

The Sagas of Icelanders

Definition

Saga of Icelanders (*Íslendingasaga*) / Family Saga

A prose narrative written in the 13th or 14th century, set around the time of the settlement of Iceland c. 871 and up to 150 years thereafter (i.e. not far beyond the Conversion c. 1000), typically focused on one or more families and their feuds, and commonly extending across a number of generations.

c. 40 sagas of Icelanders survive. c. 65 shorter tales (*íslendingaþættir*, sg. *-þáttir*) survive, but many of the latter group are episodes in the kings' sagas.

Sagas of Icelanders are characterized by a concise, “behaviouristic” style of prose: we almost never get direct insight into characters' emotions but are instead left to draw conclusions from their behaviour. Landscape is described almost exclusively in terms of its relevance to human action.

Themes

- ▶ Genealogy
- ▶ Feud
- ▶ Outlawry
- ▶ Poetry
- ▶ Foresight
- ▶ The supernatural, but subordinate to some degree of realism
- ▶ Royal service
- ▶ Raiding
- ▶ Law and conflict resolution
- ▶ Antiheroes

Some Types

Outlaw Sagas

- ▶ *Gísla saga Súrssonar*
- ▶ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*
- ▶ *Harðar saga*

District Chronicle

- ▶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*
- ▶ *Eyrbyggja saga*
- ▶ *Heiðarvíga saga*
- ▶ *Laxdæla saga*
- ▶ *Reykðæla saga*
- ▶ *Vápnfirðinga saga*

Skaldsagas

- ▶ *Bjarnar saga Híttdælakappa*
- ▶ *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*
- ▶ *Kormáks saga*
- ▶ *Hallfreðar saga*

Compare

- ▶ Contemporary sagas
- ▶ Bishops' sagas and saints' lives (*heilagra manna sögur*)
- ▶ Kings' sagas
- ▶ Legendary sagas

Some Notable Titles

- ▶ *Njáls saga*: the legalistic one
- ▶ *Egils saga*: the English one
- ▶ *Gísla saga*: the one with the blood-brotherhood
- ▶ *Grettis saga*: the outlaw hunt
- ▶ *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlandinga saga*: the New World ones
- ▶ *Eyrbyggja saga*: the Conversion-era one from Snæfellsness
- ▶ *Laxdæla saga*: the one with the love triangle

Bibliography

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