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NJALS SAGA AND THE WESTERN LITERARY TRADITION, by
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NJALS SAGA

not true.⁴ On the other hand, the saga, even more than the epic poems, is clearly designed so that it will appear to its audience to be history.⁵ There is also a chronological similarity with the epic poems; the historical events in *Njáls saga* took place between two hundred and fifty and three hundred years before the saga was written (the events are dated about the year 1000, and the saga is now supposed to have been composed about 1280). What is more significant is that, at the time the saga was composed Iceland, like the societies which produced the epic poems, was moving away from a heroic age. The thirteenth century in Iceland, the age of the Sturlungs, was bloody and violent enough for any taste, but it was a time of diminishing political liberty. Power was no longer distributed among a great many independent farmers, as it had been before, but was concentrated in the hands of a few families, and later, after the loss of Icelandic independence in 1262-64, relinquished to Norway.⁶

Njáls saga is, on the surface, most obviously unlike the epic poems in the formal aspects of its style and structure, but here, too, comparison is valuable. The fact that the saga is a prose work should not blind us to the strong resemblance between its style and the Homeric style. Auerbach's excellent remarks on Homer give an equally exact description of the saga:

the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uni-

⁴ The question of the historical accuracy of the sagas is a matter closely linked with the problems of their origins. Scholars have generally belonged to one of two opposing camps: the advocates of *freiproza*, to use Heusler's term (in *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga*, Berlin, 1914), who believe that the sagas were formed early, shortly after the events which they describe took place, were handed down orally for generations before they were put into writing, and are historically accurate; and the advocates of *buchprosa*, who hold that the sagas were composed, in writing, by individual authors at a comparatively late date, and are historically inaccurate. A short account of this controversy is given in Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York, 1957). See also Walter Baetke, *Über die Entstehung der Isländersagas* (Berlin, 1956) and Gwyn Jones, "History and Fiction in the Sagas of the Icelanders," *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, XIII (1946-53), 285-306. After the work of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, principally in *Um Njálu*, I (Reykjavík, 1933), *A Njálsbúð* (Reykjavík, 1943), and his edition for the Íslenzk Fornrit series, *Brennu-Njáls Saga* (Reykjavík, 1954), it seems hard to put much faith in the accuracy of *Njáls saga*. In any case, many parts of the saga, such as the long conversations, the supernatural events, and the accounts of solitary deaths, are indisputably fictitious. For the general problem of the sagas, see also Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða*, tr. R. George Thomas (Cardiff, 1958), where it is shown that *Hrafnkels saga*, which had been generally considered one of the most factual of the sagas, is largely unhistorical.

⁵ See Knut Liestøl, *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, tr. A. G. Jayne (Oslo, 1930), pp. 233 ff., and Sigurður Nordal, *The Historical Element in the Icelandic Family Sagas* (Glasgow, 1957).

⁶ See E. Ó. Sveinsson, *The Age of the Sturlungs*, tr. J. S. Hannesson, *Islandica*, XXXVI (Ithaca, 1953).