

The Vinland Sagas in a Contemporary Light

Introduction

Eiríks saga rauða [the Saga of Eiríkr the Red—also named the Saga of Þorfinnr karlsefni] and *Grænlendinga 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 Þórðarson 1935:lxix–xc), others on *Grænlendinga saga* (Jón Jóhannesson 1956b:125; Björn Þorsteinsson 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. *Grænlendinga 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 Þórðarson 1935:lxix, lxxix–xc; Strömbäck 1940:37–39; Halldór Hermannsson 1944:viii, xi–xiii). Jón Jóhannesson (1956a) challenged this view. He argued that *Grænlendinga 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 *Grœnlendinga 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 Erlendsson to the account of Þorfinnr karlsefni'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

Grœnlendinga saga is extant only in the great vellum manuscript *Flateyjarbók* (1387), while *Eiríks saga rauða* is preserved in two manuscripts—*Hauksbók* (1302–1310) and *Skálholtsbók* (c. 1420). Though younger the *Skálholtsbók* 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 Jóhannesson argues in favour of an early thirteenth-century date for *Grœnlendinga 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 Ólafur 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 Guðríðr 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 *Skálholtsbók* 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

Grænlandinga saga need not be considered decisive in dating the saga. In *Eiríks saga rauða* the bishops are listed in the order Þorlákr—Björn—Brandr, whereas in *Grænlandinga saga* the order is Brandr—Þorlákr—Björn. In keeping with the general view that *Grænlandinga 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 Guðríðr.

(iii) Ólafur Halldórsson believes that the genealogy of Guðríðr in *Eiríks saga rauða* is problematic, for Vífill could not possibly have been Guðríðr's grandfather. Ólafur argues that this genealogy may have been first mooted in *Eiríks 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 Guðríðr's descendants is commented upon. Ólafur believes that this comment and the genealogy both derive from the exemplar of *Melabók*, and that *Eiríks 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 *Eiríks saga rauða*.

Ólafur Halldórsson also argues that there once existed another *Eiríks saga*, very different from the one which survived. In the version which has come down to us Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir 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 *Eiríks 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 *Eyrbyggja saga* is also drawn from that older *Eiríks 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 *Eiríks saga rauða* is older than 1302–1310 and that *Grænlandinga 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 *Grænlandinga 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 *Grænlandinga saga*

the text was written down more or less in its unprocessed oral form. Ólafur Halldórsson endorses the view that *Grænlandinga 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 *Grænlandinga saga* as published in the Íslensk 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 Herjúlfr (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 Herjúlfr 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 *Grænlandinga 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 *Grænlandinga 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 *Grænlandinga 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

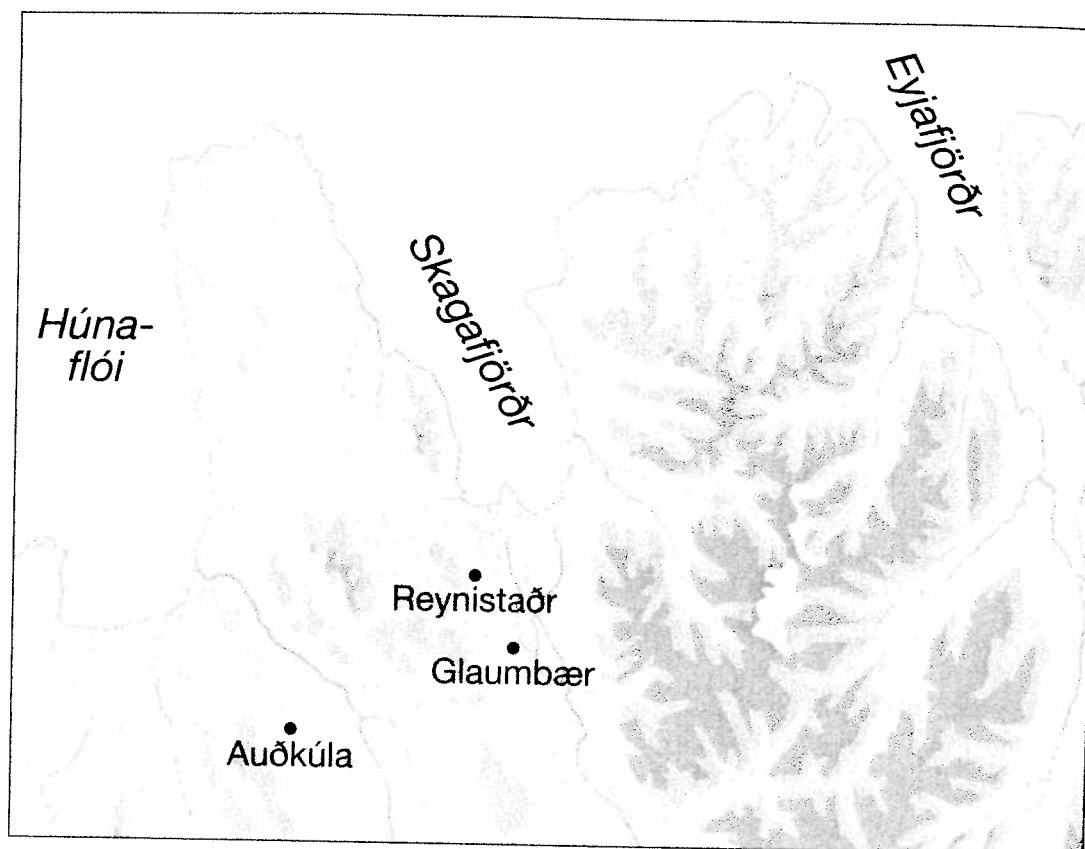


Fig. 1. The location of Auðkúla, Reynistaðr and Glaumbær.

Bishop Jörundr Þorsteinsson at Hólar, the wealthy Hallbera founded the Reynistaðr nunnery and Haukr may well have viewed her as a kind of Guðríðr figure, and seen Guðríðr 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 Guðríðr, and this in turn could have led to the expansion of Guðríðr'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, Guðríðr 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 Snæfellsnes 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.

Grænlandinga saga maintains that Guðríðr '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 Skagafjörðr. Puzzlingly, *Eiríks saga rauða* makes no mention of this. Moreover, *Grænlandinga saga* states that Guðríðr lived at

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Glaumbær in Skagafjörður, 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 Skagafjörður around 1315 (*Biskupa sögur* III:162, 339, 340, 391, 394). It is tempting to see the reference in *Grænlandinga saga* to Glaumbær as an attempt to valorise the farm and flatter the residents. If *Grænlandinga 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. *Grænlandinga 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 *Grænlandinga 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 *Grænlandinga saga*, and seems in keeping with the tone of *Eiríks saga rauða* (1969:46). The wording of the prophecies is similar: 'bjart fólk' in *Grænlandinga saga*, and 'yfir ættkvíslum þínum 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 *Grænlandinga saga* is an older work a scribe might have added the prophecy to *Grænlandinga 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 *Grænlandinga 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 *Grænlandinga 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 *Grænlendinga 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 *Grænlendinga 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 Glaumbær 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 Guðrún was the wife of Kolbeinn at Auðkúla, and Guðrún 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 Glaumbæjar-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 Guðríðr's last days in the two sagas. According to *Grænlendinga saga* Glaumbær, as the seat of Guðríðr, was a more appropriate location for a nunnery than Reynisnes. However we explain it, the silence of *Eiríks saga rauða* concerning Guðríðr's journey to Rome is striking while the ancestry and pre-history it offers for Guðríðr 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, 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 *Grænlendinga saga* in the compilation, but did include *Eiríks saga rauða* and also *Fóstbræðra 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 *Landnámabók*. In view of the fact that he altered the text of *Eiríks saga* considerably (see below) it seems certain that he would have been interested in a major work such as *Grænlendinga saga* and also in the brief *Grænlendinga þáttr*. It seems distinctly possible, therefore, that he simply did not know of these works, which in turn suggests that *Grænlendinga 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 Magnús in Norway refers to a vessel which was wrecked at Hítarnes, Iceland in 1266; and we know that it was laden with tusks from Greenland (Ólafur Halldórsson 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 (*Landnámabók* 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 Hrólfr 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 *dún* 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 Erlendr 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 Herjólfsson episode in *Grænlendinga saga* is worthy of mention. Bjarni does not figure in *Eiríks saga rauða*, and Ólafur 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 Herjólfsson and assumed a new role. According to *Grænlendinga 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. Ólafur Halldórsson suggests that the scribe Jón Þórðarson 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 Icelandic 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 *Grænlendinga 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

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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* Leifr 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 (*Íslandske 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 Haukr 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* Haukr 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 Haukr 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 *Skálholtsbók* and *Hauksbók (Sagorna)* and shows some of the alterations that Haukr 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 Haukr'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.

Skálholtsbók (557)	Hauksbók (544)
280 þa fundu þeir land ok rero firir . a baatvm ok kavnavdu landit ok fundu þar hellr margar ok svo storar at tveir menn mattu vel spyrnast i iliar.	þa sa þeir land ok skvttv bati ok konvðv landit ok fvnnv þar hellvr storar ok margar . xij. allna víðar
281 melrackar voru þar margir	fiolði var þar melracka
282 þeir gafv naf landinv ok kavllvðv hellv. land.	þeir gafv þar nafn ok kollvðv hellvland
283 þa sigldu þeir nordan uedr tvav dægr ok var þa land firir þeim ok var . aa skogr mikill ok dyr mavrg.	Þá þan sigldu þeir .ij. dægr ok bra til landsvðrs or svðri ok fvndv land skogvaxit ok morg dýr a
284 ey la i land svðr vnndan landinv ok fundu þeir þar biarn dyr ok kaullvðv biarn ey. Enn landit kavllvðv þeir markland þar er skogurinn.	ey la þar vndan i landsvðr þar drapv þeir ein biorn ok kollvðv þar síðan bianey en landit Markland
285 þa er lidin uorv tvau dægr sia þeir . land . ok þeir sigldu unn-dir landit . þar . var nes er þeir kvomu at þeir. beittu med landinu ok letv landit aa stíorn borda.	þá þan sigldu þeir svðr með landinv langa stvnd ok komv at nesi einv la landit a stíorn
286 þar var avræfi ok strandir langgar ok sanndar.	voro þar strandir langgar ok san-dar

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 landsvðrs or svðri', 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 'tvau 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 ‘avræfi’, 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 *Eiríks saga rauða* descriptions could be based on late thirteenth-century knowledge and *Grœnlendinga 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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