence intercalation in skaldic poetry and concluded that they were manifestations of the same aesthetic. Andersson focuses on the macrostructure of the Icelandic family sagas but notes several puzzling instances of "unnecessarily complicated" plot organization. He speculates that the author of *Eyrbyggja saga*, for example, "had chronological sources that called for the interspersing of these episodes."

Phillpotts distinguished a subgroup of "two-strand" sagas (*Reykdæla saga*, *Hrafnskels saga*, *Vápnfirðinga saga*, *Þórsteins þátr stangarhóiggs*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Kormáks saga*, and *Bjarnar saga hátdelakappa*) and one "three-strand" saga (*Laxdæla saga*) and guessed that they developed naturally out of the biographic form. Sigurður Nordal considered double-stranded nar-

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13 Ibid., p. 162.

14 "Two-strand" sagas consist of "the inter-actions between two men or two families, where their relations are friendly or hostile." They are "not simply double biographies, or periods in the lives of two men: they eschew all mention of incidents which do not bear on the relations between them. They are quite a distinct form" (Bertha Phillpotts, *Edda and Saga* [New York: Holt, 1931], p. 200).
ration an "excellent trait in the construction" of Hrafnkels saga, but noted "one curious use" that "must surely be considered a defect of craftsmanship"—a passage involving an unnecessary reversion to an earlier point in time:

After Hrafnkell's humiliation at Aðalbólt the Saga describes his purchase of land and his rise to power in the first years at Hrafnkelsstaðir. After returning to describe events at Aðalbólt in the first days after Hrafnkell's departure, it then describes Hrafnkell's reception of the reports about the destruction of Freyfaxi and the temple-burning—events which, of course, took place a few days after his departure. It would have been more natural if the saga had told first of Hrafnkell's departure, then of the activities of Sámr and the sons of Thjóstarr, followed by Hrafnkell's reception of the news, and in this way had avoided splitting in two the section describing his second rise to power. Such an arrangement would have had the additional merit of resembling more closely the method of narration employed in popular oral recitation.15

He concluded that the author must have had some special aim relating to Hrafnkell's ultimate fate.

In general it may be said that the nature of the inquiry into this aspect of saga composition has been conditioned, directly or indirectly, by the terms of Olrik's original formulation: critics share the underlying assumption that, because the sagas emerged out of oral culture at some point, the proper standard against which to measure a saga is a folktale, and any differences that emerge indicate the degree of "literary" interference. Whatever merit there is in this view, its local bias has inhibited us in pursuing just what the other half of Olrik's equation, "sophisticated literature," might actually mean in historical and comparative terms. This is the point of departure for the following two chapters. This chapter is an attempt to describe stranded composition in the sagas and to view it in a contemporary European context. Chapter 3 concentrates on narrative synchrony, again with an eye to Continental developments. The distinction is an artificial convenience, and the chapters, like the processes they describe, should be understood to be dependent on one another.

Stranding

**Stranded Narrative**

Stranding refers to a shift of narrative focus from part to part, usually in a way that entails the discontinuous telling of something that could just as well, and more naturally, be told all at once. A strand is the "something" in question, and its component parts, to stay within the conventional metaphor, may be termed "stitches." A strand may be brief and enclitic or it may be a full biography or anthology of events which, separated from its context, itself constitutes an independent narrative entity. In the latter case, an episode is interrupted to be resumed at a later point in the midst of a second episode, whose further development is thus postponed—to be continued, in its turn, in the midst of still a third episode. Or a strand may be a person, or a group of people (family, berserks, band of attackers), or a place (Bergþórhváll, a ship, a royal court), or an abstract vector in the plot (as in Eyrbyggja saga or Heiðarvíga saga)—whatever, indeed, one might expect to be narrated in a single unit but is instead rendered piecemeal.

Nor are strands fixed in form: they divide and merge according to the vicissitudes of plot (as, for example, in Njáls saga, where certain individual character-strands join to form the composite strand of the "burners" and, after the climactic event, diverge into individuals who go, eventually, their separate ways). Moreover, matter that is integral in one context may be subdivided in another. A dramatic example is Hallfredar saga, which is a strand in the Longest Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason (intercalated in eight parts) but an integral saga, or chapter, of Módruvallabók.

Finally, although they in no sense constitute separable stories, certain leitmotifs in the sagas may also be counted as manifestations of the stranding aesthetic: the weapon Grásiða, for example, which "cuts a ragged swath" through Gísla saga, Hallgerðr's hair and Skarphéðinn's grin in Njáls saga, and the headdress in Laxdæla saga. The principle of inseparability implied by this system of cross-references (or intertexture) has been a crux in the theories concerning the origin and transmission of the sagas.

But the exact content or size of a strand is not so important as the process of stranding itself: the rhythmic movement of the story in fits and starts, the folding back on itself of the plot, the patterns of delays and detours, the preference over straightforward arrangement for one in which "the themes run parallel, or entwined, or are brought together as in a chequer of knotting and plaiting." Strands are not, it should be emphasized, ornamental tendrils, but contributing parts of the ongoing plot, taking place in or around the narrative present. The saga is the sum of its interwoven strands, a "verbal braid" whose meaning is not stated outright but is implied in the juxtapositions and intersections.

Stranding by character is, not surprisingly, most frequent in the so-called district chronicles, where the course and logic of the story lie in no single individual but in the interaction of dozens or hundreds of characters over the space of two or more generations. But it is similarly represented to a surprising degree even in such patently biographical sagas as Grettis saga and Egils saga. A short example (about fourteen pages) of character stranding at an unadorned minimum may be found in Porsteins saga hvita. The plot revolves around the slaying of Einarr (kinsman by marriage of Þorsteinn hviti) by his onetime trading partner Þorsteinn fagri. Þorsteinn fagri is betrothed to Helga but goes with Einarr to Norway, where an illness prevents his timely return. Einarr returns alone to Iceland, where he circulates false reports of Þorsteinn’s death and marries Helga. Meanwhile, back in Norway, Þorsteinn recovers, returns to Iceland, seeks out Einarr, and kills him in his house. In revenge, Einarr’s father collects men and they kill Þorsteinn fagri’s brothers and drive Þorsteinn himself into exile. After five years, Þorsteinn returns and lives under the sponsorship of Þorsteinn hviti. When Einarr’s nephew Brodd-Helgi reaches a threatening age, Þorsteinn returns to Norway and spends the rest of his life there.

If Þorsteinn fagri is the saga’s main character, he is hardly a


18The term "språklig flettverk" is used in reference to skaldic diction by Hallvard Lie, "Natur" og "unatur" i skaldekunsten, Avhandlinger utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, II, hist.-fil. kl. (1957), p. 28.
freewheeling, independent hero in the style of a Lancelot or a Beowulf. He is rather a function of, and exists as a hero only in relation to, his family and his local district in Iceland. (His three Norwegian sojourns are, with the exception of his developing illness, empty spots in the plot.) Nor is he a particularly dominant figure in the narrative: only about 35 percent of the text focuses exclusively on him, the rest being devoted to the parallel destinies of such figures as Einarr, Þórir, and Þorgils and to the brief appearances of numerous minor characters. Porsteins saga hvita boasts about forty named characters (making it about twice as densely populated per page as Njáls saga with its six hundred characters), of whom most are introduced in the following fashion:

(A) Hrani hét maðr ok var kallaðr gullhøtttr. Hann var fóstri Þorgils, en frændi Ásvorar. Hann var hávaðamaðr mikill ok var heimamaðr at Hofi ok var kallaðr grályndr. (B) Þorkell hét maðr ok var kallaðr flettir. Hann var heimamaðr at Hofi ok frændi þeira Hofverja, mikill ok sterkr. (C) Þorbjorn hét maðr. Hann bjó i Sveinungsvik. Þat er á milli Melrakkasletttu ok Þistilsfjarðar. Þorbjorn var drengr góðr ok rammr maðr at aflí, vínr góðr Porsteins hvita. (D) Maðr er nefndr Þorfinnr. Hann bjó at Skeggjastaðum í Hnefilsdal. Hann átti ok en annat búa, Þorgerðr hét kona hans. Þau áttu þríja sonu, ok hét Þorsteinn sonr þeirra ok var kallaðr fagri, annarr Einarr, þríði Þorkell. Allir váru þeir mannvælingir. Þorsteinn var fyrir þeim bræðrum. Hann var fullkominn at aldri, er hér er komit sögunni. (E) Kraki hét maðr, ok bjó hann á þeim búa, heitir á Krakalek. Kraki var vel auðigr maðr, kvánaðr maðr, ok hét kona hans Guðrún. Þau áttu döttur eina barna, er Helga hét ok var allra kvenna fríðust, ok þótti sé kostr beztr í Fljótsdalsheraði.

(A) Hrani was the name of a man, nicknamed gullhøtttr. He was the foster son of Þorgils and a kinsman of Ásvör. He was a farmhand at Hof. He was a rowdy man, said to be malicious. (B) Þorkell was the name of a man, nicknamed flettir. He too was a farmhand at Hof and was a kinsman of the Hof people, a large man and strong. (C) Þorbjörn was the name of a man. He lived at Sveinungsvik, which lies between Melrakkasletta and Þistilsfjarðr. Þorbjörn was a good fellow, very strong, and a close friend of Þorsteinn hvíti. (D) A man was named Þorfinnr. He lived at Skeggjastaðir at Hnefilsdalr, although he also owned another farm. Þorgerðr was the name of his
wife. They had three sons, one of whom was named Þorsteinn, nicknamed fagri, the second Einarr, and the third Þorkell. They were all promising men. Þorsteinn was the most outstanding of the brothers. He was fully grown at this point in the saga. (E) Kraki was the name of a man, and he lived on that farm called Krakalrekr. Kraki was quite a wealthy man, married to a woman named Guðrún. They had a daughter named Helga who was the most beautiful of women and was considered the best match in the Fljótsdalr district.)

To the untrained eye, this passage is little more than a blurred census list, rather like a random page of Landnámabók. But the practiced audience knows that five distinct lines of the story are being plaited into the saga (above and beyond the three major lines developed in chapters 1 and 2) and held in temporary abeyance until such time as the plot requires their individual participation—in the case of strand D, 5 lines later; strand E, 56 lines later; strand A, 66 lines later; strand C, 138 lines later; and strand B, 181 lines later (or 125 lines before the end of the saga). It is characteristic of such cluster introductions that roughly equivalent space is devoted to major and minor characters. Of Þorsteinn fagri (strand D) it is said only that he was the foremost of three brothers and full grown when the saga took place, and of Þorkell flettir (strand B) that he resided at Hof, was related to that family, and was a large and strong man. The cluster introductions thus form a kind of selvage in which all threads, large and small, are evenly secured, and from which they emanate in parallel lines to form the warp of the story. It is only in the subsequent interweavings that their relative relationships, and the design of the story, become fully clear. Þorsteinn emerges as the hero, but Þorkell flettir turns out to be a marginal character who reappears only once, very briefly, toward the end of the saga.

The treatment of Þorkell flettir illustrates one of the dramatic consequences of stranding as a narrative technique. The sum total of his role in Porsteins saga hvita is his introduction (above) and the following brief account of his contribution to the revenge attack on Þorsteinn's brothers:

19Their relative importance is indicated, rather, in the adjectives used to describe them. See Lars Lönroth, "Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas," Scandinavian Studies, 42 (1970), 164–70.
Then Þorkell flettir offered to go to the back of the building and jump down from the wall in such a way as to land between Þorbjörn and the door and so drag him outside down over the slope. Þorgils told him to go ahead. In this way Þorkell managed to get Þorbjörn out of doors and away from the shed.) [chap. 7]

The advance introduction of characters (and, in longer sagas, their nonconsecutive development over the course of the stranding process) is thus, among other things, a device that enables the narrator to execute a climactic sequence entirely free of explanatory clutter. The burning at Bergþórhváll is a brilliant example: its sustained representation of immediate and unadulterated action and its affective impact despite utter authorial silence are the dramatic fruits of a literary technique. The narrative marshals through the tragic scenes no fewer than thirty-one named men and women, all of whom have been introduced and to some degree fleshed out in advance, and at least twelve of whom are distinct personalities with a particular set of reasons for being in that place at that time. The picture bears little resemblance to the medieval artist's depiction of a crowd as identical people acting in unison. Nor is it one of those literary situations whose tragic dimension must be explained or urged by the narrator. When Flosi arrives at Bergþórhváll in chapter 128, the audience is fully cognizant of the intention and significance of the situation and of the complex causal facts leading up to it; no further explanation is required.

Þorkell flettir constitutes something less than a narrative presence in Þorsteins saga hvita, yet his introduction and suspension in chapter 3 and his retrieval in chapter 7 serve as a rudimentary illustration of the technique of saga stranding. Once introduced, characters can be recalled into the action, as either central or side actors, whenever and as often as the story requires or the narrator wishes. In Njáls saga, the Þorð Valgarðsson thread surfaces and recedes twenty times between chapters 25 and 145. Likewise, Snorri goði appears as a major figure in Eyrbyggja saga some
three dozen times, and as an auxiliary figure in *Laxdæla saga* fifteen times, and in *Njáls saga* six times (his shared presence suggests the cyclic relation of those works). A saga is the sum of such threads, and the narrator’s art lies, above all, in playing out the lines in the most dramatically effective manner.

Although stranding is subject to variation in kind and degree, certain standard patterns obtain, the chief of which are represented in *Porsteins saga hvíta*. Chapters 4–6, for example, contain back-to-back the two narrative situations most amenable to stranded treatment in the sagas (perhaps in literature in general): the parting of ways of major characters and attack sequences. At the point Einarr leaves his ailing partner Þorsteinn in Norway, the story forks and follows both histories in turn until they rejoin: first Einarr’s arrival in Iceland, marriage to Helga, and settlement in Atlavík; then Þorsteinn’s recuperation and return; and finally their convergence at Atlavík. The scene-switching between the two strands before and during the attack sequence is equally typical: focus is first on Þorsteinn (his route and arrival at the door); then on Einarr (still in bed); then on Þorsteinn (his exchange with Ósk); then on Einarr (his exchange with Ósk, his climbing out of bed and dressing, and his emergence from the sleeping room); and finally on both of them as they confront one another and Þorsteinn cuts Einarr down. Such scene-shifting is a common, though by no means an exclusive, property of climactic sequences. It is simply a more rapid, more finely tuned, and hence more obviously artificial version of an ongoing narrative manner. Shifting of focus is predicated on a stranded story; and a stranded story, whether its changes are fast or slow, is in turn predicated on an aesthetic of delay and suspense.

Certain ongoing actions serve as standard points of transition from one strand to another. The illness of Þorsteinn fagrí is a classic example: the narrator leaves an ill or wounded character and returns to him only when he has recuperated sufficiently to rejoin the action. Other stock actions include journeys abroad (e.g., viking expeditions), spending uneventful time at certain places (e.g., winter at a foreign court), or, in the shorter range, protracted conversation, hiding, eating, or drinking (e.g., ban-

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quets), sleeping or resting, and riding from one point to another. Ambush passages follow a predictable pattern: the ambushers come to a halt, dismount, rest, and often eat a meal before proceeding with their attack, at which point the narrative shifts to give an account of the other side. The principle in all cases is that of equilibrium: leaving one side of the story in a state of suspended animation in order to pursue another line of action. Þórhari saga kakala (Sturlunga saga) provides a novel example. Þóðr and Sverthóði elude pursuers by taking cover in a snowdrift. The narrator then turns to the pursuers and spends a full three pages telling not only how they ride past the snowbank in question, but also how they subsequently engage in a battle in a churchyard, beat a dangerous retreat, and drive their horses to exhaustion. Only after this entire sequence of events is summarized and concluded does the narrator retrieve Þóðr and Sverthóði from their chilly lair:

Nú er at segja frá þeim Sverthóða ok Þóði Bjarnarsyni, er þeir lágu í föninni, þar til er flokkr Kolbeins var um fram riðinn.

(Now it is to be told of Sverthóði and Þóðr that they lay in the snowdrift until Kolbeinn's band had ridden past.) [chap. 11]

There is a certain humor, presumably deliberate, in this grim version of the rule of equilibrium.

In chapter 24 of Grettis saga, Grettir flees Norway; in chapter 28 he arrives in Iceland. The intervening chapters are taken up with the Sworn Brothers Interlude, in which Þorgeirr Hávarsson slays a man in a dispute over whale rights and is outlawed. The episode takes place during the year preceding Grettir's return and is not immediately pertinent to his own fortunes. Rather, like its functional counterpart the cluster introduction, it serves to bring into the saga characters who will later have occasion to cross paths with Grettir. The episode marks a new phase of the saga—a long stretch of narrative compositionally distinct from what precedes and follows it in that it embraces five story lines or subplots, each one of which is spliced at least once by parts of the others. Four of these subplots or story lines consist of relationships between Grettir and other men: Þorgeirr Hávarsson (A),
Barði Guðmundarson (B), the cohorts Þorbjörn ferðalangr and Þorbjörn ðxnamegin (C), and Þórir Skeggjason (D). The fifth sub-plot is "no plot at all, but the account of Glámr's curse and Þorsteinn's promise of revenge."21 What is noteworthy is not so much the proliferation per se but the discontinuity in the presentation of these stories, which may be roughly outlined as follows:

A1 Ásmundr's relative Þorgils is slain by Þorgeirr Hávarsson; Ásmundr outlaws Þorgeirr.
B1 Grettir seeks out Auðunn and wrestles with him; Barði Guðmundarson separates them; Grettir promises to aid Barði in his revenge.
C1 Grettir injures an opponent during a horse fight and kills several men in the ensuing skirmish.
B2 Barði Guðmundarson fails to call on Grettir for assistance; Grettir tries to avenge the slight, but is forced to withdraw.
E1 Þórhallr Grimsson's farm is haunted; his shepherd Glámr is killed mysteriously, becomes a revenant, and kills his two successors; Grettir overcomes and kills Glámr; Glámr predicts outlawry, loneliness, and death for Grettir.
C2 Þorbjörn ferðalangr accuses Grettir of cowardice; he extends his scorn to Ásmundr; Grettir kills him.
D1 Grettir sails to Norway. He fetches fire for his shipmates and unwittingly burns down a house together with its inmates. He tries to attest his innocence by ordeal, but is prevented from completing the test. He kills a berserk who challenges his host.
E2 Grettir's brother Þorsteinn vows to avenge him should the need arise.
C3 Þorbjörn ferðalangr's companion Þorbjörn ðxnamegin ambushes Grettir's brother Atli unsuccessfully. The matter is settled at the Thing. Atli harbors one of Þorbjörn's workers and Þorbjörn kills him.
D2 Þórir Skeggjason, whose sons died in the fire set by Grettir, has Grettir outlawed in Iceland.
C4 Grettir kills Þorbjörn ðxnamegin and his son.
A2 Grettir takes refuge with Þorsteinn Kuggason, Snorri goði, and Þorgils Arason. Þorgils harbors Þorgeirr and Þormóðr at the same time and keeps the outlaws in leash.
C5 During the litigation after Þorbjörn ðxnamegin's slaying, Snorri goði and Skapti Þóroddsson try unsuccessfully to lift Grettir's outlawry.

21Ibid., p. 209 (from which also the plot outline is adapted).
This sequence is not, of course, a haphazard concatenation of events. The episodes all devolve either directly or indirectly on Grettir and serve to illustrate his progressive victimization. Yet the pattern of their occurrence strikes an artificial note, particularly when compared with the rather more straightforward procedure elsewhere in the saga. One has the impression that in this section the author’s taste for the baroque has been given free rein. Certainly the following short passage from chapter 42 constitutes a gratuitous complication:

(Now to pick up a line of the story that was set aside earlier, in which Órðbjörn Óxnamegin learned of the slaying of Órðbjörn Ferðalangs, as was told before; he reacted very angrily and said he hoped there would be a retaliation from more than one quarter.) [chap. 42]

But what follows is not a settling of the score, or indeed about Órðbjörn Óxnamegin at all. Instead, the narrator turns abruptly to another side of the story, telling how Ósmundr grows ill, dies, and is buried, and how Atli assumes the family property and thereafter undertakes a journey to Snæfellsnes to buy dried fish. Only then does the story return to Órðbjörn. The above notice is therefore isolated, presumably deliberately, from both of its natural contexts: the past event it recalls (the slaying of Órðbjörn Ferðalangr) five chapters earlier and the revenge it anticipates one chapter later. It is in such lonely stitches that we glimpse most clearly the mechanics of interlace.\(^{22}\)

The pattern here is not unlike that of the Atlantic Interlude of Njáls saga. Here, too, the author develops five stories, each one comprising a recognizable and temporally complete subplot and all covering the same period of time (see chart on p. 30 above). The stories are played out in the following order:

\(^{22}\)Heusler, countering the \( catapult \) theory ("Die Anfänge," p. 452), argued that Grettis saga was constructed not on the pattern \( a + b + c \) but rather the pattern \( G + a + G + b + G + c \). Either pattern indicates open composition and a sort of interlace form.
A1 Þráinn leaves.
B1 Grímr and Helgi leave.
C1 Gunnarr decides to stay.
D1 Kolskeggr leaves.
C2 Gunnarr spends an uneventful winter and declines a spring invitation from Óláfr pá. The plans for the attack on Hliðarendi are laid at the Althing in the summer and carried out that autumn. Gunnarr’s revenant puts in an appearance. Skarpheðinn and Þógnir slay Tjórví in revenge for Gunnarr’s death. Njáll negotiates a settlement.
D2 Kolskeggr goes to Norway and spends the winter there. The following summer he goes to Denmark, where he is baptized in consequence of a dream vision. He moves on to Russia and from there to Constantinople, where he becomes a leader in the Varangian guard.
A2 Þráinn arrives in Norway and winters with Hákon. He kills Kolr. He accompanies the earl to Sweden, spends the following winter with him, hears of Gunnarr’s death in the spring, and delays his return to Iceland on that account.
B2 Grímr and Helgi are caught in a storm at sea. They fight with vikings and engage in a battle in Scotland. They stay the winter, spring, and part of the summer in the Orkneys. They go raiding with Kári the following summer. They spend a second winter in the Orkneys and leave for Norway in the spring.
E1 Kolbeinn, having arrived in Iceland, stays the winter in Breiðdalr. He takes Hrappr to Norway the following summer. Hrappr is outlawed after the Guðrún episode.
B5 Grímr and Helgi flee Norway with Hákon in pursuit. They stay with Eiríkr, sail to the Orkneys, winter with Sigurðr, go raiding in the spring, and return with Kári in the summer.

The narrative bulk of Gunnarr’s and Kolskeggr’s stories is, within the framework of the Atlantic Interlude, for the most part straightforwardly told (in C2 and D2). But the other three stories are broken apart and interbraided in such a way as to bring out certain contrivances of destiny—the three-plot convergence in Norway in the summer of the second year, for example, or the
synchronic idea that while Gunnarr is being attacked in his home, Hrappr is in Norway involved in a liaison with Guðrún, Þráinn is in Sweden, Kolskeggr is in Russia, and Grímrr and Helgi are raiding off the Orkney coast. This preoccupation is particularly apparent in two brief stitches (B^3 and A^3) inserted in the middle of Hrappr's story (E^1 and E^2):

Nu er þat at segja, at um sumarit fóru Njalssynir af Orkneyjum til Nóregs ok váru þar í kaupstefnu um sumarit. Þráinn Sigfússon bjó þá skip sitt til Íslands ok var þá mjöck albúinn. Þá fór Hákon jarl á veizlu til Guðbrands. Um nöttina fór Viga-Hrappr til goðahúss þeira jarls ok Guðbrands ok gekk inn í húsit.

(Now it is to be told that in the summer the Njalssons left the Orkneys for Norway, where they spent the summer trading. Þráinn Sigfússon was preparing his ship for a voyage to Iceland at the time and was almost ready to sail. Earl Hákon, meanwhile, was attending a feast at Guðbrandr's estate. During the night, Viga-Hrappr came to the earl's and Guðbrandr's temple and went inside.) [chap. 88]

Neither notice is necessary because the information in both cases is given elsewhere (the Njalssons' presence in Norway was mentioned in B^2, and Þráinn's imminent departure is mentioned in A^3); they form, moreover, a patent interruption in the otherwise integral story of Hrappr. The idea, of course, is to put into the mind of the audience a picture of three actions about to intersect: Hrappr, fleeing the earl's men, will make for the harbor, where he will encounter the Njalssons and Þráinn in the process of pulling up their gangplanks.

From the point of view of a medieval author bent on amplifying the story, the advantages of such plot braiding are obvious. New material is not embedded abruptly in an existing text, but is spliced into it, the ending strands of one part being woven together with the beginning strands of another part in such a way as to make the transition between the two imperceptible. The Atlantic Interlude is the largest example of the process, serving to suture two entire sagas. But the same knitting patterns are evident on a smaller scale throughout the corpus. The Únnr and Hrútr prelude is not freestanding, for example, but is spliced firmly together with Hallgerðr's story, which in turn merges with Gunnarr's story. Broken down by chapter, the passage works as follows:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unnr/Hrótr prelude</th>
<th>Gunnarr's saga</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 1a Hrótr is introduced.</td>
<td>Chap. 1b Hóskuldr and Hrótr discuss Hallgerðr's &quot;thief's eyes.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 2 He is betrothed to Unnr.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 3 He goes to Norway and becomes involved with Gunnhildr.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 4 He leaves Norway in quest of his inheritance.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 5 He vanquishes Vikings, and with Gunnhildr's intervention he retrieves his inheritance.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 6 He returns to Iceland and marries Unnr, who becomes unhappy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 7 Unnr, on Mótr's advice, divorces Hrótr.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 8 Hrótr sustains the divorce and retains the dowry.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 9 Hallgerðr is betrothed to Þórvaldr against her wishes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 10 They marry.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 11 They set up household. Hallgerðr taunts Þórvaldr; he slaps her and is killed by Þjóstólfr.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 12 Hallgerðr dissolves the household, and Hóskuldr brings about a settlement.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 13 Again against her wishes, Hallgerðr is betrothed a second time (to Glúmfr).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chap. 14 They marry and have a daughter.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chap. 15 They invite Þjóstólfr to live with them.
Chap. 16 Glúmr and Þjóstólfr quarrel.
Chap. 17 Þjóstólfr kills Glúmr. Hóskuldr and Hrútr bring about a settlement.

Chap. 18 Móðr gígja dies, and Unnr runs out of money.
Chap. 19 Gunnarr is introduced.
Chap. 20 Njáll is introduced.
Chap. 21 Unnr seeks Gunnarr's advice in recovering her dowry.

That the author has employed intertwining not solely as a splicing device but as literary effect is clear from three of the stitches: chapters 1a, 1b, and 18. The three-sentence introduction of Unnr with its comment on her nubile state belongs logically to chapter 2, where she is betrothed to Hrútr. The scene in which Hallgerðr's thievish eyes are discussed (chapter 1b) belongs logically to the fuller description of her person and the story of her marriages in chapters 9–17. And in exactly the same way, the three-sentence notice of Möðr's death and Unnr's subsequent financial plight (chapter 18) belongs logically to the duplicate information (and her actual effort to retrieve her dowry) in chapter 18 and following. Because these extra stitches could easily be eliminated, they must be deliberate. As it is, they serve as yet further witness to the baroque propensities of the Njála author. From the point of view of the listening audience, beginning the saga with two dangling prefixes, made all the more emphatic by the transitional phrase at their conclusion ("Now the saga turns west to Breiðafjarðardalir"), must have seemed a flamboyant touch indeed. Even Finnur Jónsson acknowledged the artificiality of the procedure: "As Njála now begins, no original saga ever began."23

A more elaborate and sustained use of stranding is found in Eyrbyggja saga, whose structural peculiarities have long puzzled

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critics. It is, among other things, a saga without a main character. If Snorri goði emerges as such, he does so only by dint of ubiquity, not because his biography has been developed in any normal sense. His history is spotty at best (his last eighteen years being a "perfect blank"\(^{24}\)), and he is not treated to the usual sympathetic perspective. Moreover, the saga lacks entirely the usual organization of the matter around a climax. Its "exceedingly multifarious"\(^{25}\) structure has the appearance of a compilation of several loosely related episodes, each of which might be, "if properly expanded, enough to constitute in itself a saga."\(^{26}\) But the incidents are not made into sagas, nor are they rendered as þættir set end to end, nor are they even ordered consecutively within the longer narrative. Instead they are subdivided into parts and interspersed in the larger story. The artificiality of the exercise was noted by Hollander: "As a rule, the Family Sagas follow a linear construction of one thing after, or leading to, another; with no important or extensive matter intervening between cause and effect, and events chronologically following one another. Not so Eyrbyggja."\(^{27}\) Hollander's picture of a "normal" saga may not bear close scrutiny, but his perception of Eyrbyggja as exceptionally puzzled in its composition is well taken. He distinguishes in chapters 15–55 seven major story lines (and a number of minor ones, which he discounts) interwoven in the order: A\(^1\) B\(^1\) A\(^2\) B\(^2\) C\(^1\) B\(^3\) D\(^1\) C\(^2\) D\(^2\) B\(^4\) E\(^1\) F\(^1\) G\(^1\) E\(^2\) G\(^2\) E\(^3\) G\(^3\) E\(^4\) F\(^2\) E\(^5\). He concludes that the "interbraiding, like the intercalation of sentences in Skaldic poetry, is hardly fortuitous; rather, it shows conscious planning on the part of an author who has in mind an audience that is constantly on the qui vive and able to follow this method of presentation. He does not merely string along the traditions of his countryside artlessly—popular tradition does just that—but arranges them to suit his purpose"—that purpose being the creation of suspension "similar to the premonitions and predictions which are so frequently used in the sagas."\(^{28}\) Andersson agrees that the


\(^{26}\) Andersson, Icelandic Family Saga, p. 161.

\(^{27}\) Hollander, "Structure of Eyrbyggja saga," p. 223.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 227. Hollander's approach to Eyrbyggja has been expanded somewhat by Jean-Pierre Mabire, La composition de la Eyrbyggja Saga, Publication du Centre de Recherches sur les Pays Nordiques de l'Université de Caen (Caen,
organization of *Eyrbyggja saga* seems contrived, but offers a somewhat different explanation: "What is puzzling in the saga is the involution of conflicts. The Vigfuss, Styrr, Bjorn Breidvikingakappi, and Torbrandssynir strands are picked up and dropped, sometimes twice, before finally being unraveled. This interweaving of plots is not normal saga procedure and there is no apparent reason for it. It could in fact be easily eliminated: If the Styrr ... and Bjorn Breidvikingakappi ... plots were gathered together, the narrative would be straightened and a normal order restored. Perhaps the author has chronological sources that called for the interspersing of these episodes." But the interweaving in *Eyrbyggja saga* is not abnormal, it is merely more elaborate. It is also a more exposed example because it is not absorbed in a larger climax structure: the interweaving cannot be construed as the intricate working out of a climactic prehistory, but is a contrived effect, complete in itself.

A similar pattern is found in *Heidarviga saga* (chaps. 15–26), although here it is not the characters’ actions or the story lines, but the typical preparatory moves involved in climactic staging, that are artificially broken up and interlaced together. The climax in this case is the slaying of Gisli Þorgautsson in chapter 27. The preceding twelve chapters are, in usual fashion, given over to "reconnaissance, arming, strategic planning, enlisting of allies, harangues in the form of taunts, and provisioning." But each move is divided into two or three substeps and reported nonconsecutively. For example, provisions are stocked in chapter 19 but not collected until chapter 23; allies are enlisted in chapter 17 and assembled in chapter 21; intelligence is prepared in chapter 15, gathered secondhand through agents in chapter 20, and finally

1971), esp. pp. 45–57. Mabire objects to Hollander’s purely “aesthetic” analysis: “But there is yet another reason why the author has interlaced different actions. In fact—and this Lee M. Hollander has not made clear—our author has chosen the most natural way in the world for setting out the events—that is, he presents them to us in the chronological order of their occurrence. But this method of presentation created a serious problem for him when he had to deal with two simultaneous events; in such cases, he resorted to an order of his own personal choice” (pp. 55–56). A perceptive discussion of narrative chronology can be found in W. P. Ker’s comparison of the Icelandic sagas and Joinville’s *Histoire de Saint Louis* in *Epic and Romance*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan 1908; rpt. New York: Dover, 1957), pp. 269–74.


30Ibid., p. 150.
assembled by the principals in chapter 25. Two matching taunts are placed at a remove from one another (Þórðr melrakki’s in chapter 18 and Þuríðr’s in chapter 22), and a good omen in chapter 23 is posed against bad omens in chapter 26. The passage may be outlined as follows: A1 B1 C1 D1 E1 F1 A2 D2 E2 F2 G1 B2 A3 G2. Here it is not merely a question of continuing an action, but of intensifying it (or duplicating it, as with the taunts) for dramatic effect. Björn M. Ólsen saw the pattern of suspension and delay in Heiðarvígja saga as a kind of aflist, or hyper-art.31

In Hrafnkels saga, Sigurður Nordal suggested, the author’s “method of dealing with single or double-stranded narrative when two stories are being unfolded simultaneously but neither can be carried through immediately to its proper conclusion” is also used as a device for revealing the psychology of the characters and hence the intention of the author: “After Einarr releases Freyfaxi and sees him rush off down the dale, he tries unsuccessfully to catch him. At that moment Einarr must have known that his own death was near. But we are not told his fears or whether he thinks of escape. The saga follows the horse. Einarr is not mentioned again until Hrafnkell meets him as he lies idly on the wall of the sheepfold counting his sheep. He has not attempted to flee from danger any more than he thinks to avoid telling the truth. This is very effective and makes his slaying appear all the more deplorable.” Likewise the account of Hrafnkell’s ride to the Althing: “We follow him south to Síða. He arrives at the Assembly after Sámr, is informed of Sámr’s arrival and thinks it amusing. After this we learn nothing of his behaviour until Sámr brings the case against him before the court. ’Men rushed to Hrafnkell’s booth and told him what was about to happen.’ This silence shows best what Hrafnkell thinks of Sámr’s antics, and how he discounts them; at the same time it explains how his careless contempt allowed his own affairs to drift beyond any apparent point of recovery.”32 The idea that structure indicates intention may be extended to the saga as a whole. Hrafnkatla is not multi-stranded, but strictly two-stranded; and with few exceptions (such as the Einarr/Freyfaxi episode noted by Nordal) the two strands

31Björn M. Ólsen, “Um Íslendingasögur,” Safn til sögu Islands, 6 (1937–39), 208.
32Nordal, Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, pp. 35–36.
consist of Hrafnkell’s actions and those of his opponents. The latter strand (Einarr, Sámr, Bjarni, Þorbjörn, Þorkell, Þorgeirr) changes composition during the course of the saga, but its function as the opposing force remains constant. If Hrafnkatla is elusive, that is because of its archaic social morality, not its structure. Next to the “Gothic wildness and multiplicity of motives”33 of, for example, Njála and Eyrbyggja, Hrafnkels saga has, in its simple structural dualism, something of the character of a Christian exercise.

Although its component parts have been studied, some in considerable detail, Flateyjarbók has seldom been treated as a whole work, still less a work related compositionally to classical saga narrative. In fact, the processes of compilation in Flateyjarbók duplicate, on a much larger scale, the processes of stranding in classical saga narrative—making them more clearly visible in the process. In Flateyjarbók, “strands” emerge as such by virtue of their size, their detachability (their presence in other manuscript contexts indicates their semi-independent status), their marginal relation to the “main plot” (the compilers were for the most part casual about supplying logical connections, with the result that the digressive nature of the subplots is clear), and, of course, their status in the manuscript itself (they are often marked off with capital letters or rubrics). If we follow the Vigfússon-Unger edition, we get a gross reading of forty-eight component threads that, in addition to matter from the royal biographies proper, make up the sagas of the two Óláfrs. If to these are added an indeterminate number of substrands (the longer þættir are themselves stranded), we begin to get an idea of the scope of the project.

The insertion of integral narrative units (for example, þættir) is, of course, common practice in the sagas and standard procedure in Flateyjarbók. Less common—or less obviously common—is the incorporation in discontinuous segments of episodes, þættir, or entire sagas that are known or may be assumed to have existed elsewhere in continuous if not independent form. Hálfréðar saga, for example, is preserved as a unit in Móðruvallabók but, in Flateyjarbók, is divided into eight parts and inserted piecemeal into the biography of Óláfr Tryggvason (the Longest Saga).

Hence the very story whose first existence was in the form of a side strand in the Óláf bioggraphy achieved, at some point in the thirteenth century, independent status—only to be reabsorbed as a discontinuous strand, itself stranded, in the Longest Saga. Similarly intercalated in the Longest Saga are the ongoing accounts of Kjartan Óláfsson (five segments), the Jómsvikings (two segments), Stefnir Þorgilsson (three segments), and the Vinland voyages (two segments). Into the adjacent Óláf saga helga have been interlaced Fóstbræðra saga (five segments) and Ásbjarnar þátrr selsbana (two segments). Distributed over both royal biographies are the sagas of the Faeroes (five segments) and the Orkneys (four segments). The scope and pattern of this procedure can be seen in the following list of the digressions, in order of their occurrence, in both sagas (interstitial passages of royal biography proper are excluded):34

| A1 | Jómsvikinga saga |
| B1 | Otto þátrr keisara |
| C1 | Færeyinga saga |
| A2 | Jómsvikinga saga (continued) |
| D1 | Þorleifs þátrr jarlaskálds |
| E1 | Orkneyinga saga |
| F1 | Albani þátrr ok Sunnifu |
| G1 | The Icelandic settlement |
| H1 | Þorsteins þátrr uxafóts |
| G2 | The Icelandic settlement (continued) |
| I1 | Sprla þátrr |
| J1 | Stefnis þátrr Þorgilssonar |
| K1 | Røgnvalds þátrr ok Rauðs |
| L1 | Hallfreðar þátrr vandráðaaskálds |
| M1 | Kjartans þátrr Óláfssonar |
| L2 | Hallfreðar þátrr vandráðaaskálds (continued) |
| L3 | Hallfreðar þátrr vandráðaaskálds (continued) |
| M2 | Kjartans þátrr Óláfssonar (continued) |
| M3 | Kjartans þátrr Óláfssonar (continued) |
| L4 | Hallfreðar þátrr vandráðaaskálds (continued) |
| N1 | Ógmundar þátrr dyttis |
| M4 | Kjartans þátrr Óláfssonar (continued) |
| M5 | Kjartans þátrr Óláfssonar (continued) |

34The list is adapted from the table of contents in the Vigfússon/Unger edition.
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L5 Hallfreðar þáttr vandréðaskálíðs (continued)
O1 Nornagests þáttr
P1 Helga þáttr Þórissonar
J2 Stefnis þáttr Þorgilssonar (continued)
C2 Færeyinga saga (continued)
Q1 Þórvalls þáttr tasaða
R1 Sveins þáttr ok Finns
S1 Rauðs þáttr ins ramma
T1 Hrömundar þáttr halta
U1 Þósteins þáttr skelks
V1 Þóðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls
W1 Kristni þáttr
X1 Eiríks þáttr rauða
X2 Eiríks þáttr rauða (continued)
Y1 Vinlands saga
Z1 Svaða þáttr ok Arnórs kerlingarnefís
W2 Kristni þáttr (continued)
L6 Hallfreðar þáttr vandréðaskálíðs (continued)
a1 Eindriða þáttr ilbreiðs
L7 Hallfreðar þáttr vandréðaskálíðs (continued)
J3 Stefnis þáttr Þorgilssonar (continued)
b1 Halldórs þáttr Snorrasónar
C1 Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar
L8 Hallfreðar þáttr vandréðaskálíðs (continued)
Y2 Vinlands saga (continued)
C3 Færeyinga saga (continued)
E2 Orkneyinga saga (continued)
d1 Hálfdanar þáttr svarta
e1 Haralds þáttr hárfagra
f1 Hauks þáttr hábrókar

Óláfs saga helga (Flateyjarbók)

g1 Haralds þáttr grenska
h1 Óláfs þáttr Geirstaðaálfs
i1 Styrbjarnar þáttr Sviakappa
j1 Hróa þáttr heimska
k1 Fóstbræðra saga
l1 Eymundar þáttr Hringssonar
m1 Tóka þáttr
n1 Ísleifs þáttr byskups
k2 Fóstbræðra saga (continued)
o1 Eymundar þáttr af Skórum
If the intertwining appears in some cases to have been introduced in the interest of a proper chronology (temporally, it is more natural to thread the biography of Hallfréðr onto the biography of Óláfr at intervals than it would be to embed it as a single unit), it seems in other cases to be gratuitous. The short (about eleven pages) Ásbjarnar þátttr selsbana, for example (q₁ and q₂ in the list), is dramatically interrupted when the narrator reverts to the main topic and tells something of Óláfr’s conversion activities in Norway (chap. 176) and the birth of Magnús inn góði (chap. 177). Only then is the digression resumed, as it were, and Ásbjörn’s story concluded (chap. 178). The interruption has no chronological justification and could just as easily have been delayed a page. But its interposition serves to remind us that the compiler, like the classical saga narrator, put a premium on suspense through interruption.

Flateyjarbók is thus an object lesson in the workings of baroque exposition and in the role of narrative stranding in the expansion of the form. The conception of the narration as a complex moving tapestry allows for almost infinite amplification by a simple process of weaving tangential themes onto the edges of the main theme, and yet other themes onto the tangential themes, all by the logic of entailment. The compiler, it will be recalled (see p. 36 above), offered (or retained) as a defense for narrative multifariousness an analogy with nature: “Just as running water
flows from various sources yet all comes together in a single place, so, in like wise, do all these stories from various sources have a common goal.” The dynamic image of a network of streams joining to form a swelling mainstream is particularly appropriate not only to the encyclopedic compilation, but to saga composition in general. *Flateyjarbók* is often regarded as a mechanical exercise, a thing apart from classical saga, but it is better seen as a more extreme rendition, the logical end point, of a literary technique that is evident, in lesser and varying degrees, over the generic range.35

*The Language of Stranding*

The question arises how the sagas can maintain such an elaborate and artificial structure and at the same time appear so narratively naive. How does it happen that a compositional form that would seem by definition to be predicated on extensive authorial intervention enjoys an almost universal reputation as the most extreme example in Western tradition of figural narration? The incompatibility is striking and invites a reconsideration of the doctrine of nonintrusion. The obvious starting point is the narrative mechanics of the saga at those junctures where authorial directions would seem to be required—at those moments, that is, when strands are initiated, suspended, retrieved, and terminated, and where the author might reasonably be expected to offer narrative guidance.

In many cases, particularly in shorter sagas or when the narrative interval in question (the narrated time between suspension and retrieval of a strand) is short, these transitions are accomplished silently or by means of such neutral and functionally ambiguous phrases as “svá er frá sagt (thus is it said of)” or “nú er frá því at segja (now to tell of this).” Elsewhere they are effected by means of phrases that are specific to the technique—phrases that recur as functional elements in similar contexts. These phrases make up what might be called the language of stranding.

Examples of phrases used to introduce a strand for the first time include:

Examples of phrases indicating a temporary suspension of a strand include:

\[
\text{sem enn mun sagt verða síðar (of which more will be told later)} \\
\text{sem enn mun heyra mega síðar í sögunni (of which one will be able to hear more later in the saga)} \\
\text{er síðar var getit (as will be [lit. "has been"] brought up later)} \\
\text{munu vér hér fyrrst hverfa frá (let us now turn away [from this matter] for a while)} \\
\text{koma þeir allir við þessa sögu síðan (they all appear in this saga later)} \\
\text{hverfum hér frá at sinni (we turn away [from this episode] for the time being)} \\
\text{nú verðar þar at hvílas (there [this action] will rest for now)}
\]

The retrieval of a suspended strand is a more complex negotiation, requiring an act of memory, sometimes a major one, on the part of the audience. Retrieval phrases are especially conspicuous in the sagas, not least because they are often syntactically overloaded with "recall" information—recapitulation of an earlier action and renaming of character, time, and place.

\[
\text{Nú er at segja frá Snorra goða, at hann fór til féránsdóms í Bitru norðr, sem fyrir var ritat (Now it is to be told of Snorri goði that he went to the court of confiscation north in Bitra, as was written before)} \\
\text{Nú er þar til at taka, er áðr var frá horfit, at laugardaginn eptir reið Vermundr (Now [the story] takes up at that point, where it left off before, when Vermundr rode, on the following Saturday)} \\
\text{Þórir, sonr Ketills flatnefrs, er fyrir var frá sagt, at vá Áskel goða (Þórir, son of Ketill flatnefr, of whom it was said before that he killed Áskell goði)} \\
\text{Nú er at segja frá sýslu Þórðar, hversu honum endisk (Now it is to be told of Þórðr's activity, and how it turns out for him)} \\
\text{Nú er þar til máls at taka er þeir skilðu með vináttu, sem fyrir er ritat}
\]
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(Now it is time to take up the story where they parted on friendly terms, as was written before)

Sometimes the suspension of one strand and the retrieval of another are negotiated in single or adjacent phrases:

Nú verður þar frá á hverfa um stund, en taka til út á Íslandi ok heyra, hvat þar gerisk til tíðenda, meðan Þorkell er útan. (Now we must leave [this matter] for a while and take [the story] up again out in Iceland, to hear what was happening there while Þorkell was abroad.)

Hermundr hét sonr hans Eyvindr ok Hrómundr inn halti, er síðar verður getit. Látum þar nú fyrst líða um, en segjum nokkut frá Hrolleifi. (Hermundr was the name of Eyvindr's son, and also Hrómundr inn halti, who will be mentioned later. Let us pass over this for the time being and say something of Hrolleifr.)

Nú munum vör fyrst láta dveljask söguna af hríð ok segja heldr nokkvat frá þeim jartegnum háleitum. (Now we will let the saga [proper] rest for a while, and instead say something of those glorious miracles.)

Nú munum vör hvilask láta fyrst frá segjum Þormóðar Kolbrúnarskálds ok segja nokkut af Þorgeiri. Nú er at segja frá Þorgeiri. (Now we shall let the account of Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskald rest for a while and relate something of Þorgeirr. Now to tell of Þorgeirr.)

Terminating formulas include:

lykr þar frá Geirmundi at segja (and there [the story] stops telling of Geirmundr)
er hann ór sögunni (he is out of the saga)
kemr hann ekki síðan við þessa sögu (he does not appear again in this saga)

The first point to be made about the language of stranding is that it is itself, or is immediately linked with, the most formulaic language of the sagas. Directly implicated are the narrator formulas ("Nú er þar til máls at taka [Now the story takes up at the point]," "Nú er at segja frá [Now it is to be told of]," and the like), which appear abundantly in connection with strand-shifting, particularly the resumption of suspended strands. Not all such junctures are marked by narrator formulas (the transition may also be accomplished silently or by means of such "neutral"
phrases as "svá er sagt (so it is said [that])," but the large majority of narrator formulas appear—at least in classical saga narrative—most predictably and most conspicuously at retrieval points. The mnemonic function of these phrases is confirmed by the fact that their absence, presence, and form are to a large extent determined by the length of elapsed time in question: the longer the interval, the more likely there is to be a narrator formula (or formulas), the more elaborate it is likely to be, and the more narrative information it is likely to embrace. An example of a syntactically overloaded instruction is the one mentioned earlier from Grettis saga: "Þar er nú til taka, er áðr var frá horfít, at Þorbjörn Óxnamegin spúrði víg Þorbjarnar ferðalangs, sem fyrr var sagt" (Now to pick up a line of the story that was set aside earlier, in which Þorbjörn Óxnamegin learned of the slaying of Þorbjörn ferðalangs, as was told before)—chap. 42. The line of the story being retrieved was set aside some ten pages earlier (roughly half an hour in oral performance).

The functional interrelation of narrator formulas and stranded composition is nowhere more neatly demonstrated than in the two versions of Hallfreðar saga, one in Mðruvallabók (M) and the other in the Longest Saga (O). Derived from a common original, the M version is integral and the O version subdivided into eight parts and stranded at intervals into its host narrative. An examination of the sixteen narrative seams of the latter, and a comparison of their wording with that of the corresponding passages in the integral version, reveal the compiler’s method:

\[M\]: Um várit sagði hann konungi, at hann lysti at sjá Ísland.

\[O\]: Ítlu síðar vm varit en Ólafr konungr hafði sent Leif Eiriks son til Grœnlandz gekk Hallfreðr vandrœða skalld fyrr konung einn dag ok bað ser orlofs at fara vt til Íslandz vm sumarit.

(M): In the spring he told the king that he wished to see Iceland. [chap. 9]

(O): A little later in the same spring that King Óláfr had sent Leif Eiriksson to Greenland, Hallfreðr went to the king one day and asked permission to journey to Iceland in the summer.) [chap. 232]

\[M\]: Þat sumar för Hallfreðr til Svþpjóðar ok kom á fund konungs ok kvaddi hann.
O: N<V> er þar til at taka er Hallfreyðr uandræða skalld var austr aa Gautlandi. Þ. uetr. ok hafði gengit at eiga heiðna kono. hann for aa fund Olaf’s Suía konungs ok flutti honum drapu er hann hafði ort um hann.

(M): That summer Hallfreðr went to Sweden and went before the king and greeted him. [chap. 9]

O: Now [the story] takes up [at the point when] Hallfreðr had been east in Gautland for two years and had married a heathen woman. He went before Óláfr Sviakonungr and declaimed a drápa he had composed about him.) [chap. 219]

(M): Ok um várit, er hann fóru norðr, þá rak á fyrr þeim hrið.

O: N<V> skal þar til taka þar sem fyrr var frá horfitt at Hallfreyðr vandræða skalld sigldi ut til Islandz vm svmarit aðr en barðagin varð aa Ornínunum. kom Hallfreðr ut fyrr norðan land ok reiðuðu vm heiði sem aðr er sagt.

(M): And in the spring, when he went north, a storm broke over them. [chap. 10]

O: Now [we] shall take up where [we] left off before, when Hallfreðr sailed out to Iceland in the summer before the battle on the [ship] Ormr. Hallfreðr landed in the northern part of the country and rode south across the heath, as was told before.) [chap. 264]

Stranding generates formulas; and formulas, together with the summaries they accompany, explain the relation of the narrative parts.

The language of stranding, then, amounts to a set of narrative directions—formulas in which the narrator addresses the audience on the mechanics of composition. These instructions are authorial intrusions, even though their brevity, impersonality, and formulaic quality have tended to impede their identification as such. The phrase “‘Nú munum vёр hvílask láta fyrst frásögn Þormóðar Kolbrúnarskálds ok segja nökktu af Þorgeiri (Now we shall let the account of Þormóð Kolbrúnarskáld rest and relate something of Þorgeirr)” is an exact functional counterpart of “Now lat hire slepe, and we oure tales holde / Of Troilus, that is to paleis riden / Fro the scarmuch of the which I tolde” (Troilus and Criseyde, Book 2, vv. 932-34). But where Chaucer puts himself in the foreground and indulges the convention, the classical saga
narrators normally remain in the background, with the result that their intrusions are not always obvious as such. The studied avoidance of first-person constructions appears, significantly, to be a late development in Norse prose—a point to be taken up in some detail in chapter 4.

**Material Art and Skaldic Poetry**

The idea that viking art and skaldic poetry are manifestations of the same underlying sensibility is a commonplace of Scandinavian literary criticism. Axel Olrik drew the general comparison, but it remained for Andreas Heusler to probe the analogy (despite his hesitations about a "'germanisches Stilgefühl'"). The classic statement is that of Hallvard Lie, who (well in advance of Vinaver and Leyerle) related the origin of *drottkvætt* centrally to the "abstract, unorganic sense of form" of such material artifacts as the Oseberg carvings. In his "'Natur' og 'Unatur' in skalden kunsten" he writes:

The characteristic syntax of the skalds is a form of literary interlace, and as such is closely associated with contemporary ornamental art. Recitation required a suppleness of voice, a method of shading and coloring the sounds, in order to bring out the logical line in the verbal braiding; a suppleness essentially like that on which the clear comprehension and enjoyment of ornamental art in the visual field is predicated; a suppleness, indeed, fundamental to the ancient conception of art as virtuoso performance.

The sagas have not been subjected to such a comparison, but rather have been regarded as a thing apart: straightforward, natural, lucid, "classical" rather than baroque in impulse—the polar opposite of skaldic verse. In light of this general view,

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39Lie, "'Natur' og 'unatur'," p. 28.
40See, for example, Dietrich Hofmann, "Vers und Prosa in der mündlich gepflegten mittelalterlichen Erzählkunst der germanischen Länder," *Frühmit-
Hollander's brief analogy between the interbraided structure of *Eyrbyggja saga* and the contrived syntax of skaldic poetry stands out as all the more exceptional. Hollander perceived that style is one thing and composition another—an elementary distinction, but one that has proved curiously elusive in saga studies. The prose of the saga may be plain and natural, reflecting the patterns of an oral telling style; but the organization of the story is patently unnatural, closer in spirit to the sinuous patterns of skaldic diction, and in turn to the material art of early Scandinavia, than has generally been appreciated. The interlace aesthetic appears in fact to have been more tenacious in the verbal arts than in the visual ones, for viking ornament declined radically during the eleventh century, at least in its elite manifestations,41 whereas its literary counterparts survived and even flourished well into the thirteenth. But to conclude, as Lie does, that skaldic poetry is "without doubt the most conservative artistic development in Europe's history"42 is to ignore the prevalence of interlace forms in medieval art throughout Europe (notably in Romanesque ornamentation) and the corresponding development of labyrinthine structures in imaginative vernacular literature. It is less useful to regard viking art and skaldic poetry as retrograde and special developments than to see them as anticipatory ones—early northern expressions of what neoclassical detractors as well as modern scholars consider to be a characteristically medieval habit of mind. If saga composition is not the immediate inheritor of the northern patterns, it participates in the larger phenomenon.

**The European Context**

The principle of interlace was first articulated by Ferdinand Lot with reference to the *Prose Lancelot*.43 He observed that the

43Ferdinand Lot, *Etude sur le Lancelot en prose* (Paris: Champion, 1918), esp. the chapter "Le principe de l'entrelacement."
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narrative was built up discontinuously in such a way that each episode appeared to be a digression from the previous one and a sequel to some earlier unfinished story: "The Lancelot is not a mosaic from which one can deftly remove the tiles in order to replace them with others, but a weaving or a tapestry; if one tries to make a cut in it, the whole thing unravels."44 C. S. Lewis, working independently of Lot, came to the same conclusion about Spenser's poetry; he termed the structure "polyphonic" and saw it as a "quintessentially medieval characteristic."45 He linked it with the impulse at work in much medieval architecture and decoration. "We may call it the love of the labyrinthine," he wrote, "the tendency to offer to the mind or the eye something that cannot be taken in at a glance, something that at first looks planless though all is planned. Everything leads to everything else, but by very intricate paths."46

It remained for Eugène Vinaver to examine the aesthetics of interlace narrative, to suggest its origin and trace its evolution. Vinaver related verbal interlace to the patterns of "multiplication and recurrence" in Romanesque churches and illuminated manuscripts from the ninth through the eleventh centuries, and he ascribed both the visual and the literary forms to a common "fascination of tracing a theme through all its phases, of waiting for its return while following other themes, of experiencing the constant sense of their simultaneous presence."47 Interlace narrative thus arose as a technical solution to the idea of simultaneous action: "The next and possibly the decisive step towards a proper understanding of cyclic romance," he wrote, "is the realization that since it is always possible, and often even necessary, for several themes to be pursued simultaneously, they have to alternate like threads in a woven fabric, one theme interrupting another and

44Ibid., p. 28.
The idea of literature as word-weaving is an old one. It should be recalled that "text" and "textile" have a common etymon, textus, the past participle of texere, "to weave" (to which ON þátr is also related). Jordanes, for example, concludes a digression by saying:

quod [recte: quo?] nos interim praetermisso sic ut promisimus omnem Gothorum texamus originem.

(Setting this aside, let us now weave the whole story of the origin of the Goths, as we promised.) [Getica, XLVII]

Aldhelm and Alcuin use such phrases as "fingere serta" and "textere serta" ("to fashion or weave intertwinings") to refer to their own poetry. Old English poetry has the phrases "wordum wrixlan (to vary with words)" (as the scop's art is characterized in Beowulf, v. 874) and "ic . . . wordcraeftum weaf (I wove word-art)" (Cynewulf, of his Elene). A consonant image in Norse is evoked by the literary use of such words as "snúa," "snúna," and "snara" ("to twist, turn"). Even the standard phrase "setja saman" (literally "to set together") connotes composition as a process not only of linear creation but as the articulation of component parts. A crucial word, of course, is þátr, which has the etymological meaning of "strand in a rope" and is used pervasively in connection with parts of a longer narrative, though precisely in what sense is unclear.

If an earlier generation of scholars saw these phrases as nothing more than casual figures of speech, recent critics have begun to explore the possibility that they are semitechnical terms meant to denote specific aspects of style or composition. Peter Dale Scott argues that Alcuin's fingere serta signified a "sustained interlock-

48Vinaver, Rise of Romance, p. 76.
ing of figurative meanings, operating continuously as a single world of reference underneath the literal development of the poem."\textsuperscript{52} Taking as a starting point the interlace designs common in Anglo-Saxon pictorial art of the seventh and eighth centuries, John Leyerle distinguished two types of interlace composition, stylistic and structural, present in and characteristic of Old English poetry, especially \textit{Beowulf}.\textsuperscript{53} His first category refers to a form of syntactic embedding that has no counterpart in Norse prose, though it is amply paralleled (indeed, drastically exceeded) in skaldic diction. As an example of structural interlace he offers the account of Hygelac’s Frisian expedition, which is related in four segments (vv. 1202–14, 2354–68, 2501–9, and 2913–21) and which serves to add a historical-ethical dimension to the events at hand. To the extent that this expedition of Hygelac’s is related nonconsecutively—unlike the Finn episode, which is a single unit—it resembles the techniques of stranding. But saga stranding, like interlace in the prose romances, has by definition to do with the primary or present story, not with past events invoked as contrasts or parallels to the immediate action. The Hygelac episode is, despite its subdivided form, more closely related to the traditional excursus or digression than to patterns in the sagas or later romances.\textsuperscript{54}

Stranding per se in early Germanic vernacular epic, to the extent that it exists at all, is occasional and rudimentary.\textsuperscript{55} In \textit{Beowulf}, the stories of Grendel and his mother may be considered potential strands. More artful, and more reminiscent of saga practice, is the alternation of focus, in the passage describing Beowulf’s offensive at the mere, between the hero underwater (A) and his waiting men on the shore (B). The passage is in this respect compositionally identical to its analogue in \textit{Grettis saga} (chap. 66), in which Grettir undertakes an assault on a giant under a waterfall:

\textsuperscript{52}Scott, "Alcuin as Poet," p. 251.
The blood rising to the surface is an example of what has been called the "following technique," whereby focus is shifted from one side of the story to another (here from A² to B²) by means of a natural conduit (such as messengers, beggarwomen, and the like).⁵⁶ In the Chanson de Roland the sound of the horn is the link between Charlemagne’s army and the rear guard:

Li quens Rollant, par peine e par ahans,
Par grant dolor sunet sun olifan.
Par mi la buche en salt fors li cler sancs,
De sun cervel le temple en est rumpant.
Del corn qu’il tient l’oie en est mult grant,
Karles l’entent, ki est as porz passant.
Naimes li duc l’oïd, si l’escluent li Franc.
Ce dist li reis: “Jo oï le corn Rollant!
Unc nel sunast se nu fust cumbatant.”

(Count Roland, with pain and suffering,
With great agony sounds his oliphant.
Bright blood comes gushing from his mouth,
The temple of his brain has burst.
The sound of the horn he is holding carries very far,
Charles, who is going through the pass, hears it.
Duke Naimes heard it, the Franks listen for it.
The King says: “I hear Roland’s horn!
He’d never sound it if he weren’t fighting.”)

[Chanson de Roland, laisse 134]

The narrative of the Roland is notoriously episodic and the focus ranges widely, lighting variously on different parts of the tab-

⁵⁶Kenneth Sisam explains an apparent inconsistency in Beowulf vv. 837–927 (the return from the mere) as a primitive attempt to render parallel actions. See his The Structure of Beowulf (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), pp. 29–32.
Although the itinerant perspective gives the whole the appearance of a tapestry, it is quite a different sort from that of the sagas. The *Roland* "strands" are not logically interlocking stories, but static pictures that succeed and displace one another according to an aesthetic of parallelism, repetition, contrast, and balance. Only when the horn is blown and the interplay between the two parts of the army begins in earnest does the story fork briefly into two scenic lines.

Only in romance from the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries does interlace first emerge as a recurrent feature of composition. As was suggested in Chapter 1, there was a corresponding emphasis, in the rhetorical literature of the same period, on various forms of linear expansion or amplification, digression in particular. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, it will be recalled, distinguished two kinds of digression: *ad aliud extra materiam* (introducing outside matter—a digression proper) and *ad aliam partem materiae* (moving to another part of the same matter). The second, he explained, involves omitting the part of the matter that follows directly and jumping instead to a later part. If the former type refers to the standard procedure of embedding a related but subordinate substory in the main story, the latter type indicates a system of coordinates, by which the main story itself is divided into parts and respliced in a new order. Geoffrey's digression *ad aliam partem materiae* is thus tantamount to a definition of interlace and as such appears to codify in theoretical terms a practice of such proportions and duration that it may be regarded as a defining characteristic of medieval narrative.

There is a sense in which the Tristan story is predicated on the technique of digression *ad aliam partem materiae*. Not one but several lines of action are developed separately, and the dramatic

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58"A materia ad aliam partem materiae, quando omittimus illam partem materiae quae proxima est et aliam quae sequitur primam assumimus (One goes to another part of the matter when one omits that part of the matter that follows directly and skips instead to a later part of the matter)". From Geoffrey of Vinsauf, "Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi," 2.2.18, in Edmond Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1958), p. 274.
interest of the story lies in their intersections. This is true of the versions of Béroul and Eilhart as well as that of Thomas, though their patterns of alternation are not identical. It would appear from a comparison of Thomas’s fragments with Tristrams saga that the Norse redactor followed the original faithfully in this respect. At one major juncture, when narrative focus shifts from the ship carrying Ysolt and Caerdin from London to the wounded Tristan in Brittany, the Norse redactor supplies a retrieval formula: “Nú er at vikja sógunni til Tristrams... (Now the saga will turn to Tristram)” (chap. 97). In the immensely popular Prose Tristan, which all but supplanted the poetic versions, the story is further fragmented and intertwined in the characteristic patterns of interlace.

Examples of interlace in the verse romances of Chrétien de Troyes are few and for the most part of the standard digressive type (ad aliud extra materiam). But in the second half of Li contes del graal, when the story forks into a Gawain action and a Perceval action, the narrative accordingly strands ad aliam partem materiae. The same or a similar scheme recurs throughout the vast proliferations of the Grail story: in the Continuations, in Wolfram’s Parzival, in the Norse Parcevals saga (which takes the story up to v. 6518) and Valvers pátr (which corresponds to vv. 6519–9234), and above all in the monumental prose Vulgate Cycle of the thirteenth century. It is in this last suite of works that interlace finds its most characteristic form and saga composition its closest counterpart: story lines are interwoven, broken off, and then picked up again and knit together—not merely as a solution for a divided story, but for its own sake as a literary effect. The Queste del saint graal, for example, follows the peregrinations of Lancelot, Perceval, Bors, Gawain, and Galahad, stranding from one to another in succession and at unexpected junctures (sometimes mid-episode). These episodes are further interrupted with passages of a didactic nature, in the form of holy men’s or hermits’ speeches. As in saga narrative, fragmentation and discontinuity are not only tolerated but actively

pursued. In the *Prose Lancelot*, the "wounded knight" strand is introduced; then suspended while the narrator tells of Lancelot and Guinevere; retrieved as Lancelot aids him and swears to avenge him; suspended while the narrator turns to several fresh martial episodes involving Lancelot and Arthur; retrieved again as Lancelot fights a battle on his behalf; then abandoned again; and so on for some eight hundred pages.\(^{60}\) The artificiality of the exercise becomes apparent when, as in the case of Malory, there is an effort to undo the process, to gather the constituent parts into a normal or progressive order and thus to create a well-circumscribed story. One of Malory's sources, the interlaced *Suite du Merlin*, has three main themes: the doings of Merlin (A), the wars of Arthur (B), and the machinations of Morgan le Fay (C). In the middle portion of the story, they alternate in the order \(A^1 B^1 C^1 A^2 B^2 C^2 A^3 B^3 C^3\), and so on. But Malory, in reaction to interlace composition and in an apparent effort to bring his material in line with the more straightforward English practice,\(^{61}\) changed the order to \(A^1 A^2 A^3 B^1 B^2 B^3 C^1 C^2 C^3\), and so on. In other words, Vinaver explains, the "three threads of the narrative are unravelled and straightened out so as to form in each case a consistent and self-contained set of adventures."\(^{62}\) The interlace procedure is nowhere more visible than in those cases where it is reversed and the parts set together single file.

The composition of the Vulgate Cycle is also governed, as Lot first perceived, by a principle of inseparability, whereby no single part of the story is self-contained but is anticipated or recalled in other parts of the story: "The web is uncuttable, the delayed continuations necessary for enrichment of themes; the seeming elaborations are essential parts."\(^{63}\) The effect of the technique is not only to chart what is to come, but to confer new meaning on what has passed. From the *Prose Lancelot* comes an example in

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\(^{61}\)Larry Benson stresses the difference in compositional practice between English romance (straightforward and simplex) and French romance (interlaced) in his *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 43–64.


\(^{63}\)Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery*, p. 369.
which Lancelot suddenly identifies the opponent he is facing in combat by means of his sword—Galehault’s sword, given by Lancelot to Bors over three hundred pages earlier:

This is the sword Lancelot has just taken from the tomb of Galehault. The death of this man, which occurred immediately before the cart episode, remains unknown to his friend for a long time (Baudemagu is careful to conceal it from him). It is only by chance, in going to the aid of Meléagant’s sister, that Lancelot encounters this tomb and that an epitaph reveals the truth to him. He arranges for the body of his companion to be transported to the Dolorous Gard and has it buried at the place where once, when he captured this castle, he had seen his name inscribed with these letters: “Here will lie the body of Lancelot of the Lake, son of King Ban of Benoyc.” And in fact, on the last page of the work (the end of the Mort Artu), Lancelot’s body lies in the very same tomb in which the body of his friend had been laid to rest.64

This, as Vinaver put it, “at once brings home, but only to those whose memory can retain it, a whole cluster of events in their subtle succession, culminating in the tragedy of Galehaut’s death.”65 The same principle is put to excellent use in saga narrative.66 Hallgerðr’s refusal to donate her hair to the cause of Gunnarr’s defense is a moment in which are crystallized the earlier references to its abundant beauty. Gisli’s leaving the weapon Grásiða in Þórgrímr’s body is, in light of that weapon’s history and scheduled fate, a chilling act of hubris which marks the beginning of the end. Taken by itself, Óláfr Haraldsson’s slip of the tongue as he faces the opposing force at Stiklastaðir has no particular point (Legendary Saga, chap. 89); but taken together with

64Lot, Etude sur le Lancelot en prose, p. 27.
65Vinaver, Rise of Romance, p. 83.
66Intertextural techniques have long been recognized in the sagas, but it remained for Anne Heinrichs to treat them categorically: “A feature . . . is ‘intertextural’ when it, as one part of a text, points directly to another part of the text that appears sooner or later (sometimes surprisingly late). The linking is usually indicated by the reappearance of the same or of similar phraseology. The text to come may be anticipated by the audience beforehand, or it may come as a revelation when it occurs, the author allowing a connection to appear only then. In this way a stylistic pattern is established that has, I think, certain similarities to that produced in the art of weaving or of embroidering tapestry . . . and also to the Germanic art of ornamental gold and metal work” (“‘Intertexture,’” pp. 127–28).
the prophecy some sixty pages earlier that "'skammt eigi hann þá ðlífæt, er honum verðr mismæli á munni (he won't have long to live once his tongue trips'"—chap. 18) it becomes an announce­ment that the fatal hour has arrived. In saga as in romance inter­texture, as Vinaver put it, "no recapitulation or reminder is needed; everything that happens remains present, firmly fixed in the mind, as if the mind's eye could absorb simultaneously all the scattered fragments of the theme, in the same way as our vision can absorb the development of a motif along the entire length of an interlaced ornament."67

A work startlingly like *Flateyjarbók* in narrative conception is *Les prophéties de Merlin*. A compilation made between 1272 and 1279, it incorporates in its otherwise didactic prophecies certain stories, discontinuously told, of a more romantic nature. Lucy Allen Paton distinguishes nineteen strands in the "rope" and outlines their order in a table of contents much like that of *Flateyjarbók*:68

| A1 | Mador de la Porte |
| B1 | The plots of Morgain la Fee and Claudas de la Deserte against the Dame du Lac |
| C1 | Golistan le Fort |
| D1 | Alisandre l'Orfelin |
| E1 | The Tournament of Sorelois |
| F1 | The Saxon Invasion |
| E2 | The Tournament of Sorelois (continued) |
| G1 | Perceval le Galois |
| E3 | The Tournament of Sorelois (continued) |
| F2 | The Saxon Invasion (continued) |
| G2 | Perceval le Galois (continued) |
| H1 | Morgain la Fee, Sebile l'Enchanteresse, and the Reine de Norgales |
| F3 | The Saxon Invasion (continued) |
| G3 | Perceval le Galois (continued) |
| I1 | Segurant le Brun |
| F4 | The Saxon Invasion (continued) |


The unusualness of the *Prophécies*—Paton calls it “a unique production even in an age of extraordinary compilations”69—makes all the more remarkable its similarity to *Flateyjarbók*. Just as the *Færeyinga saga*, *Orkneyinga saga*, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Kjartans þáttr*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, and other narratives are inserted piecemeal into the two Óláfr sagas, so, in the *Prophécies*, the

history of the Saxon invasion (F) is related in ten parts, the story of Morgain la Fée (H) in three parts, the story of Perceval (G) in three parts, the story of Segurant le Brun (I) in four parts, the story of Alixandre l’Orphelin (D) in four parts, and so forth. Alixandre’s story, also found in a late version of the Prose Tristan, thus stands in exactly the same relation to the Prophécties as the story of Hallfreðr does to the Longest Saga. 70 In each case, an independent story has been threaded nonconsecutively onto a host narrative (itself little more than a compilation of such strands), and in each case, the parts of this substory, removed from the larger text and set together single file, form a continuous and complete biographical history.

Just as interlace must originally have been related to certain rhetorical notions of digression and its classical antecedents, so may the verbal formulas of interlace be originally related to a figure Quintilian labeled an aphodos: a phrase by which an excursus is concluded and the theme resumed. 71 Aphodi are regularly employed by certain medieval Latin historians. In his Getica, for example, Jordanes commonly begins or concludes chapters with such phrases as these:

Nunc autem ad id, unde digressum fecimus, redeamus doceamusque, quomodo ordo gentis, unde agimus, cursus sui metam explavit.

(But now let us return to the point whence we made our digression


71 Quintilian gives the example, “Longius evectus sum, sed redeo ad propositum (I have made a long digression, but now return to the point”)—IX:3.87); see H. E. Butler, ed., The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian, Loeb Classical Library (New York: Putnam’s, 1921), III, 496–98. On the aphodos, see Heinrich Lausberg, Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik (Munich: Max Hueber, 1960), p. 187. Ernst Robert Curtius noted: “The Middle Ages was far from demanding unity of subject and inner coherence of structure in a work of literature. Indeed, digression (egressio, excessus) was regarded as a special elegance..... Accordingly, the medieval conception of art does not attempt to conceal digressions by transitions—on the contrary, poets often point them out with a certain satisfaction” (European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask [New York: Harper & Row, 1963], pp. 501–2).
and tell how the stock of this people of whom I speak reached the end of its course.) [XIV]

Ceterum causa exegit, ad id, unde digressimus, ordine redeamus. (But our subject requires us to return in due order to the point whence we digressed.) [XV]

Ad propositum vero, unde nos digressimus, iubante domino redeamus. (But let us now with the Lord's help return to the subject from which we have digressed.) [XII]

Adam of Bremen employs the figure in a more general way to link and synchronize component parts of the same story:

Nunc ad cetera, unde incepimus, regrediamur. (Now let us return to the other matters with which we began.) [I:17]

De cuius fortitudine vel potentia, quam super barbaros habuit, postea dicemus. Et haec quidem forinsecus dum varia sorte gesta sunt, in Bremis status rerum labefactari cepit. (Of his valor and the power he had over the barbarians we shall speak presently. While, indeed, these things were with varying fortunes taking place abroad, the state of affairs in Bremen began to slip.) [II:79–80]

Nunc per hystoriae ordinem redeamus ad ecclesiae legationem. (Now let us return in the order of our history to the mission of the church.) [II:50]

Likewise, Paul the Deacon in his Historia Langobardorum:

His cursim, quae omittenda non erant, narratis, ad nostrae seriem revertamur historiae. (These things, which were not to be omitted, having been briefly told, let us return to the regular order of our history.) [I:26]

Exigit vero nunc locus, postposita generali historia, paucab etiam privatim de mea, qui haec scribo, genealogia retexere, et quia res ita postulat, paulo superius narrationis ordinem replicare. (The topic now requires me to postpone my general history and relate also a few matters of a private character concerning the
genealogy of myself who write these things, and because the case so demands, I must go back a little earlier in the order of my narrative.) [IV:39]

Haec paucis de propriae genealogiae serie delibatis, nunc generalis historiae revertamur ad tramitem.
(These few things having been considered concerning the chain of my own genealogy, now let us return to the thread of the general history.) [IV:37]

Though infrequent, such phrases as these from the Gesta Danorum indicate Saxo’s familiarity with the aphodos as a digressive device:

Sed ne peregrinis ulterius immorer, stilum ad propria referam.
(But let me not dwell further on foreign matters; I shall turn the discourse back to the subject proper.) [14:liv]

Et ne quis hone bellis sexum insudasse miretur, quædadem de talium feminarum condicione et moribus compendio modicæ digressionis expediam.
(And lest anyone wonder that this sex should exert itself at war, I shall communicate certain things about the circumstances and customs of such women in the form of a modest digression.) [7:vi]

Nunc a deverticulo propositum repetam.
(Now I shall return from this byway to my theme.) [7:vi]

The figure carried over into vernacular chronicle writing. Such formulations as this one from the Histoire de Saint Louis are found occasionally in the histories of Villehardouin and repeatedly in those of Froissart and Joinville:

Or revenons à nostre matiâtre, et disons ainsi, que tandis que li roys fermoit Cezaire, vint en l’ost messires Alenars de Senaingan, qui nous conta que il avoit fait sa nef ou réaume de Noroe, qui est en la fin dou monde devers Occident.

(Now we return to our main story and tell how, while the king was fortifying Caesarea, a certain Alenard of Senaingan came to the

See Faral, Les arts poétiques, pp. 74–75; also Lewis, Discarded Image, p. 182.
army and told us that he had built his ship in the kingdom of Norway, which lies at the world’s end, toward the west.) [XCVI]

The poetic romances use vernacular *aphodoi* less frequently, but in much the same way: in the first person and for digression in both of Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s senses.

Or reviendrai al pedre et a la medre,
Et la ’spose que sole fut remese:
Quant il ço sovrent qued il fuiz s’en eret,
Ço fut granz dols qued il en demenerent,
Et granz deplainz par tote la contrede.

(Now I shall return to the father and the mother, and to the spouse who had remained alone; when they knew that he had fled, they mourned greatly, and great was the lamenting throughout the country.)\(^3\) [La vie de Saint Alexis, st. 21]

Mes n’i vuel feire demorance
A parler de chacune chose.
A Thessala qui ni repose
de poisons feire et atanprer,
Vuel ma parole retourner.

(But I do not wish to stop to describe all this in detail. To Thessala, who does not pause in preparing and tempering her potions, my story wishes to return.) [Cligès, vv. 3245–50]

De monseignor Gavain se taist
Ichi li contes a estal,
Si commenche de Percheval.
Perchevax, ce nos dist l’estoire,
Ot si perdu la miemoire
Que de Dieu ni li sovient mais.\(^4\)

(The story is silent about Sir Gawain at this point. Perceval, as the story tells us, had so lost his memory that he had forgotten God.) [Perceval, vv. 6214–16]


\(^4\)The corresponding transition in *Parcevals saga* is: “En nú er at segja frá Parceval, at . . . (And now it is to be told of Parceval, that . . .)” — chap. 18.)
Alle ir unmuoze di låzen wir nu sin
und sagen, wie vrou Kriemhilt unt ouch ir magedin
gegen Rine fuoren von Nibelunge land.

(Let us leave their bustle and tell how Kriemhild and her maidens
journeyed on towards the Rhine from the land of the Nibelungs.)
[Das Nibelungenlied, st. 778]

Nu lâze wir daz beliben, wie si gebâren hie.

(Now let us leave those of Hungary to their own devices.) [Das
Nibelungenlied, st. 1506]

Middle English usage in the metrical romances appears for the
most part to be a secondhand imitation of the French habit:

Lete we now þis fals knight lyen in his care,
And talke we of Gamelyn and loke how he fare. [Gamelyn, vv.
615–16]

But leue we of that lady here
And speake we more of that squyer. [The Squire of Low Degree, vv.
859–60]

Now let we of Blancheflour be
And speke of Florys in his countree. [Floris and Blancheflour, vv.
203–4]

Let him lye there stille,
He has nere that he soght.
And ye wil a while be stille
I shal telle yow how they wroght. [Sir Gawain and the Green
Knight, vv. 1994–97]

Or from Chaucer:

But here I leve hire with hire fader dwelle,
And forth I wol of Troilus yow telle. [Troilus and Criseyde, V:28]

That the fictional use of aphodoi was not restricted to romance,
but entered the epic sphere as well, is clear from examples in the
thirteenth- and fourteenth-century chansons de geste (e.g., "Or
le lairons ichi de Ogier ester" or "Or vos dirai de Ponchonet le fier" from *Ogier de Danemarche*, vv. 98 and 3946).

But it is, predictably, in the highly interlaced prose romances that *aphodoi* are used with great frequency—not to introduce the occasional digression, but in the service of a regular structural principle.\(^7\) They are mostly of the intramural type, impersonal, and standard in form. Phrases such as the following from the *Mort Artu* occur with almost mechanical regularity throughout the Vulgate Cycle:

Mais atant lesse ore li contes a parler del roi Artu et de sa compaignie et retourne a Lancelot por deviser l'achoison qui le detint d'alor a l'assemblee qui fut fete en la prairie de Kamaalot. Ci endroit dit li contes que quant Lancelot se fu partiz de Boort et d'Estor son frere, el chevaucha par mi la forest de Kamaalot une eure avant, autre eure arriere, et gisoit chascune nuit chies un hermite a cui il s'estoit fez confés aucune foiz.

(But now the story stops telling of King Arthur and his company, and returns to Lancelot, to relate the event which prevented him from going to the tournament held in the meadow at Camelot. Here the story recounts that when Lancelot had left Bors and his brother Hector, he rode up and down in the forest of Camelot, and stayed each night with a hermit who had once confessed him.) [*Mort Artu*, 63–64]

The equivalent cliché, equally frequent, in *Amadis de Gaula* is "De los quales dexera Ia hystoria de hablar, y contrara de don Galaor (The story will cease to talk of them, and tell of Don Galaor)—I:20). A similar phrase is employed by the compiler of *Les prophécies de Merlin* to connect the disparate parts of that work:

Mes atant s'en test ore li contes et parole d'une autre aventure.

(But at this point the story is silent on this matter and speaks of another adventure.) [I:87]

\(^7\)On the use of formulas in the prose Arthurian matter, see Pickford, *L'évolution du roman arthurien en prose*, pp. 156–58.
Mais je retomberai après a vos pour conter de ce que j'ai comencie.
Ici fenest nostre matiere et retomne a l'autre.

(But I shall return to you later to tell what I have begun. Here our material ends and returns to the other.) [1:116]

Four phases may thus be distinguished in the use of the *aphodos*. The first phase is Latin history writing, in which the figure occurs on a fairly regular basis in connection with digressions proper and digressions within the matter. At this stage, the *aphodos* is emphatically personal and constitutes a conspicuous authorial intrusion. The same is true of the second phase, which consists of the vernacular chronicles and the poetic romances. The frequency of the figure in the former indicates that it is still associated primarily with history writing proper, but its occasional use in the verse romances (and the *chansons de geste*) indicates that it has also been adopted into the fictional sphere. In both cases, the wording and function of the digressive phrases are such that their Latin origins are obvious. It is in the third phase, the prose romances, that the *aphodos* is first used on a grand scale in fiction to effect digression within the matter (less often, digression proper). The wording in the prose romances is standardized and impersonal and gives a strongly formulaic impression. Identical in tone and phrasing are the *aphodoi* of the fourth "phase," the *Prophécies de Merlin*; here, however, they are used not for moving about the lines of a coherent narrative, but for gathering into a single frame, and thereby relating, a host of diverse and previously independent stories. As a concomitant of narrative structure, the *aphodos* thus serves as an index to a distinct and patterned change in literary taste during the medieval period. In a strikingly similar way, the Norse stranding formulas serve—as will be shown in chapter 4—as an index to the phases of the evolving saga.