

Preface

The Viking king Ragnarr loðbrók and his sons feature in a variety of medieval stories, all of them highly dramatic. In one version of the legend (the Icelandic *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*), he earns his nickname – “Hairy Trousers” or “Shaggy Breeches” – from the garments he wears to protect himself from a poison-spewing serpent: cowhide pants boiled in pitch and rolled in sand. Here his slaying of the serpent is merely the first famous deed of a lifetime of warlike exploits. In another version of the legend (the French *Gesta Normannorum ducum*), he is a noble king who stays at home in Denmark, while it is his son who is the fearsome killer, ravaging the length and breadth of France. In yet another version (the English *De infantia Sancti Edmundi*), he has three sons, not one, and he wickedly inflames them with envy of King Edmund of East Anglia, leading to the Danish invasion of England and Edmund’s martyrdom. In a fourth version of the legend (the Danish *Brevis historia regum Dacie*), it is not Ragnarr who is king of Denmark but rather a son of his who conquers it and makes himself king. Even within Iceland alone, no single vision of him emerged. According to the 12th-century historian Ari Þorgilsson, one of Ragnarr’s sons was a celebrated ancestor of the kings of Norway, whereas another of his sons was a symbol of all that was evil about the pagan age in the North. According to the 13th-century chieftain and saga-author Snorri Sturluson, Ragnarr was by turns the first king known to have a court poet, the conqueror who established the definitive boundaries of the Scandinavian kingdoms, and the symbol of the ancient heroism that would be eclipsed by the new heroism of the Icelanders. According to the 14th-century official Haukr Erlendsson, Ragnarr was one of his own ancestors. In short, Ragnarr and his sons were ciphers to which almost any characterization could be attached.

The stories about Ragnarr and his sons are preserved across a large range of sources, from Latin histories to Old Norse sagas, from saints’ lives to skaldic verse, from Icelandic genealogies to lists of Danish kings. They come not just from Scandinavia but also from France, Germany, Ireland, and England. Some are clearly products of Latin clerical culture and can be traced from one written work to another, whereas others are clearly oral, with admixtures of folktale and earlier heroic legend and names that reflect centuries of changes in the Old Norse language. Above all, the stories have strong connections to the Viking Age, with some of the characters almost certainly going back to actual persons and events. These connections have led

to a number of scholarly investigations of the origin and development of the legend of Ragnarr loðbrók, but the inconsistencies, contradictions, and variation in the sources have resulted in an equally inconsistent array of conclusions.¹

Despite this, a fresh approach can lead to considerable progress in resolving the inconsistencies and explaining the contradictions. The aim of the present work is therefore two-fold: first, to re-examine all the relevant sources and, with the help of current historical and literary-historical knowledge, re-examine their origins, interrelations, and significance; and second, having gained a better understanding of the development of the legend, to explore its meaning for the medieval Icelandic authors who so often included Ragnarr in their accounts of the past. The organization of this study thus falls into two parts. Chapter One surveys the key non-Norse sources in chronological order, beginning with the 9th-century Frankish annals that record actual Viking attacks and expeditions and concluding with the early 13th-century Danish histories that use the figures of Ragnarr and his sons for their own purposes. Chapter Two follows with a review of the historical context of the real people who may have been the antecedents of their namesakes in the Ragnarr legend. Building on the conclusions of the textual survey and the historical review, Chapter Three discusses how each of the figures of the Ragnarr legend

¹ The major studies are Storm, Gustav: *Kritiske Bidrag til Vikingetidens Historie 1: Ragnar Lodbrok og Gange-Rolv*, Christiania: Norske forlagsforening 1878; Vries, Jan de: 'Die historischen Grundlagen der Ragnarssaga loðbrókar', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 39 (1923), 244-274; Vries, Jan de: 'Die ostnordische Überlieferung der Sage von Ragnar Lodbrók', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 2 (1927), 115-49; Vries, Jan de: 'Die westnordische Tradition der Sage von Ragnar Lodbrók', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 53 (1928), 257-302; Vries, Jan de: 'Die Entwicklung der Sage von den Lodbrokssöhne in den historische Quellen', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 44 (1928), 117-63; Bjarni Guðnason: 'Gerðir og ritþróun Ragnars sögu loðbrókar', in *Einarsbók, Afmæliskeðja til Einars Ól. Sveinssonar, 12. desember 1969*, ed. by Bjarni Guðnason, Halldór Halldórsson, and Jónas Kristjánsson, Reykjavík: Nokkrar vinir 1969, 28-37; Lukman, Niels: 'Ragnarr loðbrók, Sigifrid, and the Saints of Flanders', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 9 (1976), 7-50; McTurk, R[ory] W.: 'Ragnarr Loðbrók in the Irish Annals?', in *Proceedings of the Seventh Viking Congress Dublin 15-21 August 1973*, ed. by Bo Almqvist and David Green, Dundalk: Dundalgon Press 1976, 93-123; McTurk, Rory: *Studies in Ragnars saga loðbrókar and its Major Scandinavian Analogues*, Oxford: The Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature 1991 (Medium Ævum Monographs, New Series 15); Smyth, Alfred P.: *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles 850-880*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977.

developed and when and how certain important elements of the legend arose. Chapters Four to Six analyze the Old Norse historiographical sources, likewise in chronological order. Each work is set into its contemporary context, and that context in turn is used to elucidate that work's deployment of the Ragnarr legend. The 12th-century texts comprise Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, a lost poem known as *Skjöldungatal*, Abbot Nikúlas Bergsson's *Itinerarium*, and *Fóstbræðra saga*, a narrative that may have been composed before 1200. The 13th-century texts comprise *Skjöldunga saga*, *Fagrskinna*, the works of Snorri Sturluson, the items found in the manuscript Membrana Reseniana 6, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, *Ágrip af sögu Danakonunga*, Sturla Þórðarson's redaction of *Landnámabók*, *Njáls saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga* (which may have been composed in the late 13th century rather than before 1200), and the first part of the annals known as the *Annales regii*. The 14th-century texts comprise *Sturlunga saga*, *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, *Ragnarssona þáttr*, Haukr Erlendsson's redaction of *Landnámabók*, Haukr Erlendsson's redaction of *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Hemings þáttr Áslákssonar*, Appendix XIII of Hauksbók, the regnal lists in AM 415 4to, *Flóamanna saga*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, the Skálholt annals, the so-called *Lögmanns-annáll*, the Flateyjarbók redaction of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, the Flateyjarbók redaction of *Óláfs saga helga*, the Flateyjarbók genealogies, and the Flateyjarbók annals. Chapter Seven concludes the work with a discussion of the medieval Icelanders' belief in Ragnarr's historical existence and the appeal of the Viking "empire" with which he was associated.

The focus of this study is on the historical roots of the Ragnarr legend and its significance for medieval historiography, and therefore it excludes Old Norse texts that lack a clear historiographical or political aspect. For example, there is no extensive discussion of the skaldic poem *Háttalykill*, which was composed around 1142 by the Orkney jarl Rögnvaldr kali Kolsson and the Icelandic Hallr Þórarinnsson. Several stanzas seem to be about Ragnarr and his sons, but this part of the poem is fragmentary, so it provides little information about the tradition apart from a mention of a boneless person and a reference to Ragnarr's encounter with King Ella of Northumbria. Another 12th-century skaldic poem excluded from analysis is *Krákumál*, which presents itself as the song that Ragnarr composed as he was dying.² A third skaldic omission is *Ragnarsdrápa*, a poem generally attributed to the 9th-century Norwegian

² For an extensive analysis of *Krákumál* with respect to the Ragnarr legend, see: McTurk: *Studies in Ragnars saga loðbrókar*.

Bragi Boddason, about the myths depicted on a shield given to Bragi by “the kinsman of Sigurðr”.³ This circumlocution was traditionally understood as referring to Ragnarr loðbrók, the son of Sigurðr hringr (see p. 170, below). Ragnarr is also mentioned in two *fornaldarsögur* that are not discussed here. The eponymous Herrauðr of *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* turns out to be the father of Þóra, Ragnarr’s first wife, and the hero of *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar* is said to be the great-great-grandson of Ragnarr’s son Sigurðr ormr-i-auga.⁴ A final omission is the postclassical *Íslendingasaga* known as *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, which contains a character named Raknarr, whom some scholars have argued is a version of Ragnarr loðbrók.⁵

The methodology of this study is to proceed from first principles. Legends about a figure known as Ragnarr, Loðbrók, or Ragnarr loðbrók are not assumed to exist until it can be shown that textual accounts are diverging from the actual events of the 9th century, to the extent that those events can be determined. Many previous studies of this material seem to assume that there was a single legend about Ragnarr, and therefore the various source-texts are treated as evidence that this legend was known across the areas that produced them. In contrast, I make no such *a priori* assumption and instead investigate whether the sources might be drawing their information about Ragnarr or his sons from earlier texts, or whether an oral legend really might be the most likely source. The analysis relies on knowledge of the Viking Age as well as medieval literary history, and as a result it illuminates the textual tradition to a considerable degree, showing where the historical record begins to be transformed into legend and where later sources may yet preserve reliable information about the past. It also illuminates the rise of different versions of the Ragnarr legend and provides an analytical framework for explaining its development, variation, spread, and adaptation. Conversely, because some of

³ But see also Marold, who proposes a dating of around 1000: Marold, Edith: ‘Ragnarsdrápa und Ragnarssage. Versuch einer Interpretation der Ragnarsdrápa’, in *Germanic dialects: Linguistic and philological investigations*, ed. by Bela Brogyanyi and Thomas Krömmelbein, Amsterdam: J. Benjamins 1986 (Amsterdam studies in the theory and history of linguistic science [series 4] 38), 427-457.

⁴ *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda* 3, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan 1950, 281-322; *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda* 4, 247.

⁵ For the most recent expression of this view see: McTurk, Rory: ‘Recent and projected work on Ragnars saga loðbrókar’, in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi: Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8-2.9 2001*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, and Agnete Ney, Uppsala Universitet / Institutionen för nordiska språk: Uppsala 2003 (Nordiska texter och undersökningar 28), 134-137.

the source-texts are precisely those on which our ideas about the Viking Age are based, an analysis of them as textual productions can aid in evaluating their historical value.

Versions of this work have been presented at Harvard University, Durham University, and University College, London, as well as at the 2005 conference on “Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed” organized by Agneta Ney, Annette Lassen, and Árman Jakobsson. Many thanks go to my audiences for their astute questions and comments, and even more thanks go to my colleagues at the University of Cambridge, including Jonathan Grove, Simon Keynes, Rosalind Love, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, and Judy Quinn, who generously shared their knowledge. Special appreciation goes to Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Rudolf Simek, who have cast wise editorial eyes on the material, but above all I owe a great debt of gratitude to Rory McTurk, who has read this work in several drafts and who has suggested innumerable improvements both large and small. Although we do not always agree, it is his scholarship which has established the modern study of the Ragnarr legend and which remains its cornerstone.

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