Jeffrey Scott Love

The Reception of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century

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Abstract

This work is an examination of the transmission and reception of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* from the Middle Ages up to 1700. The body of evidence for this study consists of thirty-five manuscripts written during this period, medieval literary analogues and selections from seventeenth-century primary and secondary literature. The ultimate goal has been to gain a better understanding of how sagas were adapted to suit a variety of purposes as they spread from Iceland through successive generations. To do this I have applied methods grounded in the tenets of New Philology, macro-level narrative variant analysis and studies of manuscript contexts, along with a survey of seventeenth-century criticism, in order to harvest the unique cultural information available in each textual witness.

The majority of the evidence comes from narrative variants expressed in diverse manuscript witnesses. *Hervarar saga* exists in three recognized redactions, R (Regius), H (Hauksbók) and U (Uppsala), and the differences between them can be read in terms of how their compilers wished to present the saga material to their audiences. Manuscripts of the R redaction, for example, have had some of the more explicit pagan imagery removed, while copies of U contain extended descriptions of violence. Meanwhile, manuscripts of H abbreviate large portions of narrative while expanding others, a process which likely harkens back to Haukr Erlendsson (d. 1334), compiler of Hauksbók, who seems to have utilized the saga for political or antiquarian purposes. Many seventeenth-century manuscripts contain copies of the saga which display diverse combinations of variant elements present in the base redactions. Several witnesses contain only excerpts, usually from the riddles episode, the passage in the saga which shows the most variation between witnesses. At least two manuscripts, BL Add. 4859 and AM 345 4to, have texts which have been recast back into
saga prose from *rimur*. Other texts accompanying *Hervarar saga* and manuscript provenance information have also proved useful for tracing saga reception. The contents of Uppsala R 715 and Riksarkivet E8630 demonstrate how the saga was appropriated by early Swedish academics, and the compiler of AM 582 4to adapted the end of the saga to suit more Danish interests.

Seventeenth-century *Hervarar saga* commentators established the foundations for future inquiry into the saga. Olaf Verelius and Olaf Rüdbeck made the work more widely available through published volumes, and Björn Jónsson á Skarðsá’s 1641 commentary to the riddles provides us with unique insight into the world of academic learning in post-Reformation Iceland. This period also sees the creation of Ásmundur Sæmundsson’s *Hervarar rimur*, through which we discover that the saga material remained vibrant and malleable despite being several centuries old.

I conclude that *Hervarar saga* has had a variety of purposes during its early transmission. Variations in riddles, expanded battle scenes, the profusion of manuscripts and the creation of *rimur* based on the text all suggest that *Hervarar saga* was a popular entertainment piece throughout the observed period. Even from the early fourteenth century, however, the text was valued for its historical content, and parts of the saga were added or changed to suit the purposes of various persons. *Hervarar saga* was prized for its poetry as well, parts of which were even attributed to Sæmundr inn fröði during earlier periods. I surmise that these findings will prove to be the case for other *fornaldarsögur* as well, especially those whose largely uninvestigated multiple redactions make them ideal for future research, such as Bósa saga, Gautreks saga and Örvar-Odds saga.
Preface

The contents of this volume are in most respects identical to the work submitted as my PhD dissertation at the University of Cambridge in June 2012. Some wording has been modified, and certain sections have been updated in light of recent discoveries.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to many people for their help and support on this project over the last four years. This book could not have existed without the unflagging guidance and patience of my PhD supervisor, Judy Quinn. I am much indebted to Svanhildur Oskarsdóttir and the Árnastofnun staff, Matthew Driscoll, Marteinn Sigurðsson and the Arnamagnæanske Samling staff and the helpful members of staff at the Copenhagen Konglige Bibliotek, the Kungliga Bibliotek in Stockholm, the Stockholm Riksarkiv, the Carolina Rediviva in Uppsala and the Landsbókasafn Íslands for their assistance in consulting manuscripts. I would also like to thank Karl Gunnar Johansson, Elise Kleivane, Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, Alison Finlay, Vicky Cribb, Caroline Larrington, Heather O’Donoghue, Tom Birkett, Brittany Schorn, Wilhelm Heizmann and Anne Hofmann for their insight and suggestions for the project along the way.

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Chapter One: Introduction

§ 1.1 General Introduction

In his recent survey of the fornaldarsögur, Stephen Mitchell poses a series of questions about the genre:

How the fornaldarsögur were used by medieval audiences, and to what purpose, has attracted much attention in recent years. Were they written through the patronage of individuals whose ambitions and concerns influenced the shape of the text? Were they of some larger extra-literary value to the Icelanders? Were they written under the moderate, or even deep, influence of the oral tradition which informs them? To what degree can we reconstruct the performance contexts of these materials?

The purpose of this work is to seek out some answers to these queries by exploring how audiences interacted with medieval legendary texts. The following chapters expose changes in audiences’ perception of one particular saga, Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks (Hervarar saga), through analyses of the traces left on the saga by individuals associated with the work over the course of its

1 Guðni Jónsson 1954, III: 163-64. ‘Because neither this nor anything else is done according to everyone’s liking, no one need place any more faith in it than seems right [to them].’
transmission. *Hervarar saga* is an ideal candidate for a study of reception history for three simple reasons. The first is that there are many extant manuscript copies of it. Most sagas do not survive in so many witnesses, especially not from the earlier periods. *Hervarar saga* has consistently been a favorite among saga audiences and it is attested in at least 91 manuscripts. *Hervarar saga* was traditionally a favorite among scholars as well. It has been edited eighteen times since 1672, more than any other *fornaldarsaga* save *Völunga saga*, but academic interest in Heiðrekr’s exploits diminished some time during the early twentieth century. Previous readers of *Hervarar saga* held it in high regard, but it is one of several *fornaldarsögur* which have been generally overlooked by modern scholarship until very recently. The second reason for choosing *Hervarar saga* is that it exists in multiple versions, some of which were, in turn, adapted into other literary genres such as *rímur*. Finally, *Hervarar saga* was one of the earliest Old Norse-Icelandic texts to be picked up by the European scholarly community and discussed in print. These three attributes mean that a wealth of resources are available for tracking the early development of the saga.

An identifiable core narrative is expressed in all *Hervarar saga* sources, but pieces of it have been adapted over time for a variety of

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3 By comparison, Driscoll (1997, 4) writes that *Mágus saga jarls* and *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns* were two of the most popular sagas because they survive in over seventy manuscripts. No fewer than 28 other manuscripts contain copies of the two extensive *rímur* which derive from *Hervarar saga*. A detailed list of manuscripts consulted for this project is given below in § 1.2.1, and a full list of known copies is attached as Appendix A.

4 This sentiment is shared by several scholars. Margaret Clunies Ross (2006, 181) trenchantly points out that poetry in the *fornaldarsögur* has generally been ignored except the ‘genuinely old’ but that the very same poetry was highly valued in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Earlier attitudes toward the *fornaldarsögur* can be summed up by Alrik Gustafson’s (1974, 20) description of them as “This last – decadent – stage in the history of the saga ... characterized by an excess of romantic themes and utterly incredible complications of action.” Cf. also Jorgensen (1979, 1) and Tolkien (1960, vii). For a recent discussion of the genre see Kalinke, et al. 2006.
different audiences. These narrative reworkings offer us opportunities to consider why this particular saga was important to its audience at a given time and place. Textual additions, omissions and alterations all reflect the interests of the composers, many of whom have exerted their influence on *Hervarar saga* over the centuries. Codicological evidence also helps us determine prevailing attitudes toward the saga at the moment when a given manuscript was compiled. Other texts present in surviving manuscripts provide the contexts in which the saga was viewed by manuscript compilers.

Our knowledge of *Hervarar saga* begins in early fourteenth-century Iceland with its first written manifestation in Hauksbók (AM 544 4to), but it was certainly known in oral (or perhaps even written) form for some time prior to this.\(^5\) Subsequent manuscript copies of the saga were produced in Iceland, although they do not survive in any great number until the second half of the seventeenth century. Part of the reason for the upsurge in copies during the years leading up to 1700 can be attributed to antiquarian scholars in Scandinavia and other parts of Europe who began to embrace the saga for political reasons. The antiquarians and other individuals interested in the work made changes to *Hervarar saga* to suit their own interests and those of their audiences. By scrutinizing these changes, one can draw some conclusions concerning how *Hervarar saga* was viewed during the Middle Ages in its native Iceland, as well as how these views shifted as the saga was transmitted to subsequent generations both at home and abroad.

### § 1.1.1 Scope and Organization

This study strives to present a general survey of the impact exerted by *Hervarar saga* during its early development, and it encompasses

\(^5\) Andrews (1927, 161) proposes an ‘original’ date of 1250-99, but no evidence for such a speculation exists beyond an assumption that an oral version of the saga must have existed shortly before its commitment to parchment (an argument long supported by adherents of the Bookprose school, cf. Andersson 2002, 383).
as much evidence as possible leading up to the seventeenth century. After 1700, an explosion of manuscript copies occurs and, while the younger manuscripts are interesting in their own right, their sheer number presents certain practical difficulties. The eighteenth century also sees a dramatic rise in printed saga editions intended for new audiences. I emphasize early transmission and reception, as the results from this type of analysis might be applicable to other medieval Scandinavian texts, a better understanding of which would aid us in developing a more nuanced view of the culture and society of saga producers and consumers. Furthermore, such a general diachronic survey represents an initial research phase, a foundation upon which more detailed studies of *Hervarar saga* and other *fornaldarsögur* might be based. I have also chosen to include a number of paper copies in part to vindicate manuscripts of the seventeenth century which have been repeatedly denigrated by editors and literary scholars during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.  

Here I must echo the sentiments of Jón Sigurðsson, who lamented that Icelandic folktales had been “cast … aside like withered dandelions. They have never been put on parchment, and consequently we count them as of no worth.” Several of these manuscripts contain fascinating story variants not present in the medieval sources and are worthy of further investigation.

I have chosen to focus on three aspects of the primary sources which might advance our understanding of what the saga meant to earlier composers and audiences. Following this introductory material, chapter two contains a study of manuscripts, their contents and attributes. A survey of neighboring texts and other aspects unique to each source provides contextual information about how *Hervarar saga* was perceived at the times when

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6 Cf. Andrews (1914, 363) and Andrews (1927, 149). Jón Helgason (1924, ix, xx) refers to many younger manuscripts, such as AM 354 4to, as *værdiløs*. Even more recently Tolkien (1960, xxix) dismisses the paper manuscripts as “of no value for the establishment of the text.”

7 From Jón Sigurðsson’s 1860 review of Konrad Maurer’s German translation of Icelandic folktales given in Finnbogi Guðmundsson (1982, 71).
individual manuscripts were compiled. Some codicological contexts become useful for analyzing variants in chapter three, which itself delves into the literary content and exposes the extensive narrative variety which exists between saga versions and analogues. The fourth chapter is a continuation of the third. It contains a dedicated study of the Old Norse riddles, which hold a special place within the canon of Old Norse literature and seem to have enjoyed a certain fame of their own outside of the saga. Chapter five takes a broader look at *Hervarar saga* and its place in seventeenth-century society, how it spread outside of Iceland and particularly how it was absorbed into the Swedish academic milieu. Here I also consider how the core story of the saga, what I shall call ‘materia’, was transformed into seventeenth-century *rímur* in Iceland and into ballads elsewhere in Scandinavia. The most significant of these is Ásmundur Sæmundsson’s (17th c.) *Hervarar rímur*, which survives in three manuscripts from the second half of the seventeenth century.

Three appendices have been affixed to the end of this study. One is a table of all known manuscripts containing *Hervarar saga*, as well as manuscripts bearing two related texts, both called *Hervarar rímur*. The second is a collection of manuscript stemmata produced by previous scholars to explain the relationships between saga versions. Appendix C is my own interpretation of how one might graphically display relationships between the manuscripts discussed below. It includes three diagrams which illustrate the complicated network of influences on individual copies of the text. A system of internal pointers is used to reference material in other chapters. Such references are set off by square brackets. These numbers refer to chapter and section as set out in the table of contents (e.g. [§ 1.1.1] refers to this section).
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