Helgi Þorláksson

The Vinland Sagas in a Contemporary Light

Introduction

Eiríks saga rauða [the Saga of Eiríkr the Red—also named the Saga of Þorfinnr karlsefní] and Grønlandinga saga [the Saga of the Greenlanders] are often known as the Vinland sagas or even the Greenland sagas. Over a long period scholars have searched for a factual core in these works. They have sought to identify what really happened at the time of the westward explorations from Iceland and Greenland around and after the year 1000. For some there has never been a problem: the sagas tell us that Leifr the Lucky, son of Eiríkr the Red, was the first man to lead an expedition westwards. Others claim that the sagas are largely fictitious. A further group of scholars has tried to distinguish between fact and fancy in the interpretation of these texts.

The scholarly methodologies of those who have searched for facts in the Vinland sagas have also varied considerably. Some have concentrated on Eiríks saga rauða (Matthías Pórðarson 1935:1xxxix–xcii), others on Grønlandinga saga (Jón Jóhannesson 1956b:125; Björn Porsteinsson 1964), whilst a third group has selected from each saga the material which they believe to be either most plausible (Páll Bergþórsson 1997) or closest to oral traditions (Strömbäck 1940:35, 38–39).

Prior to 1956 the general scholarly view was that Eiríks saga rauða was the older and more scholarly of the two works, almost certainly dating from the thirteenth century—in all probability from 1263–1300. Grønlandinga saga was seen as the younger work: no older than c. 1300, and possibly dating from as late as the second half of the fourteenth century. It was thought to be based on somewhat faded oral traditions (Storm 1891:xi–xii, xv–xvi; Matthías Pórðarson 1935:lxxi, lxxxix–xcii; Strömbäck 1940:37–39; Halldór Hermannsson 1944:viii, xi–xiii). Jón Jóhannesson (1956a) challenged this view. He argued that Grønlandinga saga was the older work, dating from c. 1200, and more dependent on oral traditions, and regarded Eiríks saga rauða (dated 1264 or later) as dependent on the older saga. Ólafur Halldórsson developed an alternative new theory—he concluded that the two sagas represent unrelated written texts, whose common elements are mainly attributable to the influence of oral tradition (1978:369–371, 450). Ólafur assigns both works to the first part of the thirteenth century (452). Some scholars have rejected this revisionist theory, and continue to accept the arguments of Jón Jóhannesson (Ingstad 1985:81–82, 87–89, 166, 230; Wahlgren 1986:154; 1993:704–705).
In considering the nature of oral tradition, we should acknowledge its susceptibility to variation. It can be difficult to distinguish between those elements which have a basis in truth and others which do not. Even if we confine ourselves to just the material which is common to both sagas, it is hard to know what to believe. One solution to this problem has been to trust only those parts of the sagas which give the impression of being detailed, rational and original. For instance, some scholars regard the Bjarni Herjólfsson episode in *Grænlendinga saga* as very plausible—it could well be an authentic description of a real voyage. On the other hand additions and alterations of the early fourteenth-century scribe Haukr Erlandsson to the account of Þorfinnr karlsfæni’s expedition in *Eiríks saga rauða* tend to be rejected on the grounds that they represent interference with earlier and perhaps authentic traditions (see, for instance, Páll Bergþórsson 1997:22, 50, 57). I find such approaches problematic since they tend to overlook the very nature of oral tradition and the development of written texts. The tale of Bjarni Herjólfsson’s voyage could easily be a thirteenth-century creation while Haukr’s *Eiríks saga* alterations could well be based on contemporary events and experiences known to him.

In the last three decades or so scholars have developed a fuller understanding of the social function of oral tradition, notably the importance of a performative element. The story-teller is invariably alert to the interests of his audience and the atmosphere they create, and will often adjust narrative content to accommodate social expectations. The tales may, for instance, serve to validate the currently prevailing social and/or political order. Subsequently, after transmission over several generations, the social function of a particular oral tradition might well have undergone considerable modification, with adjustments and alterations consciously made. John Tosh notes that historians are now very cautious about ‘advancing interpretations of oral traditions which purport to refer to events several centuries ago’ (1984:186). It seems very important, therefore, to investigate the cultural and political context in which historical images are constructed and it is this which is attempted in the following discussion.

*Creation, datings and preservation*

*Grænlendinga saga* is extant only in the great vellum manuscript *Flateyjarbók* (1387), while *Eiríks saga rauða* is preserved in two manuscripts—*Hauksbók* (1302–1310) and *Skáholtsbók* (c. 1420). Though younger the *Skáholtsbók* text is considered to be more original than that in *Hauksbók* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1985:333–336).

The dating evidence for the sagas is less than decisive. Jón Íóhannesson argues in favour of an early thirteenth-century date for *Grænlendinga saga* but Ólafur Halldórsson, while not rejecting this view outright, finds it inconclusive and unconvincing (1978:398–400; 1985:391–392, 395). It is true that the saga does not reflect the generally accepted early thirteenth-century belief that
Leifr discovered Vinland and introduced Christianity to Greenland as a representative of King Olaf Tryggvason; but this silence need not be indicative of an early date for the saga, since Grænlendinga saga may well have been based mainly on oral tradition and little influenced by written texts. It is quite conceivable that any saga could have existed in oral tradition before being committed to vellum, and could thus have largely avoided influence from learned tradition.

Ólafur argues that Grænlendinga saga, like Eiríks saga rauða, may have been composed in the first half of the thirteenth century; and he suggests that since the works share many features without being directly related, they must derive to some extent from a common source. In Eiríks saga rauða, for instance, we learn that a bright beam of light will shine on the descendants of Guðrön Þorbjarnardóttir, while Grænlendinga saga states that these same descendants will be bright, noble and fragrant. In medieval tradition the bones of genuine saints were believed to be identifiable by their agreeable fragrance and radiant whiteness. In this instance Ólafur takes these qualities as pointing to some future saint, and identifies the only plausible candidate as Bishop Björn Gilsson. He speculates that a possible common source might have been some now no longer extant vita about this bishop whose sanctification was known to have been under discussion in the 1198–1200 period. Even though Björn was never sanctified, Ólafur suggests that individual incidents from the putative vita could have survived in early thirteenth-century oral tradition (1978:393–394, 400). This theory is certainly ingenious. Had such a vita existed it could easily have exerted influence during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, and its late twelfth-century genealogy could have been incorporated into Grænlendinga saga more or less unchanged. This, in turn, could explain the following:

(i) In Grænlendinga saga, when referring to Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson (d. 1201), no attempt is made to distinguish him from Bishop Brandr Jónsson, who held episcopal office in 1263–1264. The Hauksbók and Skáholtsbók versions of Eiríks saga rauða appear to be aware of the potential confusion, and refer to Brandr Sæmundarson as ‘the former’, suggesting that the saga was composed after 1263, though of course these words could simply represent an interpolation in the common exemplar of the two versions (Ólafur Halldórsson 1978:363, 398–400). The absence of any such distinguishing identification for Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson in Grænlendinga saga may indicate a pre-1263 composition date, though in that case we might ask why the compiler or scribe of the later Flateyjarbók did not see fit to add ‘the former’ or some similar phrase to that same Bishop Brandr’s name. One possible answer might be that the identity of the Bishop Brandr in question was sufficiently clear to most people, even as late as 1387. A more plausible answer would be that the genealogy from the putative vita of Bishop Björn found its way into Grænlendinga saga in its original form with the three bishops mentioned (see (ii) below). Thus the absence of any specific identification for Brandr Sæmundarson in
Grænlendinga saga need not be considered decisive in dating the saga. In Eiriks saga rauða the bishops are listed in the order Pórlákr—Björn—Brandr, whereas in Grænlendinga saga the order is Brandr—Pórlákr—Björn. In keeping with the general view that Grænlendinga saga may be orally based, it is possible that it was not influenced directly by the vita but underwent some changes at the oral stage.

(ii) The same explanation could account for the absence from the saga’s genealogies of any reference to the second Bishop Brandr—Brandr Jónsson (1263–1264); he was certainly also descended from Guðrøð.

(iii) Ólafur Halldórsson believes that the genealogy of Guðrøð in Eiriks saga rauða is problematic, for Vifill could not possibly have been Guðrøð’s grandfather. Ólafur argues that this genealogy may have been first mooted in Eiriks saga (chapter 1). In that saga, as well as in the Melabók and Sturlubók redactions of Landnámabók [Book of Settlements], the same genealogy occurs and the nobility of Guðrøð’s descendants is commented upon. Ólafur believes that this comment and the genealogy both derive from the exemplar of Melabók, and that Eiriks saga rauða must therefore be older than this exemplar—that is to say, it must date from the first decades of the thirteenth century (1985:369, 349–350). However, we might note the possibility that the source of the Melabók exemplar was the putative vita of Bishop Björn, where reference could have been made to both the ancestry and the nobility; those elements could then have been drawn on subsequently in Eiriks saga rauða.

Ólafur Halldórsson also argues that there once existed another Eiriks saga, very different from the one which survived. In the version which has come down to us Guðrøð Porpharnardóttir is the principal character whereas in the posited earlier one the central figure may have been Eiríkr the Red himself. Ólafur suggests that the extant Eiriks saga rauða material taken from that older version can be found in the second chapter, and corresponding material is to be found in Landnámabók, drawn from the same source (1985:352–353). Whether the corresponding material in chapter 24 of Eyrbjøggja saga is also drawn from that older Eiriks saga rauða or from some earlier and unknown redaction of Landnámabók is not certain (1985:347, 352).

It seems clear, therefore, that the datings of the present texts of the Vinland sagas, are highly speculative. The only certainties are that the existing Eiriks saga rauða is older than 1302–1310 and that Grænlendinga saga is older than 1387. Arguments put forward by Storm, Strömbäck and others for assigning the latter work to the period 1300–1387 are only tentative, but share the sense that the oral traditions underpinning Grænlendinga saga seem old-fashioned. Strömbäck finds the style ‘stiff and rhetorical’, characterized by ‘alliterative expressions’ and witty retorts which are, he claims, characteristic of oral discourse. Such features suggest that the saga does not belong in the classical thirteenth-century period of saga writing (1940:37–39). Those thirteenth-century sagas were the work of authors who transformed their inherited materials, whether oral or written, whereas in the post-classical Grænlendinga saga
the text was written down more or less in its unprocessed oral form. Ólafur Halldórsson endorses the view that *Grænlendinga saga* is mainly based on oral traditions, citing in support the distinctive use of nú [now] (1985:393).

If the datings of the Vinland sagas are problematic, so too are the circumstances of their creation and preservation. Obviously Haukr Erlendsson was not the only fourteenth-century copyist to make textual alterations to the sagas under discussion. Ólafur Halldórsson has shown, for instance, that the opening chapter of *Grænlendinga saga* as published in the Íslenzk fornrit edition (IV:241–243) has been added to the saga, probably by the *Flateyjarbók* scribe Jón Þórðarson, along with material at the beginning of chapter 1 concerning Herjölfur (1978:323, 332; 1985:369–372). It is difficult to know what that first chapter was like before Jón altered it: we can only speculate on the origin and extent of the Herjölfur additions, though it seems quite likely that the original material in the chapter may have been based on oral traditions.

It is quite clear, then, that not only did oral traditions change from one generation to another, but that written texts were subject to alteration and augmentation.

**Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir and the nunnery at Reynistaðr**

Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir is a prominent figure in *Grænlendinga saga* and this is even more the case in *Eiríks saga rauða* where she is effectively the principal character. Ólafur Halldórsson has argued persuasively that her origins and pre-history as set out in that saga are pure fabrication. In *Grænlendinga saga* she arrives in Greenland almost out of the blue as the wife of Þórir, a shipwrecked Norwegian merchant (Ólafur Halldórsson 1986:239–246). The available oral traditions may not have explained whether she originally came from Iceland or Norway. Yet even though her origins are not explained she is a central figure in the saga, along with her husband Þorfinnr karlsefni.

It is appropriate to ask why the two sagas pay so much attention to Guðríðr. The most common explanation is that at the end of both works, as we have already noted, she is identified as the ancestor of three twelfth-century Icelandic bishops. But the same is true of Þorfinnr, who is also represented as an ancestor of the same bishops and who also figures prominently in *Grænlendinga saga*. The expansion of the role of Guðríðr in *Eiríks saga rauða* is striking and requires further explanation. It seems to me that the foundation of a nunnery in Reynistaðr in 1295 (see Fig. 1) offers a way of accounting for this emphasis. At the end of his copy or redaction of *Eiríks saga* Haukr Erlendsson traces his own ancestry back to Guðríðr and refers to Hallbera Þorsteinsdóttir, the abbess at Reynistaðr, with whom he shared a common great-grandfather. He also traces her ancestry back to Guðríðr (*Hauksbók* 1892–1896, 444; *Sagorna*, 81). It is worth reflecting on why Haukr did this; there must after all have been several other noble women at that time among Guðríðr’s many descendants. The answer may lie in the fact that, along with
Bishop Jörundr Porsteinsson at Hólar, the wealthy Hallbera founded the Reynistaðr nunnery and Haukr may well have viewed her as a kind of Guðrún figure, and seen Guðrún as her predecessor, so to speak, at Reynisnes (or Reynines). Like her, Hallbera was in charge at Reynisnes, which became known as Reynistaðr. Others may also have noted the parallels between Hallbera and Guðrún, and this in turn could have led to the expansion of Guðrún’s role in Eiríks saga rauða. It seems to me perfectly plausible that Eiríks saga rauða could have been viewed as appropriate reading matter for the Benedictine nuns at Reynisnes and indeed as a guide for noble women generally. After all, according to the saga, Guðrún was always Christian, behaved with great circumspection, and lived a thoroughly respectable and dignified life in a hazardous world. Though it has been suggested that Eiríks saga rauða was probably composed by someone familiar with Snæfellssnes in the west of Iceland, it seems possible that the saga’s origins may lie further to the north in the foundation of the nunnery at Reynistaðr.

Grænlendinga saga maintains that Guðrún ‘went south’, by which is probably meant ‘journeyed to Rome’, and that in her old age she was both a nun and hermit at her home in Skagafjörður. Puzzlingly, Eiríks saga rauða makes no mention of this. Moreover, Grænlendinga saga states that Guðrún lived at
Glaumbær in Skagaþóar, and not at Reynisnes where the nunnery was later built. A less than satisfactory attempt has been made to account for this (Ólafur Halldórsson 1978:360–362). It is true that the descendants of Þorfinnr and Guðríðr did live in Reynisnes but the fine farm at Glaumbær was not in the possession of that family, as far as we know. Glaumbær is interesting in this connection since it only became a seat for chieftains in the 1280s. In the Sturlung Age a wealthy farmer lived there (Hallr Þorsteinsson in Sturlunga saga), but we have no indication that he was related to the chieftain families. By c. 1285, Hrafn Oddsson, the most important secular chieftain in Iceland, had made Glaumbær into his residence and subsequently Hrafn Jónsson also lived there—he was almost certainly the grandson of Hrafn Oddsson. Hrafn Jónsson, known as Glaumbæjar-Hrafn, was obviously a force to be reckoned with; he was the leading figure in Skagaþóar around 1315 (Biskupa sögur III:162, 339, 340, 391, 394). It is tempting to see the reference in Grænlendinga saga to Glaumbær as an attempt to valorise the farm and flatter the residents. If Grænlendinga saga is the older of the two sagas—as many scholars believe, for all the absence of conclusive evidence, as we have seen—it is possible to construct the following scenario: Eiríks saga rauða was written at the instigation of someone who felt that the foundation of the Reynisnes nunnery was a good reason to highlight the role of Guðríðr, whose name could help to establish a prestigious pre-history for the new foundation and could also serve to promote the reputation of Abbess Hallbera, the founder. Grænlendinga saga was later altered in the light of this: Reynisnes was replaced by Glaumbær, and elements such as the church at Glaumbær, Guðríðr’s becoming a nun, and her ‘journeying south’ were all added to the text.

Eiríks saga rauða’s radiant light prophecy relating to Guðríðr has its counterpart in Grænlendinga saga and is possibly based on the putative vita of Bishop Björn Gilsson. As Iceland’s Nobel prize novelist Halldór Laxness once pointed out, this is the only monastic or clerical reference in Grænlendinga saga, and seems in keeping with the tone of Eiríks saga rauða (1969:46). The wording of the prophecies is similar: ‘bjarð fólki’ in Grænlendinga saga, and ‘ýfir ættkvislum þinum mun skína bjartur geisli’ [over your descendants will shine a bright light] in Eiríks saga rauða. This prophecy is obviously an important feature of Eiríks saga rauða; it is referred to twice, which may suggest that it featured in the original work. If Grænlendinga saga is an older work a scribe might have added the prophecy to Grænlendinga saga to lend substance to the conclusion of a work which also states that Guðríðr pilgrimaged to Rome and later lived as a nun and hermit in Glaumbær, eventually taking her formal vows.

I do not find these suggested alterations of and additions to Grænlendinga saga convincing and offer instead what seems to me a more likely explanation—namely, that the saga as a whole is a later work than Eiríks saga rauða, written perhaps in the first half of the fourteenth century. I find such a theory more plausible not least because Grænlendinga saga is not found in the great
early fourteenth-century compilation *Hauksbók*, a point to which I shall return. I suggest that *Eiríks saga rauða* was directly influenced by the putative *vita* of Bishop Björn and in turn influenced *Grønlandings saga* at the oral stage. We might note a possible parallel with *Hrafnkels saga*, which seems to have been based on late thirteenth-century oral traditions, independent of the written text of *Landnámabók*. In much the same way *Grønlandings saga* could have been based mainly on early fourteenth-century oral traditions, but could also have been influenced to a degree by *Eiríks saga rauða* at the oral stage.

The people of Glaumbaer at this time are never mentioned in connection with the nearby nunnery, which was under the protection and influence of Hallbera’s family at the farm Auðkúla in a neighbouring district. Hallbera’s sister Guðrun was the wife of Kolbeinn at Auðkúla, and Guðrun and Kolbeinn were the parents of Benedikt, the powerful sheriff at Auðkúla (on Benedikt and Hallbera see *Biskupa sögur* III:239–240, 383–384). Hallbera died in 1330, but ten years later Ingibjörg, a daughter of Benedikt, joined the nunnery, bringing with her a generous financial contribution. Her father was a benefactor to the nunnery on several occasions; in his 1363 testament we find him still donating to Reynistaðr (DI II:753–756; III:185–186, 276–277). We do not know how Glaumbaajar-Hrafn viewed this connection between Benedikt and the nunnery. Until his death in 1342 Hrafn was, with Benedikt, the most important chieftain in the north of Iceland, and from what we know and can reasonably deduce about the views of ambitious chieftains, he is unlikely to have been overjoyed at the developing links between Auðkúla and Reynistaðr. He and others may have regarded the situation as somewhat awkward. In this context it is illuminating to consider the different treatments of Guðrún’s last days in the two sagas. According to *Grønlandings saga* Glaumbaer, as the seat of Guðrún, was a more appropriate location for a nunnery than Reynisnes. However we explain it, the silence of *Eiríks saga rauða* concerning Guðrún’s journey to Rome is striking while the ancestry and pre-history it offers for Guðrún seems dubious. Accordingly, we should be careful when referring to these sagas about her; indiscriminate mixing of evidence from both works seems unwise. I suggest that, in this instance, in its view of Reynisnes and in its silence concerning Rome, *Eiríks saga rauða* is closer to more original oral traditions, whatever the actual events may have been.

*Eiríks saga in Hauksbók in a contemporary light*

Thus far in this paper I have concentrated on points where it seems possible only to speculate as to how and why the texts have been changed. When it comes to Haukr Erlendsson and his alterations in *Hauksbók*, however, we are in a happier position because we know the scribe, have some sense of his background, as well as of the date when he copied *Eiríks saga rauða* and of his exemplar. Though this is an unusual situation, to the best of my knowledge it has been little explored or exploited by scholars.
Haukr was the son of Erlendr, a Lawman in Iceland who was closely connected with the Norwegian court. Haukr himself eventually became Lawman in Iceland in the 1290s. In the early fourteenth century he served as an important official in Norway, and was dubbed by the king, and became one of his closest counsellors. Haukr had the great compilation known as Hauksbók made and he himself either copied or edited individual chapters for it. This work bears witness to his interest in Greenland and its affairs.

It is noteworthy, however, that for all his Greenland interests Haukr did not incorporate Graelendinga saga in the compilation, but did include Eiriks saga rauða and also Fóstbrœðra saga, which contains significant material relating to the topography and circumstances of Greenland (ch. XX–XXIV). Furthermore, Haukr incorporated Greenland-related material in his redaction of Landnámabóbók. In view of the fact that he altered the text of Eiriks saga considerably (see below) it seems certain that he would have been interested in a major work such as Graelendinga saga and also in the brief Graelendinga þáttur. It seems distinctly possible, therefore, that he simply did not know of these works, which in turn suggests that Graelendinga saga did not yet exist in the early fourteenth century.

A document written not long after 1266 which was incorporated in Hauksbók confirms Haukr’s keen interest in Greenland. A letter written in Greenland and sent to the court of King Magnus in Norway refers to a vessel which was wrecked at Hitarnes, Iceland in 1266; and we know that it was laden with tusks from Greenland (Olafur Halldorsson 1978:273–274). The same letter claims that in 1266 men had journeyed further north than ever before on the west side of Greenland and that their finds had included many seals, whales and polar-bears (Hauksbók 1892–1896:500–501). Since this letter was sent to the royal court it seems reasonable to suppose that the expedition had been made under the auspices of Norwegian officials.

It seems entirely plausible that the Norwegian authorities wished to learn more about the nature of the land whose people had accepted Norwegian rule in 1261; and it was perfectly natural for the king to promote such investigations at a time when ivory seems to have been much in demand. Knowledge about the eastern side of Greenland must have been very limited since no-one sailed in that region any longer unless driven there by unfavourable winds. The route from Norway to Greenland was directly to the south of Reykjanes in southwest Iceland (Landnámabóbók 1968:32–34), and drift ice had led to a cessation of voyages along the east coast of Greenland (Ívar Bárðarson, 133). Though mariners had no maps at this time, they knew which routes to take. The east coast of Greenland must therefore have represented terra incognita in the latter half of the thirteenth century. After the 1261 assumption of sovereignty, the Norwegian authorities may well have wished to extend their knowledge of these remote areas of the country. This in turn might have aroused their interest in Gunnbjarnarsker, probably a part of eastern Greenland; in the voyage of
Snæbjörn galti to these regions (as narrated in Landnámabók); and in the discoveries of Eiríkr the Red.

In 1285 two Icelandic brothers, the Helgasons, reported the discovery of a new land, named Nýjaland and we learn from one of the annals that this was a part of eastern Greenland. King Eiríkr of Norway soon sent a man called Hrólf to explore Nýjaland and he tried to enlist some Icelanders for an expedition in 1290 (Hermann Pálsson 1965:126–145). We know nothing of the outcome of this expedition, but another name for Nýjaland was Dúneyjar or Dúneyjar; the diūn element, meaning 'eiderdown', seems preferable since this was a valuable commodity. The Helgason brothers probably called the newly discovered land Dúneyjar to arouse interest back home, in keeping with the perceived allure of names like Greenland, Markland and even Vinland. When the reports about Nýjaland or Dúneyjar reached Iceland Erlandr the Lawman, father of Haukr, must have acquired as much information as possible about these lands and probably soon became involved by virtue of his being a royal official. The same may well have been true for Haukr himself, and it is thus small wonder that he had material about Greenland collected for his Hauksbók compilation.

In connection with King Eiríkr and Nýjaland or Dúneyjar, the Bjarni Herjólfssson episode in Gøranlendinga saga is worthy of mention. Bjarni does not figure in Eiríks saga rauða, and Olafur Halldórsson argues that at the oral stage of the work's development Bjarni might even have been the Bjarni Grimólfsson who is mentioned in Eiríks saga rauða before he became Bjarni Herjólfssson and assumed a new role. According to Gøranlendinga saga Bjarni discovered Vinland but did not land there, since he wanted to remain with his father in Greenland, as indeed he did until his father died. He eventually headed for Norway where he told Earl Eiríkr about the new lands, which he was criticised for not having explored. He became the earl's courtier and in due course returned to Greenland where there were many discussions about the possibility of undertaking new voyages to the west, with Leifr Eiríksson eventually taking the initiative and becoming leader of a new expedition. Olafur Halldórsson suggests that the scribe Jón Póldarson may have altered the text and erroneously converted Eiríkr the Red into Earl Eiríkr (1978:334–335; 1985:375–376). Bjarni's seemingly long stay in Greenland may be difficult to explain, but I myself do not find Earl Eiríkr a puzzle in the story. After 1262 no Icelander would have claimed for himself a newly discovered land, any more than the brothers Helgason did when reporting the discovery of Nýjaland or Dúneyjar. A discoverer would report his discovery of new lands and then wait for the king to claim the territory; to the discoverer would fall the honour of the discovery and possibly some more tangible reward from the king. Earl Eiríkr corresponds to King Eiríkr, which indicates that this tale about Bjarni as rendered in Gøranlendinga saga is a late thirteenth-century (or even later) version. The apparently realistic description of Bjarni's voyage need not be thought of as any older. It could perfectly easily be based on accounts of some
thirteenth- or fourteenth-century experience, perhaps of merchants sailing from Norway to Greenland who had seen lands in the west without reporting the sighting officially, perhaps believing them to be well known already. We should also remember that according to Eiríks saga rauða Leif Eiríksson was a representative of King Óláfr Tryggvason when he discovered Vinland.

It is worth noting in this connection that the Greenlanders sailed to Markland in 1347 or possibly a year earlier. According to the annals a Greenland ship landed in Iceland in 1347 without any anchor but with a crew of seventeen or eighteen men who had travelled as far as Markland, that is (most probably) Labrador, but had afterwards been driven back to Iceland (Islandske Annaler, 213, 403). The annals do not indicate the nature of their business in Markland, but a fair guess would be that they had been searching for lumber, and that they might even have built a ship there and extracted iron from iron bogs—there were serious shortages of iron and timber in Greenland at this time. It would be fascinating to know whether the Greenlanders made a habit of going to Markland or whether this was a one-off voyage. There is some archaeological evidence for connections between the Nordic people and the aborigines at Hudson Strait and in Labrador well into the thirteenth century (Sutherland 2000:246; Seaver 2000:274-275). The possibility exists therefore that the route to Baffin Island and Labrador was well known to the Greenlanders around 1300, and that such familiarity might have had something to do with Norwegian rule in Greenland and the royal interest in investigating all economic possibilities in the region.

When we examine the alterations made by Haukur himself to the text of Eiríks saga rauða, probably in 1306-1308, we must bear in mind that he may have had access to new information. Exactitude seems to have been one of his priorities, as with his description of sea routes in his Landnámabók redaction which is more detailed than that in Sturlubók. In his Landnámabók Haukur adds a good deal of precise detail to his description of the direct route from Norway to Greenland, as if he had discussed such matters with experienced seafarers who were, perhaps, experts on Greenland (1968:32-34). For the officials coming from the western tax-lands, as they were called, this knowledge was of particular importance. And when we note that Haukur was probably regarded in the court as the principal authority in all matters relating to Iceland and Greenland it is no surprise that he was at pains to describe the route exactly.

Let us examine some of his Eiríks saga rauða alterations. Fig. 2 is a reproduction of Jansson's edition of Skáholtsbók and Hauksbók (Sagorna) and shows some of the alterations that Haukur made. The left column presents something close to the text from which he must have worked; and in the right-hand column we have his own redaction. The passage concerns the Karlsefni voyage and in three instances Haukur's changes are extensive. In one of them we learn that many of the slabs in Helluland are measured as twelve ells wide instead of the size signalled by the idea of two men lying on their backs, heel to heel (as it is usually understood), which means hardly more than just over seven ells.
| Hauksbók (544) |  
|----------------|---|
| ðæ sa þeir land ok skvæ batí ok konvõv landit ok fynnv þar helvvr storar ok margar . xij. allna viðar | fiolði var þar melrakar |  

| Skálholtsbók (557) |  
|----------------|---|
| þæ funndv þeir lannd ok rero firir . a baatvm ok kavnnavdu lanndit ok funndv þar hellr margar ok svo storar at tveir menn mattu vel spyrnaet i liiar. | fæir gafv nað lanndinv ok kavllyv hellv. lannd. |  

| 280 | 281 melrackar voru þar margir |  
| 282 þæi gafv nað lanndinv ok kavllyv hellv. lannd. | fiolði var þar melrakar |  

| 283 þæi gafv þeir nordan uedr tvæ dægr ok var þæi lannd firir þæi ok var . aa skogr mikill ok dyr margv. | fæi gafv þar nað. ok kollvõv hellvland |  

| 284 ey la i lannd svdr vnndan lanndinv ok funndv þæi þar biarn dyr ok kaullyv biarn ey. Enn lanndit kavllyv þæi marklannd þæi er skogurinn. | ey la þar vnndan i landsvõr þar drapv þæi ein bjorn ok kollvõv þar sõdan biaeney en lannd Markland |  

| 285 þæi er lidin uorv tvæ dægr sia þæi . lannd . ok þæi siglau unndir lanndit . þæi . var nes er þæi kvomu at þæi. beittu med lanndinv ok letv lanndit aa stiorn borda. | þæi gafv þeir svõr med lanndinv langa stvnd ok komv at nesi einv la lannd a stiorn |  

| 286 þæi var avræfi ok strandir lanngar ok sanndar. | voro þar strandir langar ok sanndar |  

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**Fig. 2.** *From Sven B.F. Jansson, Sagorna om Vinland I (1945), p. 62.*

Haukr uses the word viðr [wide] and is most probably referring to diameter rather than, as Jansson believes, circumference (*Sagorna*, 137–139). Why should such an emendation have been made unless Haukr had acquired new information which he sought to incorporate into the text? Haukr alters the wind directions on the way to Markland from 'nordan uedr' to 'bra til landsvõrs or svõri', which signifies a southeasterly wind; it was indeed this wind that drove the sailors ashore at the location where they found wood and an island. He also modifies the distance from Markland to Kjalarnes and Furðustrandir, which his exemplar had measured as the distance travelled in 'tvæ dægr' [two days]; Haukr makes it longer and less exact—'langa stvnd' [a
lengthy time]. The Furðustrandir may have been a part of Markland and this change could also have been based on actual experience. Originally Furðustrandir may not have been a place-name (Perkins 1976; Ólafur Halldórsson 1985:361–362), but the saga scribes clearly took it as such. Furthermore Haukr omits ‘avrafi’, signifying lack of harbours. He also identifies the Straumsey birds as common eider (Sagorna, 64), and this need not be dismissed as mere speculation if (as is possible) Straumsey belonged to Markland. Eiderdown as a commodity seems to have been of some interest at this time, as the name Dúneyjar indicates.

**Conclusion**

My conclusion is that it is futile to search the Vinland sagas for the narrative core of what the first European explorers in America actually reported. Oral traditions changed from generation to generation and the written texts were also subject to alteration. Although we can compare the two different versions of the Vinland sagas it is very difficult to know how the texts changed and why. In this paper I have sought to emphasise that the texts are thirteenth- and fourteenth-century constructions; the Eiriks saga rauða descriptions could be based on late thirteenth-century knowledge and Gøænlendinga saga could be even younger, reflecting fourteenth-century realities and understandings. There is no doubt that people from Iceland and Greenland journeyed to America in the eleventh century but the Vinland sagas are obviously unsatisfactory sources for details of their achievements. On the other hand people may well have continued such journeyings to America from Greenland at intervals thereafter. The saga descriptions of the Vinland voyages could have been based on later reports and for that reason are worthy of serious scholarly consideration. The saga accounts bear witness to great sailing achievements of Norwegians, Icelanders and Greenlanders, both in the early eleventh century and, no less, in the high middle ages between 1050 and 1350.

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