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RÉSUMÉ – Le développement de la philologie médiévale scandinave au XVII^e siècle est fortement lié à la politique des rois de Suède et à la fondation d’institutions officielles comme l’Antikvitetscollegium. Leur travail a consisté à définir et à classer des genres littéraires et à élaborer des méthodes de collecte documentaire, mises en œuvres par des chercheurs suédois, en collaboration avec des Islandais, comme cela a été le cas, en particulier, de Jón Eggertsson, agent littéraire suédois en Islande.

MOTS-CLÉS – philologie scandinave, méthodes de collecte, Suède, Islande, Jón Eggertsson

ABSTRACT – The rise of Old Norse philology during the seventeenth century was strongly linked to a royal policy in Sweden, resulting in the foundation of official institutions such as the Antikvitetscollegium. Old literary genres were defined and classified, and methods for collecting documents were developed by Swedish scholars, in collaboration with Icelanders. This study focuses in particular on the literary agent Jón Eggertsson and his methods.

KEYWORDS – Old Norse philology, collecting methods, Sweden, Iceland, Jón Eggertsson

“ALL KINDS OF CHRONICLES AND HISTORIES”

Old Norse literature and gothicism between history and philology

The beginning of Old Norse philology can be dated to the seventeenth century and located to the realm of Sweden, as Swedish scholars were the first to produce and publish academic editions of Old Norse texts. In this paper, the causes of this phenomenon will be discussed in terms of the historical events that led to it, why Sweden was the place where it happened, and why it would occur at that time. Accordingly, a short historical introduction will be given, referring to the relations between the Nordic countries in early modern times – relations which had a significant impact on the development of historical and literary criticism. As a case study, the role of an Icelander who served as a literary agent will be introduced. Terminological problems arising when Old Norse literature is discussed will be addressed in short digressions. Further, a sketch of the periodisation of Old Norse literature and the classification of its literary genres in their beginnings in the seventeenth century will be presented along with a perspective on Icelandic literary historiography. To complete the picture of the Nordic reinvention of the Middle Ages, the further development of the reception of Old Norse literature in the course of time will be touched upon as a conclusion to the paper.

In the Nordic countries, the term “medieval literature” was not used before the end of the eighteenth century. The postmedieval preoccupation with texts transmitted from medieval times, however, reached a first peak there in the seventeenth century. With very few exceptions, it was vernacular texts that were the subject of particular interest, while the texts in the dominating language and lingua franca of the Middle Ages, Latin, were not considered as belonging to the national heritage.

Addressing the Swedish tradition, the word “Middle Ages” is not used in the academic writings of the learned Swedes of the time, neither is

the term “literature” which instead is called by the term “monuments”. The time period in question is a rather vaguely determined period: it is historical monuments in a broad sense; it is texts from “old times” (*forna tider*) that are of interest. However, it must be borne in mind that the written record in Sweden does not pass behind the fifth or sixth century, which is the time of origin of the oldest rune-stones preserved.

In Sweden, the cause of the interest in the local or regional Middle Ages was political and ideological in nature: in the wake of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), the Swedish realm had become one of Europe’s Great Powers. To consolidate this status, as a relatively young nation, and in the aftermath of the Renaissance, Swedish history and culture was to be on a par with ancient nations and cultures like those of the Romans and the Greeks. Thus, the Swedish royalty was in need of some historical justification to compete with rival European powers and to keep up its claim for its position as a leading nation. As the Northern countries share a common history, it was particularly the Danish realm with its absolute monarchy and likewise a claim to represent an important nation that constituted a constant challenge on different levels. Accordingly, historical studies that would bring the – supposedly – glorious past of the Northern people to light were encouraged in both countries.

To pursue these studies, the scholars needed sources. In Sweden, this need led to a systematic investigation of the whole country to find, collect and analyse historical objects as well as written and oral records of the past. As a matter of course, the wish to consolidate Sweden’s outstanding position was of highest importance. In 1630, the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus II issued a decree in which he listed all the items and objects that he wished to be collected, and the information he wanted to have gathered. The list signifies no less than a royal demand to measure and tax the country “*till itt fulkomligt lexicon*” – “until you get a comprehensive [national] handbook¹”. One reason for the gathering of information might thus have had roots in economic calculation: the gathering of lists of farms, their inventories and land mass as well as of the people’s properties could be used effectively as a sound database for raising taxes.

1 Printed in V. Gödel, *Sveriges medeltidslitteratur: proveniens: tiden före antikvitetskollegiet*, Stockholm, Nordiska bokhandeln, 1916, p. 279-282, p. 279.

TERMINOLOGICAL EXCURSUS I:
SWEDISH “ANTIKVITETER”

The umbrella term used for the items and information to be collected was “*antikviteter*” – antiques. Then, unlike today, the concept included almost any object that could give information on the local and national past. It could also comprise written material such as manuscripts and texts, epigraphic inscriptions, and more. The above-named royal decree lists a great number of items and pieces of information that were considered to be of interest: namely all kinds of old monuments and things, calenders, easter tables and runic calenders, all kinds of old legal manuscripts, all kinds of old letters/documents, all kinds of old coins, data to compile special geographical maps of the whole of Sweden, land measuring, mineral resources, books of household accounts, hunting treatises, medical matters, leechbooks, weather forecasts, clothing, coats of arms, names, accounts of the temper and spirit of the inhabitants of the different landscapes².

The royal order explicitly includes the collection of heroic ballads and runic verse (as well as the musical record), but there the term is “*visor*” – verse, not the term “literature”. There was hope that these songs would contain at least some historical truth, and according to the royal scholars’ opinion, the reason why academics should even take quite fantastic tales into account was that the people in the old times did not know better and perceived events in a different way than later ears and eyes would judge³. In short, the term “*antikviteter*” comprised anything that would be needed to write a comprehensive national history as well as to compile an account of the present state of the country.

The work of the royal Swedish antiquarians was advanced by the founding of an institution that was to coordinate the work on the national history⁴. This happened in 1666; the institution was called the Collegium Antiquitatum or Antikvitetskollegiet and had its

2 *Ibid.*

3 On the discussion of the sagas’ historical truth, see below.

4 The most comprehensive history of this institution still is H. Schück, *Kgl. Vitterbets, Historie och Antikvitets Akademien: dess förhistoria och historia*, Stockholm [etc.], Almqvist & Wiksell, 1932-1944, 8 vols.

residence in Uppsala (later in Stockholm). Already four years earlier, at Uppsala university, a chair had been inaugurated that would deal with “*fäderneslandets antikviteter*” – the historical items of the home country. The first professor to occupy that chair was Olof Verelius (1618-1682), an industrious and dedicated publisher of scholarly editions and treatises.

Where were the collectors to look for the desired historical objects? As early field researchers, they traveled around the country, drawing inscriptions and decoration from rune stones, collecting manuscripts and interviewing people about their customs and their local memory. As a result of these efforts, the new disciplines of archaeology, folklore studies, runology and more began to become established in Scandinavia. Concerning Old Swedish and Old Danish text sources, the scholars found that there was not much material preserved in the vernacular. The genuinely Nordic rune stone inscriptions, of which there are thousands preserved both in Sweden and in Denmark, were also subject to the scholars’ investigations. However, most of the inscriptions are memorials stating who set a stone for whom, and maybe who carved the stone, and thus yielded very little material to tell a sublime story about old times.

The only “bookish” genre in East Norse vernacular, preserved from early times onwards, are legal texts. From the Old Swedish legal texts transmitted, there could at least be grasped an idea of the advanced legal system that organized medieval Swedish society. In addition, an insight into the highly developed level of complex language in the syntactic structures and terminology of the Old Swedish legal texts could be gained. However, stories about national heroes and their glorious deeds paralleling Ancient Greek and Roman culture could not be found there.

Fortunately, there were other Nordic sources to be exploited: in Denmark, where scholars a century previously had already started to work on large projects to produce a national history, it had been known for long that on the far Atlantic island of Iceland, there existed manuscripts that contained texts telling of the past of the Nordic peoples. But when the Swedes started to get interested in this material in earnest, the Danes started to organise systematic manuscript “digging” on Iceland.

In order to collect and examine the desired historical textual witnesses, the Antikvitetscollegium established contact with Icelanders, and these native speakers were to gather, to decipher and to transcribe as well as translate Icelandic manuscripts for them. Swedish and Icelandic still

are closely related languages, and communication in the Middle Ages appears to have been easy, at least by some kind of semi-communication. However, from the late Middle Ages onwards, this became gradually more difficult. Due to its isolated position far off in the Atlantic Ocean, the Icelandic language proved to be extremely conservative while the continental Scandinavian languages had undergone considerable change; they were strongly influenced by, for example, Low German. Thus, in their effort to investigate the Icelandic sources, the Swedish antiquarians of the early modern period were heavily dependent on the help from the Icelanders. To give an impression of the nature of the texts preserved in Old Icelandic, a short overview will now follow.

OLD NORSE LITERARY GENRES

Old Icelandic literary genres in a modern sense of the word can be described as three main examples and one late medieval version of the kind. The three classical ones are Eddic verse, skaldic verse, and sagas. Eddic songs tell of Old Norse mythology and heroes; skaldic verse mainly denotes the poems composed for Nordic kings on special occasions like a battle won or a king killed, and there are Christian as well as pagan poems; and the third genre gathers the famous Old Norse sagas. The fourth genre in the series is that of Icelandic *rímur*, a late medieval specific genre of epic poems.

The so-called Icelandic family sagas are the best-known subgenre of Old Icelandic prose literature⁵. These medieval narratives of various length tell of important individuals and clans that usually emigrate from Norway to Iceland, settle there and immediately start to fight other clans and individuals for reasons of jealousy, pride, honour, fame or love. The sagas tell of events that (could) have taken place in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, that is during the age of settlement and the age of the Icelandic commonwealth, and Christianity was officially taken at the *Alþingi*, the national assembly, in the year 1000. Besides

5 For the following account, see e.g. M. Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic saga*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

this prominent saga genre, there are several others: the kings' sagas describing the biography of Norwegian kings (called *konunga sögur*), there are bishops' and saints' lives (called *biskupa sögur* and *heilagra manna sögur* respectively), there are translations or rather adaptations from other languages within the subgenres of *riddara sögur* – knights' tales from Old French as well as of pseudo-historical accounts of antique heroes like Alexander the Great (*gervisögulegar þýðingar*). The texts that we today assume under the term *fornaldar sögur* (stories of old times) deal with heroes who were thought to have lived before the settlement of Iceland, and there, a number of continental Scandinavians, among them Swedes and Danes, figured as protagonists. And it was exactly these stories that the Swedish scholars were after, indeed as well as their Danish rivals; as noted previously, Iceland belonged to the Danish realm, and in Copenhagen, a long-standing project to write a national history put the focus on Icelandic material. From the beginning, the historical credibility of the saga accounts was under discussion while the aesthetic values of the texts was not at issue. The sagas' relationship to real history, the truth of the sagas, was discussed. What counted most was the content, not the form, of the texts which were seen exclusively as sources, not as literature.

The first Old Norse edition to be published and printed in Sweden contained two *fornaldar sögur*, *Gautreks saga* and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*⁶. This happened in 1664, and a number of saga editions were to follow, printed first in Uppsala, later in Stockholm. In this first edition, the preface contains a note that excuses the Nordic people from the reproach of being barbarians:

[...] although they lived in the thick dark of heathendom [...], they were nevertheless great and notable kings [...] which does not too iniquitously serve to refute some people's unsubstantiated subterfuges as if the old times here in the Nordic countries had been nothing but rough and barbarian survival; and as if the inhabitants had done nothing but quarrel and lumber⁷.

6 *Gothrici & Rolfi Westrogothiae regum historia lingua antiqua gothica conscripta*, ed. O. Verelius, with notes by J. Schefferus, Uppsala, Curio, 1664, p. 5.

7 “[...] *fast de I tiöcka bedendoms-mörkeret lefwat [...] hafwa the doch warit stora och märkeliga Konungar [...] Hwilken och icke illa tiänar till at weder läggia någras ogrundade föregifwande som skulle här I Norlanden the forna tijder inet annat warit än itt groft och barbariskt lefwerne; och inbyggjarne inet annat idkat än rjffwas och slås.*”, *Gothrici & Rolfi Westrogothiae regum historia*, p. 18 (my translation).

This wish to prove that the Nordic peoples were not barbarian but descended from the noble people of the Goths (as many other European nations were eager to prove), was the central concern of gothicism⁸.

As indicated briefly above, saga style is grammatically characterized by short sentences, paratactic structures, sudden changes of tense and leaps between direct and indirect speech, and in its narrative is straightforward in an impersonal, sober way. This was perceived as “evenly and simply put together and [they] tell here and there things which in our times might be perceived as of little importance and not suited to being accounted for among the deeds of kings⁹”. However, as the quoted 1664 preface to Verelius’ edition of *Gautreks saga* continues, “in this, [the story] should not be judged to be of less value, but rather would it thereby gain higher credibility and authenticity because it tells what happened in the past regardless of somebody’s praise or blame¹⁰”.

TERMINOLOGICAL EXCURSUS II: ICELANDIC “SAGA”

The ambiguity of the term “saga” makes it difficult for a non-Icelandic mind to decide if it is meant to be fact or fiction that is dealt with. Both history and story is addressed by the word, and the term is ambiguous in Icelandic even into the present day. A “saga” can be a prose narrative of non-defined length, a story, a novel, a history. Moreover, as stated above, this term is used for the specifically Icelandic literary genre of narratives from the Middle Ages, be it specified by the prefix “old”, “*for-*” - *forn-sögur*. So, if a text bears the title “saga”, it would be impossible to tell which kind of text it was without further information or without reading it. Historical events, real kings’ reigns and other information is given in

8 See I. Schmidt-Voges, *De antiqua claritate et clara antiquitate Gothorum. Gotizismus als Identitätsmodell im frühneuzeitlichen Schweden*, Frankfurt, Lang, 2004.

9 “slätt och enfaldigt sammansatt och förtälta här och thär nogot som wid vår tid kan synas förringa och otjänligt att upräknas ibland Konunga bedrifter”, *Gotbrici & Rolfi Westrogotbiae regum historia*, p. 6 (my translation).

10 “bör hon för thenskull icke thess ringare värderas; utan fast heller gifs henne för slikt större witzord och trovärdighet att hon wtban anseande till någons ros eller last berättar hwad fordom skeat är”, *ibid.* (my translation).

a neutral and emotionless reporting style that tempts the audience to believe in the trustworthiness of the stories being told. Furthermore, the style of the Icelandic sagas supports the impression that facts are being recounted as real persons' names are used, real place names are given and described in such geographical detail that they can be directly related to a modern map¹¹. And, even into the present day, the detailed topological descriptions of the sagas form the basis for archeological excavations¹².

SWEDEN'S LITERARY AGENT JÓN EGGERTSSON

As pointed out before, it was not possible for the Swedish antiquarians to determine the historical validity of the “sagas” they bought from the Icelanders, and neither had they direct access to the texts labelled as sagas. It was not only the language of Old Icelandic that was incomprehensible, but the written record as such as it is, with its specifically Icelandic paleography, is a challenge in itself due to its elaborate system of abbreviation. No dictionaries or grammars existed at that time. All this meant that the Swedes were absolutely dependent on help from native speakers and literate Icelanders. As a consequence, the Collegium Antiquitatum hired a number of Icelanders as translators. These individuals had thus the power to decide which texts the Swedes and Danes were to read. Of special importance for the Swedish side was the role of a person who served both as a scribe and an agent who provided the Antikvitetskollegium with medieval manuscripts and new copies of old saga texts. Jón Eggertsson (1643-1689), a cloister bailiff administering a former monastery in Northern Iceland, was to become the Swedish crown's literary agent who travelled around Iceland and collected manuscripts for the Collegium Antiquitatum.

11 A recent research project places the geographical data given in the sagas of Icelanders on a map with the help of GIS co-ordinates: E. Lethbridge, Icelandic Saga Map, <http://www.sagamap.hi.is> [retrieved 19/01/2021].

12 For details of a recent archaeological finding that indeed proved a geographical detail given in a saga narrative to be true, see Norsk institutt for kulturminneforskning, Olav den helliges alter i Trondheim, <https://niku.no/2016/11/olav-helliges-alter-trondheim/> [retrieved 19/01/2021].

And another fact complicated the accomplishment of the Swedish task: Iceland was not an independent nation but – of all things – a Danish colony. The medieval Icelandic commonwealth had come under the Norwegian crown in 1262/64 which then entered the Kalmar union of 1397, only to stay with the Danish kingdom after this union’s dissolution in 1523. In 1602, the Danish king imposed Danish trade monopoly on Iceland (which lasted until 1786)¹³. This heavy control of all imports and exports made it even more difficult to obtain manuscripts from the island.

The Danish king forbade Icelandic manuscripts to be sold or given to anyone but the royal Danish legate whom he sent to Iceland to obtain old Norse text material for his own national historiographical purposes. However, Iceland was and is a far remote island with its own laws and social system: Jón Eggertsson succeeded in persuading his compatriots to give or sell written material to him, be it illegal or not, and managed to take a considerable amount of material with him. The Danish legate, by contrast, perished on the way back to Denmark and with him an unknown amount of manuscripts¹⁴.

Ironically enough, Jón did have to spend some time in Danish prison, but not in Blåtårnet, the Blue Tower reserved for traitors to the nation but in the debtors’ prison – for fiscal fraud concerning his cloister duties. Nevertheless, he had the opportunity to copy manuscripts as debtors were allowed to have visitors who could bring food, clothes, paper, ink and manuscripts. Copenhagen was Iceland’s capital at the time and many Icelanders would travel there, some of them living there permanently. Two industrious Icelanders were in royal service working for the national history project, and Jón Eggertsson was in contact with both of them. Their common origin led them to exchange information and manuscripts regardless of decrees expressing the competition between the two Nordic realms – obviously, the Icelanders did not perceive any moral conflict there. However, when Jón tried to sell some of his manuscripts to these Icelanders, they brusquely refused – the *historiographus regius Daniae*, Þormóður Torfason, called Torfæus, reacted quite indignantly

13 J. J. Aðils, *Einokunarverzlun Dana á Islandi 1602-1787*, Reykjavík, Heimskringla, 1971 (2. ed.).

14 See also my doctoral thesis: R. Jucknies, *Der Horizont eines Schreibers: Jón Eggertsson (1643-1689) und seine Handschriften*, Frankfurt, Lang, 2009, p. 50.

in a letter on Jón's proposal: "Do you think that I would want to buy any old corrupt scrawlings at great expense when His Majesty himself owns correct parchment exemplars of the same things that have been entrusted to me¹⁵".

What Jón Eggertson did do – probably while imprisoned and lacking further manuscript material – was to become a creative writer himself. As I have shown elsewhere, Jón actually was quite creative both in texting and writing. He worked readily with different layouts according to the different commissioners he was writing for, and for example made his texts look older than they were. Furthermore, he transformed given texts into saga form. There are several examples of his adaptation of Icelandic songs called *rímur* into saga style and form. *Rímur*, the youngest of the main literary genre of Icelandic medieval literature as mentioned above, are a specifically Icelandic genre of epic song with strict metrics and form that were very popular for centuries. However, they were not favoured by Icelandic literary historiographers of later periods as they were adjudged to mark the decline of the elaborate art of Skaldic poetry and the established prose genre of the sagas. *Rímur* were sung for entertainment, often expanding just on the protagonists of "classical" sagas or telling the story itself – there exist many *rímur* that were based on medieval saga plots and narratives¹⁶. Jón Eggertsson in his turn applied exactly the opposite technique: he reworked the verses of the *rímur* into saga prose. He managed indeed to sell his works to the Swedish Antikvitetskollegium, but in the face of his fellow Icelanders who immediately saw through his game, he did not succeed – Árni Magnússon for example, the great eighteenth century collector of Icelandic manuscripts, judged some of Jón's texts to be plain forgery¹⁷.

Árni Magnússon (1663-1689), who was about a generation younger than Jón Eggertsson, was to become the most important Icelandic scholar of the eighteenth century, and his approach towards copying Old Norse literature was different from Jón's. As a scribe, Jón represents a medieval way of treating his source texts: it is the content that is to be preserved and copied, not the wording, and much less the

15 Jucknies, *Der Horizont eines Schreibers*, p. 231: "meine hier jeg vilie kaupá nockud corrupt krabull fyrer dyra peninga, þar hans Majestet Sialfur a sier correct pergamentz exemplaria afsama sem mier eru betrud", ms. AM 282 fol. 124r (letter dated 27/03/1685), my translation.

16 A comprehensive portrayal and history of Icelandic *rímur* art is still a desideratum.

17 See also Jucknies, *Der Horizont eines Schreibers*, p. 233.

orthography in detail. This distinguishes him from Arni’s academic approach, concerned as it is with copies as close to the source texts as possible – a copy in the modern sense of the word. Jón even produced manuscripts for the Swedish scholars, expanding abbreviations and writing in a clear style so they would be able to use the transcriptions for their editorial work. However, being a clever businessman, he used their dependence and incompetence to judge his work at full capacity by putting comparatively little text on every page, leaving lots of space to the margin, between the lines, and even between letters. Regarding his almost playful approaches to copying texts, Jón Eggertsson is to be seen as a link or a traveller between the Middle Ages and modern times.

In the field of vernacular philology, Sweden was – as stated above – first in the North to publish multilingual editions of Old Norse texts. These editions, usually printed in quarto or even folio format, displayed the Old Norse text in a left hand column, a Swedish translation to the right and a synoptic Latin translation at the bottom of the page. A common layout of these editions would use different fonts for the Norse and Swedish vernacular (blackletter) and for Latin (antiqua). The editions printed in folio format were presumably meant to accompany diplomats and other high-status players on their trips to the continent, and to impress a hopefully dazzled European public, scholars as well as nobles.

LITERARY HISTORIOGRAPHY IN ICELAND

The searing criticism of Jón Eggertsson’s saga writing expressed by his fellow Icelanders leads us to the following question: how did the Icelanders themselves rate medieval Nordic literature?

In an attempt at sketching a history of the beginnings of Icelandic literary historiography, Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) is to be mentioned first. Before Snorri, there only existed mere lists of Old Norse poets (called *Skáldatal*) that might give some but little information on the poets’ biographies and would mention their works. Snorri was the most important medieval Icelandic of his time, a politician as well as a brilliant

poet and author of both saga and verse. He evaluated skaldic poems and in his poetics, he wrote down rules about how skaldic verses were to be appropriate and correct in form and content. In addition, he reflected – already in the first half of the thirteenth century – on the historical truth contained in Skaldic verse. He argued for the trustworthiness of the poems for two reasons – the rigid Old Norse metres that do not allow changes to the text through the ages, and the urge for the skald to tell the truth because he and his audience would be contemporaries to the events described in their work¹⁸. Thus, in contrast to the Swedish Antiquarians of the seventeenth century, Snorri Sturluson – himself being a skald and author of a work on Old Norse poetics – was able value the aesthetic and technical quality of the poems. However, his judgment refers exclusively to the technical quality of the verses insofar as their correspondence with the stiff rules of skaldic metrics and rhyme is concerned.

The first post-medieval attempt to write a more expanded Icelandic literary history was conducted by Páll Vídalín (1667-1727) in the beginning of the eighteenth century. The original manuscript has not been preserved, but Páll's Latin text was translated into Icelandic as well as augmented by an almost contemporaneous compatriot, Þorsteinn Pétursson (1710-1785). Páll's work bearing the title "*Recensus poetarum et scriptorum Islandorum hujus et superioris seculi*" and its augmentation was only printed in the twentieth century¹⁹. A great number of Icelandic authors, their works, lives and social status are evaluated, and their work judged. However, this account only covers authors from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and none from the Middle Ages.

An almost full account of Icelandic literature was likewise compiled in Latin by Hálfðan Einarsson (1732-1785) in 1777, a work called "*Sciagraphia*²⁰", but this contains no mention of the term "medieval literature" – the term used is "*antiquitates*". Furthermore, it is religious and political features that mark the border between periods of literature and which are used to distinguish different phases of literary writing. These

18 See S. Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. B. Aðalbjarnarson, Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002, 3 vols, I.

19 Páll Vídalín, *Recensus poetarum et scriptorum Islandorum hujus et superioris seculi. Viðauki Þorsteinssonar*, ed. J. Samsonarson, Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1985.

20 H. Einarsson, *Sciagraphia historiae literariae Islandicae autorum et scriptorum tum editorum tum ineditorum indicem exhibens*, Copenhagen, Sander & Schröder, 1777. This text is currently being edited by Icelandic Latinist G. Jensson.

phases concern poets before and after the reformation. Before the reformation, it is the poets during the time of the Icelandic commonwealth (in the ninth to thirteenth centuries), then poets writing under the Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish crown. Notably, it is only poetry that is judged by this periodisation. Sagas are labelled as historical literature and listed as well as discussed separately in this work.

TERMINOLOGICAL EXCURSUS III: ICELANDIC “MIÐALDABÓKMENNTIR”

There are two difficulties regarding terminology. Icelandic historians divide the Middle Ages into the age of settlement, the age of the Icelandic commonwealth, which is followed by an age named after the main ending with the reformation). The Icelandic term “*miðaldir*”, Middle Ages, and then, “*miðaldabókmenntir*” only occurred in the nineteenth century, and still it is rather the term “*fornöld*” – “old times”, and “*fornaldarbókmenntir*” (literature of old or ancient times) that are used for the phenomenon. As literature in the Nordic countries only occurs from the Middle Ages onwards, the term is equivalent to the “*antiquitates*” that the learned philologists of the seventeenth century used. This Latin term was used up to the nineteenth century, when the Dane Carl Christian Rafn edited Old Icelandic sagas in very successful anthologies named *Antiquités américaines*, *Antiquités de l’Orient*, and *Antiquités russes* according to the places of the saga settings²¹. In these editions, Rafn gathered medieval Icelandic writing that is set in named places in the Middle East and the North-West, all places where the Vikings had travelled in their time. The term “Middle Ages”, to sum up, was not in use before being included into the vocabulary of the eighteenth-century Romantic movement, which also coined the term “*söguöld*” (“saga era”) for the period described in the sagas of Icelanders (870-1030 AD).

21 C. C. Rafn, *Antiquités de l’Orient. Monumens runigraphiques*, Copenhagen, Thiele, 1856; *id.*, *Antiquités américaines: d’après les monuments historiques des Islandais et des anciens Scandinaves*, Copenhagen, Schultz, 1845; *id.*, *Antiquités russes d’après les monuments historiques des Islandais et des anciens Scandinaves*, Copenhagen, Berling, 1850.

DEVELOPMENTS OF THE RECEPTION
OF OLD NORSE LITERATURE

Of the editions that saw the light of day during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, one anthology had an outstanding impact on the literary world. This was a book called *Nordiska Kämpa-Dater i en sagoflock* – *The Deeds of Nordic heroes in a group of sagas*²². It was edited by Erik Julius Björner in 1737 and was the last comprehensive publication of the extensive movement of Swedish gothicism. *Nordiska Kämpa Dater* is a collection of *fornaldar sögur*, giving the text in Old Norse, Swedish and Latin in the three-part layout described above. The most prominent author and work are Olaus Rudbeck and his monumental *Atlantica*, where he explains to the world that Swedish is older than the world's oldest languages (that is Hebrew, Greek, and Latin) and that Sweden in truth is Atlantis (hence the title of his work)²³.

The *Kämpa Dater* edition gained immense popularity within the dawning Romantic movement of Neo-gothicism that encouraged a number of Swedish poets to immerse themselves into the Old Norse literary heritage and even had an impact on international writers and poets. The rewritings and versifications of the Old Norse material in turn became themselves very popular and wide-spread, on example being *Frithjofs saga* by Esaias Tegnér, which was almost immediately translated into German and other European languages²⁴.

As to the periodisation of Old Norse literature in the eighteenth century, there was by this point seemingly no advanced thought upon this aspect of literary historiography except in terms of the estimated historical value of the texts. In the nineteenth century, literary historiographers still divide medieval literature into the four named text

22 *Nordiska kämpa dater: i en sagoflock samlade om forna kongar och hjältar för hwilken, förutan et ständigt ättartabl på alla befintliga svenska kongar och drottningar, äfwen et företal finnes, angående orsaken til detta wärk, göta språkets förmän, gamla sakers nöjje, sagors trouwärdigbet och de här trycktas tidatabl, jämte förteckning på dem, som tilförende warit tryckte*, ed. E. J. Björner, Stockholm, Horn, 1737.

23 O. Rudbeck, *Atland eller Manheim*, Uppsala, Curio, 1675-1702, 4 vols.

24 E. Tegnér, *Frithjofs Saga*, Stockholm, Nordström, 1825, German transl., Hamburg: Schubert, 1840.

genres that are connected to subsequent periods of time: eddic poem as genre of the heroic time before the settlement of Iceland, Skaldic verse connected to the age of settlement, followed by the age of settlement and the age of the Icelandic commonwealth, to which saga literature is attributed. The latest genre of Icelandic rímur, up to twentieth-century literary historiography, is still being attributed to an age of decline at the very end of the Middle Ages and in the wake of reformation. As far as literary art in Iceland is concerned, it would be well into the twentieth-century before Icelandic writers started to grow independent of their medieval literary heritage. Modern fiction only started with Jón Thoroddsen's *Piltur og stúlka* in 1850. After a period in which the prevailing sentiment had been disgust at Iceland's romantic poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who were geared to central Europe's aesthetics, the genuinely Icelandic art of the rímur has only started to be re-esteemed, and reinvented in recent years, with its starting-point perhaps being Þórarinn Eldjárn's *Disney rímur* from 1978²⁵.

Even in the the present, Nordic literary historiography still has difficulties in describing the beginning of Nordic literature and the question of written record. There are stories and poems that simply have to originate in continental Scandinavia, but are only preserved in Icelandic wording. As stated above, concerning vernacular literature preserved in East Norse, with the exception of legal texts, it is comparably late and mostly consists of translations. For long centuries after the gothicistic movement, the Old Swedish and Old Danish literary works were of little interest to the national literary historiographers. Instead, a common literary heritage dressed in the Icelandic vernacular was claimed, and this made it possible to include Old Icelandic texts and poems into the historical account and the national canon. This, however, is a matter for a further study.

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25 Jón Þórðarson Thóroddsen, *Piltur og Stúlka: dálítill frásaga*, Copenhagen, Møller, 1850; Þórarinn Eldjárn, *Disneyrímur*, Reykjavík, Iðunn, 1978.