

E. C. QUIGGIN MEMORIAL LECTURES 23

RALPH O'CONNOR

**The Music of What Happens:
Narrative Terminology
and the Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic Saga**



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Edmund Crosby Quiggin (1875-1920) was the first teacher of Celtic in the University of Cambridge, as well as being a Germanist. His extraordinarily comprehensive vision of Celtic studies offered an integrated approach to the subject: his combination of philological, literary, and historical approaches paralleled those which his older contemporary, H. M. Chadwick, had already demonstrated in his studies of Anglo-Saxon England and which the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic continues to seek to emulate. The Department has wished to commemorate Dr Quiggin's contribution by establishing in his name, and with the support of his family, an annual lecture and a series of pamphlets. The focus initially was on the sources for Mediaeval Gaelic History. Since 2006 the Quiggin Memorial Lecture is on any aspect of Celtic and/or Germanic textual culture taught in the Department.

The Music of What Happens: Narrative Terminology and the Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic Saga

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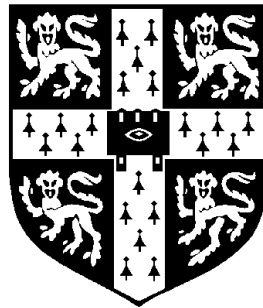
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The Music of What Happens: Narrative Terminology and the Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic Saga¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

Saga, plural *sǫgur* or *sögur*, is an originally Old Norse word that is still used in modern Scandinavian languages to refer to a large and varied corpus of narrative prose. Since the nineteenth century, it has also been used to refer to a similarly extensive and disparate, but less clearly defined, corpus of narrative prose in mediaeval and modern Irish. *Saga* literally means ‘what is said’. Like its mediaeval Irish cognate *scél* (plural *scéla*), it derives from an Indo-European root **sek^w*- ‘say’.² Like *saga*, *scél* was used across the mediaeval Gaelic world

¹ The research on which this essay draws began with a period of research leave funded by a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship, and I wish to express my gratitude to the Trust for their generosity. I am grateful to Cambridge’s Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic for inviting me to deliver the 2021 Quiggin Lecture which formed the germ from which the present essay grew. I thank members of the audience for discussion at the event. For subsequent discussion of specific points, I am grateful to Michael Clarke, Margaret Cormack, Jenyth Evans, Jon Gunnar Jørgensen and Geraldine Parsons. For valuable feedback on previous drafts of this essay I am indebted to Paul Bibire, Elizabeth Boyle, Erich Poppe and especially Máire Ní Mhaonaigh. I claim full responsibility for any errors or oversights. Textual quotations are set out where possible using the orthographies of the editions cited, but I adapt punctuation in the interests of clarity. All translations are my own unless otherwise credited.

² Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1981), p. 24; Ranko Matasović, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 328 and 338-9. For other Germanic cognates, see Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, 1977), pp. 459 and 578 (ss.v. *saga*, *sǫg*, *sǫgn*). My discussion of the semantics of *scél* and *saga* draws heavily on the two leading dictionaries of Old Norse prose up to about 1550 and Irish up to about 1700. These two enormously valuable resources are still under development and my observations are based on the current versions of the relevant entries. For Irish, see *eDIL 2019: An Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, based on the Royal Irish Academy’s *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin, 1913-76), www.dil.ie 2019, s.v. *scél*, entry last updated 2013 (accessed

to denote an oral or written narrative, including the kinds of narrative frequently referred to as ‘sagas’ in Anglophone scholarship. Both words were also used to refer to a wide range of other kinds of utterance, especially news, information or reports.

All the sagas surviving from the mediaeval Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic worlds³ exist only in written form, and the forms and content of any supposed oral precursors or sources are partly or wholly irrecoverable. The balance of oral and written sources for written sagas will have differed greatly from one text to another. Some sagas are clearly based on written sources only, including some of the earliest physically attested Norse-Icelandic sagas, while others appear to be based wholly or partly on oral sources. This essay is focused on written narratives in both cultures. Nevertheless, it is essential to remember that the spoken word (the idea of ‘what is said’) lies at the heart of the etymology of *scél* and *saga*. In terms of functional semantics, too, the spoken word is central to the broader ways in which both terms were used, which were not restricted to narrative.

The extant saga literature (as it is often termed) of Ireland and Scotland, surviving in redactions from about the eighth century onwards, represents the oldest substantial corpus of vernacular narrative prose surviving from the

7 November 2022). For Norse, see the University of Copenhagen’s *ONP: Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, <https://onp.ku.dk>, s.v. *saga*, entry last updated 2020 (accessed 7 November 2022).

³ Most extant mediaeval saga-manuscripts were written in Ireland and Iceland, but several were written in 12th- and 13th-century Norway and 15th- and 16th-century Scotland. The languages that I refer to as ‘Norse’ and ‘Irish’ were written in both Norway and Iceland, and in both Ireland and Scotland, throughout the Middle Ages. It is often impossible to determine in which part of either cultural zone an individual saga was first composed. The linguistic divergences which arose later in the Middle Ages between written Irish and Scottish Gaelic, or between written Icelandic and Norwegian (and the much greater divergences that must have characterized the spoken languages), are not relevant to this essay. In this essay I use ‘Norse-Icelandic’ and ‘Gaelic’ (with ‘Gael’) to refer to cultures and literatures and ‘Norse’ and ‘Irish’ to refer to the languages, while acknowledging that any choice of terminology will have its disadvantages. On manuscript distribution, see Brian Ó Cuív, ‘Ireland’s Manuscript Heritage’, *Éire-Ireland*, 19 (1984), 87-110; Ronald I. M. Black, ‘The Gaelic Manuscripts of Scotland’, in William Gillies, ed., *Gaelic and Scotland: Alba agus a’ Ghàidhlig* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 146-74; Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, ‘Manuscripts and Palaeography’, in Rory McTurk, ed., *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (London, 2005), pp. 245-64, at pp. 246-9.

Middle Ages.⁴ As a written tradition it was also extremely long-lived, giving way only in the nineteenth century into purely oral storytelling on the one hand and written novels and histories on the other. The later corpus of Norse-Icelandic sagas, written mostly in Iceland and Norway and surviving in versions composed from the twelfth century onwards, was scarcely less durable: the last saga-copyists laid down their pens around 1920, by which time the radio had supplanted the manuscript as the source of a winter evening's aural entertainment. Literary and intellectual developments elsewhere in Europe did not go unnoticed during the saga's long history in both cultures. The renaissances of the eighth (for the Gaels), twelfth, and fourteenth to sixteenth centuries all left their mark, as did the emergence of the vernacular chronicle, romance, humanist historiography and the modern novel. Hundreds of individual narratives survive, many of them in several different versions.

Both bodies of written narrative emerged within different linguistic and cultural traditions, but their geographical and political proximity to each other makes the wider North Atlantic context a natural arena in which to undertake comparative study. Such comparisons are further encouraged by the shared identity of Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic sagas as bodies of vernacular prose surviving from beyond the edges of the old Roman Empire. It has sometimes been suggested that the later Norse-Icelandic saga tradition was sparked off through culture-contact with the Gaelic world, but the smaller but equally important bodies of Welsh and Old English vernacular narrative prose (both extant and lost) create difficulties for such a view. *A priori*, independent evolution seems more likely. Nonetheless, there are enough historical, literary

⁴ Contrary to Lars Boje Mortensen's assertion in 'The Sudden Success of Prose: A Comparative View of Greek, Latin, Old French and Old Norse', *medieval worlds*, 5 (2017), 3-45, pp. 22-3, the Gaelic world produced a substantial body of 'continuous prose texts' besides legal texts and adaptations from Latin between 600 and 1100 – not only sagas but also genealogies, chronicles, place-lore, glossaries, devotional texts, mirrors for princes and hagiography – predating the 'sudden success of prose' in twelfth-century Europe by several centuries. Nonetheless, it would be fruitful to compare Mortensen's sociohistorical explanation of this twelfth-century phenomenon with the Gaelic situation between the seventh and ninth centuries.

and folkloric parallels between some of the individual texts to make comparisons productive, and some of these parallels point to oral and/or literary connections between the two cultures at different periods and on several levels. In a twelfth- and thirteenth-century context, these connections have recently been treated to an in-depth exploration in the recent book co-authored by two members of Cambridge's Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic along with co-authors from Ireland and Norway, *Norse-Gaelic Contacts in a Viking World*.⁵

The present essay involves cultural comparison rather than culture-contact. It is an attempt to take the necessary first steps towards answering the question of what a saga is (or was) in these two cultures: whether 'saga', *scél* or both are meaningful categories of narrative in Gaelic as well as Norse-Icelandic contexts, and how closely they compare with each other.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the word 'saga' has been used by many Celticists to refer to a wide range of Gaelic prose and prosimetrum narratives, both by analogy with the German folkloristic term *Sage* (meaning a folk legend, as opposed to a *Märchen* or folktale) and by analogy with Icelandic sagas.⁶ Use of the term *Sage* by German Celticists such as Ernst Windisch and Rudolf Thurneysen, in studies of written Gaelic narratives such as *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The Cattle-Raid of Cooley'),⁷ was rapidly assimilated by their Anglophone contemporaries and successors to the Anglicized term 'saga', sometimes with a conscious nod to Norse-Icelandic examples.⁸ The term is still widely used today

⁵ Colmán Etchingham, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *Norse-Gaelic Contacts in a Viking World: Studies in the Literature and History of Norway, Iceland, Ireland, and the Isle of Man*, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe, 29 (Turnhout, 2019).

⁶ See James Murray *et al.*, ed., *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 11 vols in 15 (Oxford, 1888-1933), VIII.2 (*S-Sh*, ed. by Henry Bradley, 1914), p. 32, s.v. *saga* 2.

⁷ The most influential example is Rudolf Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (Halle a. S., 1921), where the term *Sage* is used sometimes to denote a cycle of sagas but more often to denote an individual saga. This was noted by Erich Poppe, *Of Cycles and Other Critical Matters: Some Issues in Medieval Irish Literary History and Criticism*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures, 9 (Cambridge, 2008), p. 8.

⁸ For example, Eleanor Knott translated Windisch's praise of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as Ireland's 'alte Heldensage' via the phrase 'old heroic saga' in her 'Ernst Windisch, 1844-1918', *Studies*, 8 (1919),

to refer to Gaelic prose narratives, but some scholars studiously avoid it.⁹ Certainly, it is by no means self-evident that the Norse-language category ‘saga’ is either appropriate or useful to describe a putative subset of works of Gaelic narrative prose. Nonetheless, and rather uncharacteristically for Celticists, there has been virtually no debate over how appropriate this usage is. Nor has there been any clear articulation (by proponents or opponents) of what the term ‘saga’ might be felt to imply about the narrative in question. Conversation with colleagues in recent years has confirmed that the term’s longstanding oral-traditional associations have put some Celticists off using the label ‘saga’ in a Gaelic context, although it has to be said that the commonly used alternative, ‘tale’, is even more problematic in this regard because of its long history of usage to translate German *Märchen*, referring to a genre of fictitious oral narrative.¹⁰

Beyond these difficulties of terminology, for some Celticists today there is a nagging suspicion that what many of us call the Gaelic or Irish ‘sagas’ do not constitute a discrete corpus at all. The sheer heterogeneity of literary forms, styles, subjects and indeed genres contained within the Gaelic *scéla*, and the huge number of texts produced over a long period of literary development, add to this difficulty. Even if we restrict ourselves to mediaeval compositions and ignore the centuries of post-mediaeval saga production, we are dealing with

264-7, p. 266. See also Eleanor Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature*, Grimm Library, 8 (London, 1898), and for comment see Poppe, *Of Cycles*, pp. 5-15. Influential in the wider application of ‘saga’ to traditional (oral or literary) prose narrative has been H. Munro Chadwick and N. Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1932-40), e.g. I, 2.

⁹ The term is avoided, for instance, in Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘The Literature of Medieval Ireland, 800-1200: from the Vikings to the Normans’, in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O’Leary, ed., *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 2006), I, 32-73. Despite its longstanding associations with oral-traditional narrative, however, it is used as the label of preference for vernacular Irish narratives by Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth Monographs, 3 (Maynooth, 1990), and Brent Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland*, Studies in Celtic History, 30 (Cambridge, 2011), two books which take a firm line against oral-traditional approaches to the texts in question.

¹⁰ Other terms used to denote Gaelic prose narratives include ‘romance’ and ‘epic’, as discussed by Poppe, *Of Cycles*, pp. 1-15. See also the previous footnote.

hundreds of individual texts, most of them lacking proper critical editions (and many not even in print). Of course, except for the last point in brackets, all these practical difficulties are equally true of the Norse-Icelandic saga corpus. But at least the (putatively) mediaeval Norse-Icelandic sagas have been defined as a stable corpus by (mostly) consistent application to them of the label *saga* over more than three centuries of scholarship, much of it supported by mediaeval attestations of that label in rubrics, colophons and cross-references. Only a tiny minority of texts have had their status as ‘sagas’ laid open to question.¹¹

By contrast, the large-scale philological study of Gaelic sagas began much more recently than that of their Norse-Icelandic counterparts, and the lack of a consistently applied label in mediaeval rubrics and colophons has hampered all attempts at describing an analogous saga corpus. Lists of Gaelic sagas do survive in the so-called Middle Irish tale-lists, purporting to describe the storytelling repertoires of high-ranking learned poets (*filid*); but these are clearly not comprehensive, and many of the narratives they do list no longer survive.¹² As will become clear below, the category *scél* was far broader in its application to written texts than was its Norse counterpart *saga*. In describing a Gaelic saga corpus, scholars since the late nineteenth century have generally fallen back on a loosely agreed set of conventional ‘cycles’ of narratives grouped by content, outlined in more detail below.

A helpful starting-point in considering the notion of a mediaeval Gaelic saga corpus, then, is provided by Erich Poppe’s provisional concept of ‘secular pseudo-historical narrative prose’ to embrace ‘the narrative texts of the so-

¹¹ See, for example, Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, ‘*Ynglinga saga* mellom fornalderssaga og kongesaga’, in Agneta Ney *et al.*, ed., *Fornaldarsagaerne: myter og virkelighet* (Copenhagen, 2008), pp. 49-59.

¹² Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*. ‘Middle Irish’, conventionally dated to *c.* 900-1200, is the transitional form of the written language as it metamorphosed from ‘Old Irish’ (*c.* 700-900) to ‘Early Modern Irish’ (*c.* 1200-1600). The term *fili* (pl. *filid*) means a high-ranking learned poet, and the duties of such individuals went well beyond the production and recitation of poetry: along with ecclesiastical scholars they were central to the Gaelic learned classes. For discussion, see Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland*, *Studies in Celtic History*, 33 (Woodbridge, 2013).

called Mythological, Historical (or King), and Ulster (or Heroic) cycles',¹³ but if this concept is to include all the texts commonly referred to as sagas or tales by Celticists, it needs to be expanded and further fleshed out. The Finn or Fenian cycle should also be added, and one might also add the qualifier 'vernacular' here, in keeping with Celticists' tendency to bracket off Hiberno-Latin narratives from those in Irish. Poppe cautions against over-emphasizing this linguistic boundary, but none of the texts conventionally included within the 'cycles' he mentions is in Latin, so this question remains open.¹⁴ The label 'secular' might be subject to a similar caveat.

Recent decades have seen the publication of some valuable overviews of subgroups of Gaelic saga literature, but despite some Herculean efforts to survey the whole body of mediaeval Gaelic literature, the outlines of any overarching saga corpus remain unclear.¹⁵ In the early to mid-twentieth century, surveys of mediaeval Gaelic literature used to refer confidently to the corpus of traditional *scéla* as listed in the Middle Irish tale-lists as a genuine corpus of 'tales' or 'sagas', but not all Celticists today find the idea of such an umbrella-category helpful to think with. The reification of that corpus through the tale-lists, and through the attention gained by anthologies of translated sagas, might

¹³ Erich Poppe, 'Reconstructing Medieval Irish Literary Theory: The Lesson of *Airec Menman Uraird mac Coise*', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 37 (1999), 33-54, pp. 33-4 and 41. I outline the various saga groupings below.

¹⁴ Poppe, 'Reconstructing', p. 33.

¹⁵ The fullest and most recent attempt to survey the Gaelic saga corpus is Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Clavis litterarum Hibernensium: Medieval Irish Books & Texts (c. 400–c. 1600)*, 1 vol in 3 (Turnhout, 2017), pp. 1259-1523, which lists and briefly describes most of the extant examples of 'medieval vernacular narrative prose' (p. 1259), in other words the sagas (Ó Corráin's preferred shorthand is 'tales'). However, the difficulties involved in defining the saga corpus are exemplified by Ó Corráin's assignment of several sagas or tales to the separate categories 'Historicist & Historical Vernacular Texts' (e.g. *Baile in Scáil*), 'Classica' (e.g. *Togail Troí*) and 'Foreign Medieval Literature – Translations and Adaptations' (e.g. *Stair Bibuis o Hamtuir*), even though some of the texts in these other categories were included in the Middle Irish tale-lists. Vernacular saints' Lives, whose Norse equivalents are considered 'sagas' by many scholars today, occupy their own category as is conventional. Curiously, Ó Corráin's overview does not include any of the so-called 'romantic tales' dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. His survey is nonetheless an essential reference-point for any future attempts to define the saga corpus.

even seem to hinder appreciation of the heterogeneity of mediaeval Gaelic literary production.¹⁶

Accordingly, some recent surveys of mediaeval Gaelic prose literature tread very lightly in terms of assigning vernacular narratives to groups at all unless they belong to widely recognized and defined international genres such as saint's Life, chronicle and universal history. The resulting literary landscape ends up implicitly subdivided into, on the one hand, those European genres, and on the other, a huge quantity of narrative corresponding to 'none of the above', with a few Gaelic-specific genres such as *immram* (voyage-tale) and *dindsenchas* (placename-lore) providing islets of definition within that undifferentiated morass. This practice chimes with the approach taken by many mediaeval manuscripts, which were far more heterogeneous than modern literary anthologies tend to be.¹⁷ But if those manuscripts were miniature libraries, we may still consider whether some of their narrative contents were felt to be a kind of text distinct from other narratives they included. Modern libraries, after all, contain texts belonging to a wide range of genres, yet their being gathered together in a single place does not make the question of their genre irrelevant. It is less easy to say whether the Gaelic sagas constitute a corpus (let alone a genre) in any sense parallel to the Norse-Icelandic sagas.

Both corpus and terminology are clearer for the Norse-Icelandic sagas. Yet they, too, are so heterogeneous that defining what counts as a saga is not straightforward here either. One useful starting-point is a cautiously phrased definition by Margaret Clunies Ross, here edited to convey the essentials:¹⁸

¹⁶ Different attitudes towards the traditional *scéla* as a corpus are exemplified by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Literature of Medieval Ireland to c. 800: St. Patrick to the Vikings', in Kelleher and O'Leary, *Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, I, 9-31, and Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Literature', especially p. 33.

¹⁷ Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Literature', p. 33.

¹⁸ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 23.

a textual form that was primarily a narrative in the vernacular ...;¹⁹ it was about people, mostly Norse people, and their doings, whether these were individuals or groups; it often contained poetry ...;²⁰ it occupied a grey area between fact and fiction, springing in variable part from known events, but it was also shaped by the creating imagination of its composers For the most part it was orally performed and had a high entertainment value.

Apart from the requirements that a saga be about people and involve authorial creativity (common to a very wide range of genres), these elements are all envisaged as frequent rather than qualifying attributes. Paul Bibire's quite different preliminary definition of a saga focuses on form alone rather than on content, language or function: for him, a saga is a prose narrative (often containing verse) 'which is more or less complete in terms of the causal structure which constitutes its narrative'.²¹ This formulation highlights the no less important issues of narrative focus and scope, while leaving open the question of how one is to decide what counts as a causal structure: Bibire's phrasing ('more or less') is as circumspect as Clunies Ross's.

Considering these very different definitions, one wonders whether there is anything that distinguishes sagas, in either culture, from other kinds of narrative. Not all narratives describable in these terms are generally seen by scholars today as 'sagas'.²² Bibire's emphasis on causal structure (as opposed

¹⁹ I omit here Clunies Ross's cautious discussion of possible oral sagas.

²⁰ Here I omit discussion of whether the poetry was composed previously or invented by the saga-author.

²¹ Paul Bibire, 'On Reading the Icelandic Sagas: Approaches to Old Icelandic Texts', in Beverley Ballin Smith *et al.*, ed., *West over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement before 1300*, Northern World, 31 (Leiden, 2007), pp. 3-18, at p. 3.

²² Examples might include the narrative introductions to the Prose *Edda* and some recensions of *Landnámabók*, as well as (depending on one's view of their causal structure) the whole of *Íslendingabók*, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* and *Lebor Bretnach*. Clunies Ross's 'primarily in the vernacular' does not exclude Latin hagiography. On the causal coherence of *Íslendingabók* and its relationship to saga narrative, see Siân Grønlie, 'Introduction', in her ed. and trans., *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga*, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series, 18 (London, 2006), pp. vii-xlvi, at pp. xviii-xxx. In view of Clunies Ross's last two criteria, it is worth noting that the extent to which any (or parts) of the texts listed in this footnote were orally performed, or were found entertaining, is impossible to determine, just as it is with many texts that we generally refer to as sagas.

to, for example, the mere chronological arrangement of events) does open up one possible means of distinguishing sagas from some other branches of historical narrative, but that avenue has not yet been properly explored.

Critical interest in narrative genre has been lively in both disciplines, but it has been focused on subgroups where family resemblances in form and especially content are easy to see. On the Gaelic side this is because the corpus is so difficult to define; on the Norse-Icelandic side it may be because everybody knows which texts qualify as ‘sagas’ and therefore there is felt to be no need to interrogate that umbrella-category. It is telling that one of the most sustained recent attempts to answer the question ‘what is a saga?’ is a chapter of a book designed primarily to introduce sagas to non-specialists.²³ In my view the question deserves the attention of every scholar in the field. The largest-scale single publication so far devoted to the study of prose genre in either culture is the *Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre* edited by Massimiliano Bampi and others, published in 2020 and an essential scholarly resource. Even here there is no real discussion of what a ‘saga’ is, except for a helpful paragraph by Kevin Wanner about how saints’ sagas are often seen as different from sagas ‘proper’.²⁴ The rest of the book focuses on what its contributors take to be different genres within the Norse-Icelandic saga corpus, and on historical and literary relationships between those genres. The category ‘saga’ is used throughout the book, but it is of no real generic interest in itself and is not defined in any way against other narrative forms.

Before I proceed, it deserves emphasizing that many of the issues raised here also apply to other bodies of narrative beyond the Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic worlds. The use of the category ‘saga’, conflating German *Sage* with Anglicized Icelandic ‘saga’, has been no less prevalent in scholarship on other

²³ Clunies Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 23.

²⁴ Kevin J. Wanner, ‘*Byskupasögur* and *heilagra manna sögur* – A Case Study’, in Massimiliano Bampi et al., ed., *A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre* (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 283-97, at pp. 284-5.

bodies of narrative ancient and modern, from ancient Israel to late pre-modern New Zealand.²⁵ Closer to the two cultures under discussion here, the concept of the ‘saga’ has featured in scholarship on mediaeval Welsh and Old English literature, but as a category of narrative either no longer extant at all, or surviving only in heavily adapted and un-saga-like forms. In Anglo-Saxon scholarship a century ago ‘sagas’ were sometimes invoked as now-lost oral-traditional sources of extant Old English and Anglo-Latin narratives, but have since faded from view even in this regard. A detailed study by C. E. Wright brought to light numerous fascinating and overlooked byways of Anglo-Saxon legendary tradition, but failed to define in even the vaguest way what a saga was.²⁶ The sole extant example (in Wright’s view) was the Cynewulf-Cyneheard story in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (annal for 755), but Wright considered it in its extant form to have suffered from condensation and confusion; in his view it no longer survived in its ‘original saga form’.²⁷ The few surviving pieces of extended prose narrative in Old English have never been considered as ‘sagas’, not even the late Old English adaptation of the Graeco-Latin romance of Apollonius of Tyre which has a much later Icelandic saga-analogue, the post-mediaeval *Apollonius saga*.²⁸

‘Sagas’ play a livelier role in studies of mediaeval Welsh literature, primarily in relation to the question of whether or not the extant poems about (or voiced by) Llywarch Hen and other legendary figures were performed or written with saga-like connecting narratives that have since been lost.²⁹ Oddly,

²⁵ Chadwick and Chadwick, *Growth of Literature*; Patricia G. Kirkpatrick, *The Old Testament and Folklore Study* (Sheffield, 1988), pp. 75-6.

²⁶ C. E. Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh, 1939). A very cautious and quite different possibility of lost Old English ‘sagas’ framing some of the extant elegies, along the lines of the Welsh ‘saga poetry’, has been raised in Nicolas Jacobs, ‘Celtic Saga and the Contexts of Old English Elegiac Poetry’, *Études celtiques*, 26 (1989), 95-142.

²⁷ Wright, *Cultivation of Saga*, p. 80.

²⁸ On the Old English adaptation, see Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York, 1986), pp. 96-8.

²⁹ Jenny Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poetry: A Study and Edition of the Englynion* (Cambridge, 1990), especially p. 265; see also Proinsias Mac Cana, ‘Prosimetrum in Insular Celtic Literature’, in Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, ed., *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose*

however, the mediaeval prose narratives grouped together in modern times as the *Mabinogion* – the closest extant analogues to Norse-Icelandic sagas and especially Gaelic sagas – are almost never referred to as ‘sagas’. This may be in order to avoid confusion with the ‘saga poetry’ debate; if so, Welsh ‘sagas’ are lost by definition. There is much scope for comparison of the extant Middle Welsh (and Cambro-Latin) prose narratives with their Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic counterparts,³⁰ although as Barry Lewis has recently emphasized, it is also essential not to assume that the beginnings of narrative prose in Welsh must have developed along Irish lines.³¹ For now, I restrict my own exploration to the two huge bodies of mediaeval narrative where the category ‘saga’ has been either unquestioned or very widely adopted.

In the Quiggin Lecture on which this pamphlet is based, I surveyed several aspects of the Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic saga corpora in order to see whether criteria such as language, length and degree of narrative focus could be said to distinguish sagas from other kinds of narrative in both cultures, and to test how far these distinctions were recognized by mediaeval Gaels and Norse-speakers. The subject was far too broad to cover in one lecture, as I found when speaking and even more when attempting to write it up in pamphlet form. The pamphlet quickly grew into a book, which I hope to publish before long. The present essay has a more limited aim. I will first set the two saga corpora (such as they are generally assumed to be) alongside each other and draw out some underlying similarities and differences between their various forms, their development over time and, in particular, the ways in which mediaeval scribes and redactors conceptualized these bodies of narrative via naming patterns used

and Verse (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 99-130, at pp. 116-22, and compare Jacobs, ‘Celtic Saga’. For a sceptical perspective on the existence of these ‘sagas’ see Patrick K. Ford, ed. and trans., *The Poetry of Llywarch Hen* (Berkeley, California, 1974), pp. 48-55.

³⁰ See, for example, Poppe, *Of Cycles*, pp. 32-6; Erich Poppe, ‘The Matter of Troy and Insular Versions of Dares’s *De Excidio Troiae Historia*’, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft*, 19.2 (2009), 252-98.

³¹ Barry Lewis, ‘Irish and Welsh’, in Mark Chinca and Christopher Young, ed., *Literary Beginnings in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2022), pp. 45-68, at pp. 61-4.

in saga titles. I will then explore the wider, often non-narrative senses in which the words *saga* and *scél* were used, to see what light these broader semantic fields shed on how mediaeval writers and audiences conceptualized the bodies of narrative which were also referred to as *sögur* and *scéla*. We shall then be in a better position to explore what, if anything, distinguishes these narratives from other kinds of narrative in mediaeval Norse-Icelandic and Gaelic literature, and one step closer to understanding what they meant to the people who wrote, read and heard them.

2. THE GAELIC AND NORSE-ICELANDIC SAGA CORPORA

Most modern scholars divide each corpus into subgroups based on the narratives' content: the time and place in which they are set, and/or their main protagonists' social status. Many, although not all, Gaelic *scéla* are conventionally and loosely grouped into 'cycles', a categorization first employed by Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville in 1883.³² Not all these cycles are universally recognized. As in the Norse-Icelandic list below, categories in square brackets such as 'Antiquity-sagas' are used only by a minority of scholars but are helpful for comparative purposes. As far as possible, I have placed these groups in chronological order based on when the earliest extant examples are generally thought to have been written.³³

³² Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville, *Introduction à l'étude de la littérature celtique* (Paris, 1883), pp. 44-45; Poppe, *Of Cycles*. More recent reflections are offered in Erich Poppe, 'Cycles and the Cyclic Impulse: Some Conceptual and Comparative Considerations', in *The Ulster and Finn Cycles: Studies in Gaelic Heroic Literature*, ed. by Abigail Burnyeat *et al.* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

³³ For different ways of grouping sagas into cycles, see Poppe, *Of Cycles*, pp. 13-14, including some comparison with Norse-Icelandic groupings.

Grouping	Content	Date of earliest extant example
Cycles of the Kings, king-tales	about ‘exploits of certain early Irish [and Scottish] kings and dynasts generally not treated in the [other cycles]’, ³⁴ sometimes subdivided into individual cycles (Conaire, Cormac mac Airt, etc.)	7 th or 8 th century ³⁵
Ulster Cycle	about rulers, nobles and royal champions of 1 st -century Ulster and Connacht, and their deeds at home and abroad	7 th or 8 th century ³⁶
Mythological Cycle	about the pre-Gaelic rulers of Ireland known as the Túath Dé or Túatha Dé Danann, who subsequently inhabited the Otherworld	8 th century ³⁷
Finn / Fenian Cycle, <i>fianaigecht</i>	about aristocratic hunter-warriors or <i>fénnidi</i> in 3 rd -century Ireland and Scotland, some surviving into the Christian era	8 th century ³⁸
Classical tales or Antiquity-sagas	about rulers and nobles in the ancient Mediterranean world (adaptations of Classical and late-Antique Latin narratives)	10 th or 11 th century ³⁹

³⁴ Dan Wiley, ‘Kings’ Cycles, Medieval Irish’, in John T. Koch, ed., *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, 1 vol in 5 (Santa Barbara, California, 2006), pp. 1058-60, at p. 1058.

³⁵ The datings of the oldest examples of the Kings’, Ulster and Mythological Cycles rely in part on scholarly reconstructions of the lost manuscript *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, ‘The Book of Drumsnat’, which contained versions of *Echtrae Chonnlai*, *Compert Con Culainn* and *Tochmarc Étaíne*. It is conventionally dated to the eighth century but also contains some kings’ sagas argued by John Carey to date back to the late seventh: see his ‘On the Interrelationships of some *Cín Dromma Snechtai* Texts’, *Ériu*, 46 (1995), 71-92, p. 89, and Kim McCone, ed. and trans., *Echtrae Chonnlai and the Beginnings of Vernacular Narrative Writing in Ireland* (Maynooth, 2000), pp. 41-8 and 118-19, and see also Ó Corráin, *Clavis*, pp. 1351-3, 1364, 1394, 1498 and 1525. Independently of that lost manuscript, the Ulster saga *Compert Con Culainn* and the kings’ saga *Echtrae Chonnlai* have been dated linguistically to the eighth century at the latest (for references see Ó Corráin, *Clavis*, pp. 1344–7 and 1364–66). The ‘Mythological Cycle’ saga *Tochmarc Étaíne* survives only in later reworkings, but two other sagas assigned to this cycle, *Aislinge Óengusso* and *De gabáil int Sída*, are generally dated to the eighth or ninth century (footnote 37 below).

³⁶ Ruairí Ó hUiginn, ‘Ulster Cycle of Tales’, in Koch, *Celtic Culture*, pp. 1708-17, at p. 1709.

³⁷ John Carey, *The Mythological Cycle of Medieval Irish Literature*, Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures, 3 (Cork, 2018), pp. 19-25 (but see also pp. 7-8 on the difficulty of defining this cycle); Ó Corráin, *Clavis*, pp. 1358 and 1301.

³⁸ Kevin Murray, *The Early Fenian Corpus*, Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures, 5 (Cork, 2021), pp. 1-4. See also Kevin Murray, ‘Interpreting the Evidence: Problems with Dating the Early *fianaigecht* Corpus’, in Sharon J. Arbuthnot and Geraldine Parsons, ed., *The Gaelic Finn Tradition* (Dublin, 2012), pp. 31-49; Joseph J. Flahive, *The Fenian Cycle in Irish and Scots-Gaelic Literature*, Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures, 1 (Cork, 2017), pp. 9-11.

³⁹ Ralph O’Connor, ‘Irish Narrative Literature and the Classical Tradition, 900-1300’, in Ralph O’Connor, ed., *Classical Literature and Learning in Medieval Irish Narrative*, Studies in Celtic History, 34 (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 1-22, at pp. 4-5 and 13-14; Poppe, *Of Cycles*, pp. 27-30. The term

[romances and histories adapted into Irish]	about ancient and mediaeval rulers and nobles (adaptations from mediaeval Latin, French and English narratives)	14 th century ⁴⁰
Romantic tales	about mediaeval European (including Irish) rulers and nobles; romance-inflected / folkloric adventure-tales	15 th century ⁴¹

Table 1: the conventional ‘cycles’ and other major modern groupings of mediaeval Gaelic sagas or *scéla*

The penultimate row in the table requires some comment because it is not yet considered to be a discrete category of Gaelic narrative. Late mediaeval translations and adaptations into Irish, when noticed at all, are typically clumped as ‘translations’ regardless of genre, and even regardless of whether they are narrative compositions at all.⁴² Within this ‘translations’ group, adaptations of romances and *chansons de geste* have recently attracted interest as a small corpus displaying varying degrees of proximity to the Gaelic ‘saga’ or ‘tale’ as traditionally conceptualized.⁴³ In my view, adaptations of Latin histories about similar figures, such as the Irish version of Pseudo-Turpin’s *Historia Karoli Magni*,⁴⁴ could be assigned to the same category as the

‘Antiquity-sagas’ is a very recent coinage and is not yet in general use. ‘Classical tales’ is Brent Miles’s preferred term (*Heroic Saga*, p. 51).

⁴⁰ See pp. 15-16.

⁴¹ Gerard Murphy, *The Ossianic Lore and Romantic Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1961), pp. 37-46; Alan Bruford, *Gaelic Folk-Tales and Mediaeval Romances: A Study of the Modern Irish ‘Romantic Tales’ and their Oral Derivatives* (Dublin, 1969), published as *Béaloideas*, 34 (1969), at pp. 1 and 46-8.

⁴² Murphy, *Ossianic Lore*, pp. 35-8; J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, 2nd ed., trans. by Patrick K. Ford (Cardiff, 1992), pp. 136-40; Ó Corráin, *Clavis*, pp. 1675-88. For other examples see the table in Poppe, *Of Cycles*, p. 13.

⁴³ See, for example, Erich Poppe, ‘Cultural Transfer and Textual Migration: Sir Bevis Comes to Ireland’, in Wolfram R. Keller and Dagmar Schlüter, ed., *‘A fantastic and abstruse Latinity?’ Hiberno-Continental Cultural and Literary Interactions in the Middle Ages* (Münster, 2017), pp. 205-20; Aisling Byrne, ‘The Circulation of Romances from England in Late-Medieval Ireland’, in Nicholas Perkins, ed., *Medieval Romance and Material Culture* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 183-98.

⁴⁴ On the diversity of translation-techniques and styles, see Erich Poppe, ‘*Gabháltais Shearluis Mhóir* in its Irish and Insular Contexts’, in Aisling Byrne and Victoria Flood, ed., *Crossing Borders in the Insular Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 133-60; Aisling Byrne, ‘Translating the Crusades in Late Medieval Ireland’, in Byrne and Flood, *Crossing Borders*, pp. 161-77.

romance-adaptations, by analogy with the Norse-Icelandic ‘translated *riddarasögur*’, similarly adapted from foreign romances, epic poems and (in the case of *Karlamagnús saga*) Pseudo-Turpin’s *Historia* itself. Interestingly, while these texts are acknowledged as part of the wider body of mediaeval Gaelic narrative and sometimes referred to as ‘tales’, the term ‘saga’ itself is almost never applied to them. Until very recently, the same was true of the earlier ‘Classical tales’. It is unclear whether this exclusion is connected with their shared identity as adaptations of texts in another language, or with their shared lack of Gaelic subject-matter.

These modern groupings are extremely rough and ready. The ‘Cycles of the Kings’, in particular, is a grab-bag category which may or may not be taken to include, alongside standalone *scéla*, a number of narratives embedded in genealogical compilations.⁴⁵ Poppe’s outline of different scholars’ taxonomies underlines just how limited scholarly agreement has been on the contents of the various groups beyond the better-studied Kings’, Ulster, Finn and Mythological Cycles.

Even in these familiar groupings, the outer boundaries are unclear. My table refers only to sagas (or ‘tales’), as is conventional; but much discussion of individual cycles actually proceeds on the assumption that they include not only prose or prosimetrum narratives, but also narrative and lyric poems. This is a radically content-oriented way of envisaging the cycles, ignoring all formal aspects of their texts, and it was already present in d’Arbois de Jubainville’s cyclic scheme in the 1880s. His inclusiveness was reinforced by his very loose conceptualization of ‘epic’, including wisdom-literature, lyric poetry, praise-

⁴⁵ Ralph O’Connor, ‘*Scélsenchus* Revisited: Historical Function and Literary Artistry in the Gaelic Kings’ Sagas’, in Kevin Murray, ed., *Revisiting the Cycles of the Kings*, Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures, 6 (Cork, 2022), pp. 1-24, at pp. 16-20.

poetry, lists and synthetic history within his category *la littérature épique* which the four established cycles were supposed to parcel out.⁴⁶

Today, the inclusion of poetry and non-narrative texts within those four cycles remains a common working habit, especially in modern discussion of the Finn Cycle which is so rich in metrical texts. When scholars explore the Finn Cycle, their decisions about which texts to include in it are shaped primarily by shared reference to a common cast of characters rather than by any formal considerations of the texts' genre or medium. The 'Finn Cycle' is thus treated rather along the content-oriented lines of the French word *matière* or 'matter' (as in *matière de Bretagne*, the Matter of Britain): narrative and non-narrative verse are included alongside prose or prosimetrum narratives. But the dissonance with scholarly discussion of the 'cycles' remains, because wider discussions or surveys of these 'cycles' as a subset of mediaeval Gaelic textual production tend to assume that they comprise a body of narrative. Real debate on which texts belong in the cycles tends to be focused not on the question of whether or not verse and/or non-narrative texts are to be included, but whether one specific corpus of verse (and prose, and prosimetrum), the *dindsenchas* or placename-narratives, should be considered as a separate category from the conventionally recognized cycles, in light of ongoing disagreement about whether narrative explanations of this kind are primarily narratives or explanations.⁴⁷

On the question of verse, it is also worth mentioning one feature of mediaeval Irish usage of the term *scél* in its narrative sense, namely that (unlike Norse *saga*) it is quite often used by poets to refer to narratives that they have just told in verse. As I will explore in the second half of this essay, in passing

⁴⁶ For examples, see Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville, *Essai d'un catalogue de la littérature épique de l'Irlande* (Paris, 1883), pp. 38-9, 41, 54, 101-3, 158-71, 176-8, 193-5, 201-5, 221-2.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Carey, *Mythological Cycle*, pp. 5-6. On the *dindsenchas* corpus, see Marie-Luise Theuerkauf, *Dindshenchas Éirenn*, *Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures*, 7 (Cork, 2022), especially pp. 1-18 and 87-121, and Kevin Murray, 'Genre Construction: The Creation of the *Dinnshenchas*', *Journal of Literary Onomastics*, 6 (2017), 11-21.

references such as chevilles the narrative sense of *scél* is often difficult to distinguish from wider senses referring to news, information or events. But there are enough clear examples to indicate that mediaeval Gaels did not consider *scél* in its narrative sense to refer exclusively to prose or prosimetrum. An early example is in the first of Blathmac mac Con Brettan's two long poems addressed to St. Mary, written sometime in the eighth century. At one point, a 22-stanza summary of God's dealings with the Israelites is referred to by the speaker as *a scél nglan / di bágaib Dé* ('the full story / of the contests of God'), and concludes by referring back to it as *a scél ad-chuäd co glé* ('the story I have told').⁴⁸

Nor did the subsequent flowering of saga-writing and *scéla* in prose or prosimetrum do away with the convention of referring to verse narratives as *scéla*. The Middle Irish metrical *dindsenchas* contain several examples. An account of the flooding of Riach's fort in the metrical *dindsenchas* of Loch Riach ends with the phrase *in scél diar' bádít na fir* ('that was the *scél* of the men's drowning') before narrating what happened next.⁴⁹ An example referring even more unambiguously to a narrative composition (rather than to *scél* in the more general sense of the 'information' contained in it) concludes the metrical *dindsenchas* of Druim Clíab: *is scél búan ... / ... radelbus sunnda* ('it is a lasting *scél* ... that I have shaped here').⁵⁰ The narrative sense in which mediaeval Gaels used the Irish term *scél*, then, maps much less smoothly than its Norse equivalent onto the modern English term 'saga' (or 'tale' as used by many Celticists). Gaelic *scéla* were not restricted to the sagas grouped in the established cycles and the other categories listed above.

⁴⁸ James Carney, ed. and trans., *The Poems of Blathmac Son of Cú Brettan*, Irish Texts Society, 47 (Dublin, 1964), pp. 32-5 (stanzas 93 and 100, Carney's translation).

⁴⁹ Edward Gwynn, ed. and trans., *The Metrical Dindsenchas*, 5 vols, Todd Lecture Series, 8-12 (Dublin, 1903-35), III, 326; compare also Gwynn, *Metrical Dindsenchas*, IV, 16 (*a scél fir*).

⁵⁰ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindsenchas*, IV, 10.

The cycles, then, are a convenient set of boxes into which to slot individual narratives, but as narrative categories they are desperately ill-defined. This haziness alerts us to the question of how far mediaeval redactors themselves prioritized shared content over shared form as a means of organizing texts. Given these ambiguities, I will state here that when I refer to the cycles, I am using that term in the narrow sense to refer to the narrative prose and prosimetrum works that they are thought to include, and not to the non-narrative works that they are also often treated as including, nor to verse narratives that were called *scéla* by some mediaeval poets. Even when I refer to the Finn Cycle, I do not include standalone verse texts about or associated with Finn and his *fian*, even in narrative forms, because the whole point of this essay is to investigate the concept of the saga, a label associated by scholars with narrative prose or prosimetrum only.⁵¹ For this reason, the supra-generic difference between sagas and narrative verse forms such as the ballad or *laoid* must be upheld here. This is not to imply that groupings of narrative and non-narrative texts around common casts of characters and geopolitical settings are not valid in their own terms: they clearly are, but they are not the subject of this essay.

Even if the cycles are viewed consistently as bodies of narrative prose and prosimetrum, their conventional groupings as outlined in Table 1 end up excluding a large number of individual *scéla*, including vernacular Irish narratives or anecdotes about saints (equivalent to the Norse-Icelandic *heilagra manna sögur*) and narratives about poets. Almost forty years ago, Tomás Ó Cathasaigh tentatively proposed the labels ‘Cycles of the Saints’ and ‘Cycles of the Poets’,⁵² but these two groupings have not achieved recognition as such. The whole question of whether sagas are, by definition, secular narratives – not to

⁵¹ This is how ‘saga’ is generally understood in Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic scholarship today. I am not aware of any modern scholar using ‘saga’ to refer to, say, the metrical version of *Esnada Tige Buchet* or the *rímur* versions of Norse-Icelandic sagas.

⁵² Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, ‘*Cath Maige Tuired* as Exemplary Myth’, in Pádraig de Brún *et al.*, ed., *Folia Gadelica: Essays Presented by Former Students to R. A. Breatnach* (Cork, 1983), pp. 1-19, at p. 18 n. 63.

mention vernacular ones – will be explored more fully in my forthcoming book. Even some of the best-known individual *scéla* such as the *immrama* or voyage-tales fall between the large gaps in the conventional division into ‘cycles’.⁵³

The *immrama*, in fact, belong to a different method of grouping *scéla* devised by mediaeval Gaels themselves. From at least the tenth century onwards, Gaelic writers working in specific legal, educational or narrative contexts had occasion to list their corpus of *scéla* by the type of event or action narrated, typically presenting it as a large repertoire of stories that were supposed to be known by poets for reference and/or performance.⁵⁴ The extant Middle Irish tale-lists name over two hundred separate vernacular narratives, about half of which can be identified with extant sagas (and almost all of which feature secular protagonists, even if saints often appear in supporting roles). I give here only a few representative examples in alphabetical order of event-type:

Event-type	Example of saga
<i>aided</i> ‘death-tale’	<i>Aided Con Culainn</i> ‘The Death of Cú Chulainn’
<i>compert</i> ‘conception’	<i>Compert Conchobair</i> ‘The Conception of Conchobar’
<i>echtrae</i> ‘Otherworld adventure’	<i>Echtrae Chonnlae</i> ‘The Adventure of Connlac’
<i>immram</i> ‘rowing-about, voyage’	<i>Immram Curaig Máele Dúin</i> ‘The Rowing-about of Máel Dúin’s Currach’
<i>táin bó</i> ‘cattle-raid’	<i>Táin Bó Cúailnge</i> ‘The Cattle-Raid of Cúailnge’
<i>tochmarc</i> ‘wooing’	<i>Tochmarc Becfola</i> ‘The Wooing of Becfola’
<i>togail</i> ‘destruction’	<i>Togail Troí</i> ‘The Destruction of Troy’ (based on <i>De excidio Troiae historia</i>)

Table 2: examples of *scél* ‘event-types’ named in Middle Irish tale-lists

These tale-lists, like the ‘cycle’ scheme, are far from comprehensive. Many extant Old and Middle Irish narratives seem not to be represented in them, even

⁵³ R. I. Best considered the *immrama* as a separate ‘cycle’ (Poppe, *Of Cycles*, p. 13).

⁵⁴ The lists are edited and discussed in Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*. On the date of their common source, see Gregory Toner, ‘Reconstructing the Earliest Irish Tale Lists’, *Éigse*, 32 (2000), 88-120.

some that loom large in modern anthologies and surveys.⁵⁵ One perennial favourite, the Old Irish love-story *Comrac Líadaine ocus Cuirithir* ('The Meeting of Líadain and Curithir'), falls through the gaps in both the modern 'cycle' and the mediaeval 'tale-type' schemes, perhaps because of its monastic setting: almost none of the listed tales are hagiographic. As I will argue below, these lists by event-type were designed more as mnemonic aids than as a taxonomy of narrative genres, even though some or all event-types are often argued or assumed to be genres by modern scholars.⁵⁶

I will treat the mediaeval Norse-Icelandic saga corpus more briefly here because, despite ongoing debates about terminology and genre, the level of scholarly consensus about its contents is much higher. This corpus is more easily defined in part because *saga*, when applied to written texts, denoted narratives almost exclusively, whereas *scél* was much broader in its semantic range when applied to written texts – something on which I will comment in more detail below.

Like the Gaelic saga 'cycles', Norse-Icelandic sagas are conventionally grouped by modern scholars into content-based categories, based specifically on the narratives' chronological and geographical settings and/or the social status of their main characters. In contrast to the Gaelic cycles, the Norse-Icelandic saga groupings are frequently viewed as (sub)genres or treated as if they had real generic identities in the Middle Ages. My own view, which there is not space to develop here, is that genre-boundaries within this corpus are real, but are not coextensive with the boundaries between the conventional groupings.

Unlike the Gaelic 'cycle' scheme in its current form, the Norse-Icelandic groupings include almost all the surviving mediaeval saga texts. To this list of

⁵⁵ On omissions and ambiguities regarding titles assigned in the lists, see Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, pp. 66-7.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Lewis, 'Irish and Welsh', p. 46. For a detailed treatment of one event-type as a genre, see Leonie Duignan, *The Echtrae as an Early Irish Literary Genre* (Leidorf, 2011). On their mnemonic function, see Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, pp. 29-32. For critical reflections on ways of identifying genre in mediaeval Gaelic literature, see Murray, 'Genre Construction'.

content-based groupings there is often added another category which operates at a different level, that of length. This category, *þáttr*, is similarly often treated in quasi-generic terms by modern scholars. Whereas in Celtic scholarship a one- or two-page narrative like *Echtrae Chonnlai* can be referred to as a ‘saga’ – and be cited in the tale-lists as a *scél* – in Norse-Icelandic scholarship narratives of such brevity are referred to either as anecdotes or as *þættir*.⁵⁷

Icelandic grouping	English rendering(s)	Content	Date of earliest extant ex.
<i>heilagra manna sögur</i>	saints’ sagas	about apostles and saints of the early church (translated or adapted <i>vitae</i> and biblical narratives, then original narratives)	1150-1200 ⁵⁸
[Antiquity-sagas]		about secular rulers and nobles in the ancient Mediterranean world (adapted from Latin)	1180-1200 ⁵⁹
<i>konungasögur</i>	kings’ sagas	about Scandinavian kings from 9 th century onwards	1180-1200 ⁶⁰

⁵⁷ The Norse-specific idea that a saga must be over a certain length will be more fully explored in my forthcoming book. On the Norse-Icelandic concept, see Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Life and Death of the Medieval Icelandic Short Story’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 112 (2013), 257-91; Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, ‘Þættir – A Case Study: *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*’, in Bampi *et al.*, *Critical Companion*, pp. 259-70.

⁵⁸ G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford, 1953), p. 131; Kirsten Wolf, ‘Postola sögur’, in Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, ed., *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York, 1993), pp. 511-12; Ian Kirby, ‘The Bible and Biblical Interpretation in Medieval Iceland’, in Margaret Clunies Ross, ed., *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 287-301, at p. 295.

⁵⁹ Jakob Benediktsson, ‘*Rómverja saga*’, in Pulsiano and Wolf, *Medieval Scandinavia*, pp. 537-8; Stefanie Würth, *Der ‘Antikenroman’ in der isländischen Literatur des Mittelalters: Eine Untersuchung zur Übersetzung und Rezeption lateinischer Literatur im Norden*, Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie, 26 (Basel, 1998), especially pp. 35-7 and 54-6 (with thanks to Stefanie Gropper for sending me a copy); Stefanie Würth, ‘Historiography and Pseudo-History’, in McTurk, *Companion*, pp. 155-72, at p. 164. These adaptations of Classical narratives used to be grouped with the ‘translated *riddarasögur*’, but they now tend to be treated as a separate group of sagas, albeit with no agreed label.

⁶⁰ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Partisan Muse in the Early Icelandic Sagas (1200-1250)*, *Islandica*, 55 (Ithaca, New York, 2012), pp. 45-82; Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Royal Biography’, in McTurk, *Companion*, pp. 388-402, at pp. 389-82.

<i>samtíðarsögur</i> (including <i>byskupasögur</i>)	contemporary sagas, including bishops' sagas	about leading Icelanders in mid-11 th to 13 th centuries (initially bishops, then secular leaders)	1180-1210 ⁶¹
<i>Íslendingasögur</i>	family sagas, sagas of Icelanders	about leading Icelanders in 9 th to early 11 th centuries	1200-40 ⁶²
<i>fornaldarsögur</i>	legendary sagas	about Scandinavian and Germanic rulers and warriors from ancient times up to end of 10 th century	13 th century ⁶³
<i>riddarasögur</i>	knights' sagas, chivalric sagas	about mediaeval European, Asian and African rulers, nobles and warriors 1. translated romances, <i>chansons de geste</i> , <i>lais</i> , ballads and exempla 2. original Icelandic romance-sagas ⁶⁴	1. 1200-50 ⁶⁵ 2. 1275-1325 ⁶⁶
<i>þættir</i> (sing. <i>þáttr</i>)	Tales	short saga-like narratives or saga-episodes (various subgenres, including 'king and Icelander <i>þáttr</i> ', 'Conversion <i>þáttr</i> ', etc.)	13 th century

Table 3: generally agreed groupings of mediaeval Norse-Icelandic sagas, sometimes called genres

⁶¹ Turville-Petre, *Origins*, pp. 196-212; Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 'Biskupa sögur', in Pulsiano and Wolf, *Medieval Scandinavia*, pp. 45-6.

⁶² Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', in McTurk, *Companion*, pp. 101-18, at pp. 114-15; Else Mundal, 'The Dating of the Oldest Sagas about Early Icelanders', in Else Mundal, ed., *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions* (Copenhagen, 2013), pp. 31-54 (with thanks to Slavica Ranković for sending me a copy); Chris Callow, 'Dating and Origins', in Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson, ed., *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (London, 2017), pp. 15-33, at pp. 20-1.

⁶³ Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. by Randi C. Eldevik, Viking Collection, 13 (Odense, 2002), pp. 62-3. Pre-1200 datings have been suggested, but only for texts that no longer survive: see, for example, Torfi Tulinius, 'Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory', in McTurk, *Companion*, pp. 447-61, at pp. 451-2.

⁶⁴ This second group is sometimes known as *lygisögur* ('lying sagas'), in my view unhappily.

⁶⁵ Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, *Islandica*, 46 (Ithaca, New York, 1990), p. 1; Jürg Glauser, 'Romance (Translated *riddarasögur*)', in McTurk, *Companion*, pp. 372-87, at pp. 374-7.

⁶⁶ Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Mediaeval Iceland*, Viking Collection, 21 (Odense, 2014), p. 9; Marianne E. Kalinke, *Stories Set Forth with Fair Words: The Evolution of Medieval Romance in Iceland* (Cardiff, 2017), p. 63.

Unlike the Gaelic ‘cycles’, there is some, but very limited, overlap between these categories in modern scholarship and their mediaeval usage. The modern categories ‘Antiquity-sagas’, *samtíðarsögur*, *byskupasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* have no mediaeval attestations, while the mediaeval categories *Íslendingasögur*, *riddarasögur* and *þáttr* were used in ways that either refer to a completely different group of texts (as with *Íslendingasögur*)⁶⁷ or were, at least, not coterminous with modern usage (as with *riddarasögur* and the category *þáttr* to be discussed below). Meanwhile, a few important and artistically accomplished sagas, such as *Færeyinga saga* (‘The Saga of the Faeroe Islanders’) and *Jómsvíkinga saga* (‘The Saga of the Jomsvikings’), fall through the gaps in this classification, simply because they do not fit into any of the very specific pigeonholes relating to geography and/or their protagonists’ royal status.⁶⁸

The rough-edged and approximate nature of all these methods of classifying Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic sagas and *scéla* is well known. Only a few of the subgroups have been cogently argued to display features of genuine narrative genres – that is, showing peculiarities of form as well as content and function. But all these systems, whatever their analytical shortcomings, have become convenient ways of making each sprawling corpus more manageable, and they have become inescapable in our discussions of the corpus. So we have numerous studies of Icelandic family sagas (often referred to as simply ‘the sagas’, as if they stand proxy for the entire corpus); separate conference series and books on *fornaldarsögur*, the Ulster Cycle, the Finn Cycle; and focused genre-studies of the *aided*, the *echtrae*, or disputed subgroups within subgroups such as ‘post-classical family sagas’ or the ‘king-and-Icelander *þáttr*’.

⁶⁷ The sole mediaeval attestation of *Íslendingasögur*, in the prologue to *Sturlunga saga*, uses the term to refer to unspecified narratives about relatively recent Icelandic events (i.e. *samtíðarsögur*) written by Sturla Þórðarson: *Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Gudbrand Vigfusson, 2 vols (Oxford, 1878), I, 86.

⁶⁸ Melissa Berman, ‘The Political Sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 57 (1985), 113-29.

At a theoretical and literary-historical level, many scholars do not treat these categories as fully-fledged genres. Yet even when these labels are used merely ‘for convenience’ or to describe a corpus rather than a genre, the ensuing pattern of repeated scholarly usage has resulted in the categories becoming reified in scholarship as *de facto* genres, implicitly claiming to represent the most natural and significant set of dividing-lines within the saga corpus as a whole. The reification of this taxonomy, which Andersson has called ‘the straitjacket of genre’, can make comparisons between very similar texts in different subgroups appear more counter-intuitive than they would have done to mediaeval Icelanders.⁶⁹ In short, the tendency to specialize on subgroups can stop us from seeing the wood for the trees. This is one reason why closer attention to the larger category, be it *scél* or ‘saga’, may be of value.

Parallels and contrasts in saga evolution

There is no space here for a proper comparison of the origins and development of saga-writing in the two cultural zones, but a few salient points of parallel and contrast are worth briefly outlining if we are to entertain the idea that *saga* and *scél* are comparable categories.

From an early date, saga-writing drew on and incorporated vernacular verse, although this was an option rather than a requirement.⁷⁰ There has been much debate about the relationship between poetry and storytelling in both cultures, and the profession of ‘poet’ was conceptualized in different ways; but whether literate or not, poets were clearly expected in both cultures to be good

⁶⁹ Andersson, *Partisan Muse*, p. 9; see also Yoav Tirosh, ‘On the Receiving End: The Role of Scholarship, Memory, and Genre in Constructing *Ljósvetninga saga*’, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Iceland, 2019, pp. 213-15.

⁷⁰ Proinsias Mac Cana, ‘Prosimetrum’, pp. 106-8; Joseph Harris, ‘The Prosimetrum of Icelandic Saga and Some Relatives’, in Harris and Reichl, *Prosimetrum*, pp. 131-63; Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto, 2001).

storytellers (in prose) as well as knowledgeable in other aspects of learning and skilled at delivering these through word of mouth. In the Gaelic world, where the profession of ‘poet’ was rigorously stratified, knowledge of a large repertoire of (putatively oral) sagas was required of the highest-status poets (the *filid*), as indicated by the tale-lists.⁷¹

By the time in which saga-writing flourished in the two cultures, many of the best-known named poets were said to have been literate, and a number of written texts are attributed to them. As Barry Lewis has written of the Gaelic situation, by this period there had already taken place ‘a massive cross-fertilization between the knowledge of these professionals and the scholarship of the church’.⁷² In both cultures, saga-writing was a product of Christian literacy, emerging within (initially ecclesiastical) environments in which the Bible and Latin rhetoric were intensively studied. It is no coincidence that the earliest physically attested pieces of extended vernacular prose in either zone (not counting brief runic and ogam inscriptions or Easter tables) are two homilies composed a century or so after Christianization in each zone. The probably seventh-century Old Irish *Cambrai Homily* survives in a late eighth-century Carolingian manuscript, while the probably early twelfth-century Old Norse *Stave Church Homily* or *Dedication Homily* survives in a Norwegian manuscript written c. 1150.⁷³ Indeed, early homilies in Norway and Iceland drew heavily on Insular Latin sources, including on one of the earliest surviving

⁷¹ My quotation-marks around ‘poet’ indicate the lack of clear fit between the modern term (which centres on verse composition) and the much wider job-description of the highest-status mediaeval Gaelic poets, the *filid*. That job-description nonetheless included verse composition as a core element, as with the less learned and typically less literate grades of poets known as *baird* (singular *bard*). For discussion and documentation see Johnston, *Literacy*, pp. 151–4.

⁷² Lewis, ‘Irish and Welsh’, p. 55.

⁷³ Pádraig P. Ó Néill, ‘The Background to the *Cambrai Homily*’, *Ériu*, 32 (1981), 137–47; Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Nine Norse Studies* (London, 1972) pp. 79–101. Both homilies appear to be original compositions, not translations from Latin, although they draw on Latin sources.

Hiberno-Latin homilies (*De duodecim abusiuis*), enabling a direct literary-historical link between the beginnings of written prose in both cultural zones.⁷⁴

Given the strong roots, in both cultures, of vernacular prose composition in Latin ecclesiastical literacy and religious devotion, it is natural to wonder how far the specifically narrative genre of hagiography shaped both saga-writing traditions. But the parallels are not direct. In both Ireland and Gaelic Scotland, Latin saints' Lives and other hagiographic narratives survive from the seventh century onwards, but no vernacular Lives are known until the ninth century, well after the emergence of vernacular saga-writing (and the oldest of those, the Old Irish *Bethu Brigte* 'Life of St. Brigit', is macaronic rather than fully vernacular). The earliest known Gaelic sagas are very short: the longest of this group occupies just eight pages in a modern anthology, and some are just one or two pages long.⁷⁵ Several of them are artistically accomplished and use a range of dramatizing techniques, some with parallels in hagiography, but there is no clear structural debt to hagiography either here or in the longer, ampler sagas being written by the tenth century. Gaelic saga-writing and hagiography seem to have evolved in dialogue with each other rather than in a cause-and-effect relationship.⁷⁶ The same applies to sagas' relationships with other vernacular genres of historical writing which are thought to have taken written

⁷⁴ Joan Turville-Petre, 'Sources of the Vernacular Homily in England, Norway and Iceland', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 75 (1960), 168-82.

⁷⁵ The longest is *Immram Brain* ('The Voyage of Bran'): see Séamus Mac Mathúna, ed. and trans., *Immram Brain: Bran's Journey to the Land of the Women* (Tübingen, 1985). Translation-anthologies offer useful indicators of relative length: see Tom P. Cross and Clark Harris Slover, ed., *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York, 1936), pp. 588-95.

⁷⁶ This is the model favoured in Kim McCone, 'An Introduction to Early Irish Saints' Lives', *Maynooth Review*, 11 (1984), 26-59. McCone subsequently distanced himself from that 'semi-nativist' view (as he called it), downplaying the possibility that sagas or their oral precursors influenced early saints' Lives (*Pagan Past*, pp. 179-202, quoting p. 180), but retained the view that both sacred and secular forms of heroic narrative display 'an appreciable degree of clearly deliberate homogenization' (p. 188) during the period from which our extant texts date. For helpful reflections see also Elizabeth Boyle, *History and Salvation in Medieval Ireland* (London, 2021), pp. 58 and 60, and John Carey, 'Muirchú and the Ulster Cycle', in Gregory Toner and Séamus Mac Mathúna, ed., *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Berlin, 2013), pp. 121-6.

form in these early centuries, such as regnal lists and genealogies, as well as with more Latinate learned genres such as universal history and annalistic chronicles.

On the Norse-Icelandic side, the earliest extant written sagas are considerably longer, and hagiography stands at the beginning of the written saga tradition. The oldest extant ‘sagas’ (named as such in early manuscripts) are mid-twelfth-century vernacular adaptations of Latin biblical narratives, apocrypha and saints’ Lives, while the oldest extant sagas about secular rulers are part-hagiographies in their own right: a lost Latin biography (sometimes called a ‘saga’) of Óláfr Tryggvason by Oddr Snorrason and a now-fragmentary anonymous Norse saga of St. Óláfr (his so-called *Legendary Saga*), both probably composed in the 1180s. These factors make it harder for Scandinavianists to follow the Celticists’ example in excluding saints’ Lives from the saga corpus, although their position within that corpus remains contested.

However, there was an equally important secular (Latin and vernacular) historiographical background to the later and better-known kings’ sagas and sagas about Icelanders. This background is seen in the so-called ‘synoptic histories’ in Latin and Old Norse surveying the reigns of Norwegian kings (the earliest dating from the 1180s) in the manner of short chronicles, and the chronicle-like account of Roman political history known to its redactors as *Rómverja sögur / saga* (‘The Saga(s) of the Romans’), adapted from Sallust and Lucan and also dated to the 1180s. Further back, the short vernacular history of Iceland’s settlement by Ari Þorgilsson (*Íslendingabók* or ‘The Book of the Icelanders’, composed c. 1122-33) and the now-lost and probably Latin historical writings of Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056-1133) indicate that, in the period before our earliest attested hagiography in Norway or Iceland, history was being written in a manner that was rooted less in hagiography than in (often) oral-traditional genres such as genealogies and king-lists, as well as in

more exclusively literate genres such as universal and *origo gentis* histories.⁷⁷ Again, the relationship between sacred and secular narrative is one of interplay rather than cause and effect.

The different evolutionary paths of large-scale narrative forms are worth highlighting. On the Gaelic side, large-scale sagas were a later development. The best-known one, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The Cattle-Raid of Cooley'), existed as a narrative from an early date, but there is no evidence that anything in writing on the elaborate, epic-like scale of the extant (eleventh-century) *Táin* existed before the ninth century.⁷⁸ The same goes for the second recension of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* ('The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel'), dated linguistically to the tenth century in its extant form, and the earliest version of *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* ('The Voyage of Máel Dúin's Currach'), assigned linguistically to the ninth.⁷⁹ All three texts plainly weave together and amplify shorter narrative units into larger compositions. So, whatever our uncertainties about absolute dating, Gaelic saga-writing clearly began on a small scale. Subsequent authors experimented with different ways of amplifying their texts, and the influence of Latinate (biblical and Classical) modes of amplification becomes especially prominent in the more elaborate later recensions of some of

⁷⁷ Turville-Petre, *Origins*, pp. 81-108. There is no consensus on whether Sæmundr's histories of Norwegian kings and Icelandic settlers were more like annotated king-lists or full-scale chronicles.

⁷⁸ Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'The Background and Development of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*', in J. P. Mallory, ed., *Aspects of the Táin* (Belfast, 1992), pp. 29-67, at pp. 31-2; Máire Herbert, 'Reading Recension 1 of the *Táin*', in Ruairí Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin, ed., *Ulidia 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Maynooth, 2009), pp. 208-17, at pp. 208-11.

⁷⁹ Máire West, ed. and trans., 'An Edition of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*', unpublished PhD dissertation, National University of Ireland (1986), pp. 350-1; H. P. A. Oskamp, ed. and trans., *The Voyage of Máel Dúin* (Groningen, 1970), pp. 47-8; Elva Johnston, 'A Sailor on the Seas of Faith: The Individual and the Church in *The Voyage of Mael Dúin*', in Judith Devlin and Howard B. Clarke, ed., *European Encounters: Essays in Memory of Albert Lovett* (Dublin, 2003), pp. 239-69, at p. 265.

these sagas.⁸⁰ Large-scale vernacular prose or prosimetrum adaptations of biblical and Classical narratives postdated the beginnings of saga-writing.⁸¹

The Norse-Icelandic tradition shows a very different pattern, with sagas springing into existence as large-scale texts from the beginning, and self-standing shorter narrative forms flowering (in writing) only later on.⁸² This disparity presumably reflects the very different points in Latin European literary history with which the two saga-writing traditions intersect, namely the Carolingian renaissance and the twelfth-century renaissance. The composition of large-scale narratives, especially about secular figures, was not unknown in the earlier period, but by the twelfth century, when Norse-Icelandic sagas emerged, a wider range of biographical and national-historical narrative models was available for imitation and reference. It is no coincidence that vernacular adaptations of relatively large-scale Latin narratives stand at the beginning of the Norse-Icelandic saga-writing tradition.

Postponing the complex question of ‘saints’ sagas’ for future discussion, the two saga corpora display broadly comparable subject-matter. Both focus on the ancient and recent histories of their own lands and (with Classical and biblical adaptations) the ancient Mediterranean and early mediaeval Europe.

⁸⁰ Michael Clarke, ‘An Irish Achilles and a Greek Cú Chulainn’, in Ó hUiginn and Ó Catháin, *Ulidia* 2, pp. 238-51, especially p. 243; Ralph O’Connor, ‘Was Classical Imitation Necessary for the Writing of Large-Scale Irish Sagas? Reflections on *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and the “Watchman Device”’, in O’Connor, *Classical Literature*, pp. 165-95, at pp. 186-90.

⁸¹ Large-scale biblical adaptations include *Saltair na Rann*, a tenth-century verse retelling of sacred history, its later Middle Irish prose reworking, and the Middle Irish prose Gospel History in the *Leabhar Breac* (Poppe, *Of Cycles*, pp. 23-7). The eighth-century poems addressed to St. Mary by Blathmac include retellings of episodes in the life of Christ and in salvation history generally, but these poems are framed primarily as utterances of lament, praise, exhortation and credal statement in which storytelling plays a subsidiary, albeit important, role (as discussed above, p. 18). See, for example, Carney, *Poems of Blathmac*, p. 46, where the poet concludes the first poem by referring back to it as *coiniud* (‘a keen’) and *figel* (‘a vigil-prayer’). More consistently ‘narrative’ retellings of biblical stories in verse are shorter, resembling the earliest prose sagas in this respect, for example the narratives of Christ’s boyhood deeds in the metrical Gospel of Thomas edited by Carney (*Poems of Blathmac*, pp. 90-105) and dated by him to c. 700.

⁸² However, scholars continue to debate whether the first written sagas about Norwegian kings and Icelandic settlers originated in the sewing-together of short oral narratives (the so-called ‘*pátr*’ theory of saga origins). For an overview of these issues, see Callow, ‘Dating and Origins’, pp. 16-20.

Both narrate history through focusing on the deeds of high-status individuals. But there is a marked difference in how their sagas' titles appear to conceptualize those narratives. Sagas' titles must not be taken as authoritative, transcendent expressions of the most important features of the narrative to which they are attached, but their mediaeval attestations do reveal something of how one or more mediaeval writers conceptualized that saga.

Saga titles and the Gaelic 'saga as event'

As mentioned above, the titles of even the longest Gaelic sagas label them as accounts of actions or events. We may think of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as Cú Chulainn's saga and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* as the biography of Conaire Mór, but their titles focus on actions rather than people. This shorthand forms the organizational principle of the tale-lists, but it is also found in many rubrics and colophons attached to individual sagas in manuscripts. In these settings this shorthand embraces a wider variety of event-types than those included in the tale-lists, including for instance *Fingal* ('kin-slaying'), *Genemain* ('birth'), *Comthóth* ('conversion [to Christianity]'), *Talland* ('siege') and *Merugud* ('wandering').

This focus on events and actions is matched by a common device in saga incipits from the earliest manuscripts, introducing a saga as the answer to a question about what brought about a state of affairs known from historical tradition or *senchas*.⁸³ Narrative is here framed as a means of imparting information. For instance, in the mid-twelfth-century Book of Leinster (rich in

⁸³ On this introductory device, see Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Narrative Openers and Progress Markers in Irish', in Kathryn A. Klar *et al.*, ed., *A Celtic Florilegium: Studies in Memory of Brendan O Hehir* (Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1996), pp. 104-20. Its wider didactic and dramatic possibilities (as found in one of the very oldest surviving sagas, *Echtrae Chonnlai*) are elucidated by Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'From Story to History: Narrating Conversion in Medieval Ireland', in Nancy Edwards *et al.*, ed., *Transforming Landscapes of Belief in the Early Medieval Insular World and Beyond*, Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, 23 (Turnhout, 2018), pp. 207-27, at pp. 214-17.

rubrics, incipits and colophons) the saga that we know as *Longes mac nUislenn* ('The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu') opens, using a variant name-form, with the conventional question: *Cid dia mboí longes mac nUsnig? Ni handsa* ('What caused the exile of the sons of Uisnech? Not difficult').⁸⁴ The question concerns an event in legendary history, to which the saga is the (or one possible) answer in narrative form. This habit of viewing sagas as explanations of causes is also seen in the common practice of composing prequels or *remscéla* to an existing saga, or devising prequel-like causal connections to bind existing sagas together.⁸⁵ This approach to the (re)composition of narrative positioned known stories as parts of an implicitly connected or related web of causes and effects that could be revealed through narrative performance, even if chronological sequences of linked Gaelic sagas ('cycles by transmission', such as we find in the Icelandic kings' saga and *Sturlunga* compilations) are not found in Gaelic manuscripts until the late Middle Ages.⁸⁶

There are exceptions to this event-oriented practice of naming sagas. Some narratives, especially very short ones, may be introduced simply as information or a narrative about a named person or persons, especially when they are embedded in genealogical compilations or take the form of onomastic explanations: in those contexts, a person's name takes priority. Examples from the Book of Leinster include *Incipit de maccaib Conaire* ('Here begins [an account] of the sons of Conaire') and the colophon *Unde Flann [recte Níall] Frossach* ('From whence [comes the name] Flann Frossach').⁸⁷ Title-forms *scél(a)* + genitive ('A narrative / information about X') or *senchas* + genitive ('Historical information about X') are also quite frequently used, including of highly dramatic tales such as the Book of Leinster's *Scél Mucci Meic Dathó*

⁸⁴ R. I. Best *et al.*, ed., *The Book of Leinster: Formerly Leabar na Núachongbála*, 6 vols (Dublin, 1954-83), V, 1162.

⁸⁵ Poppe, *Of Cycles*, pp. 23-32 and 39-42.

⁸⁶ Poppe, *Of Cycles*, pp. 27-32 and 41-2.

⁸⁷ Best *et al.*, *Book of Leinster*, V, 1262 and 1203.

(‘The Saga of Mac Dathó’s Pig’). Here the pig’s centrality to the title reflects, not anything it actively does – it spends most of the narrative lying dead and waiting to be carved – but the fact that it sparks off the culminating action depicted in the saga.⁸⁸ But the dominant pattern in saga naming focuses primarily on an event or action attached to a person, group or locality, rather than on the person alone.

By contrast, with very few exceptions, mediaeval Icelanders and Norwegians named even their shortest sagas as narratives about the person or people at its centre, even in sagas which treat only part of the protagonist’s adult life. Early examples include the family sagas rubricated in the mid-fourteenth-century manuscript *Möðruvallabók* as *Egils saga*, *Hallfreðar saga* and *Laxdæla saga* (‘Egill’s Saga’, ‘Hallfreðr’s Saga’, ‘The Saga of the People of Laxárdalur’).⁸⁹ Individual chapters or episode-sequences are quite often rubricated by event-type in mediaeval Icelandic manuscripts (such as the rubric *Konungr hialpadi Egli*, ‘The king helped Egill’, heading one chapter in the saga of St. Óláfr in the late fourteenth-century manuscript *Flateyjarbók*),⁹⁰ as they are for individual episodes in some of the longer Gaelic sagas; but for whole sagas the difference between the two traditions is marked. This difference may, again, reflect the disparity in the range, number and circulation of Latin models available for saga-authors at the different periods when title-conventions for written sagas were forming. The European twelfth-century renaissance had, after all, seen a massive upsurge in the writing of national histories and biographies both sacred and secular, often with titles drawing attention to the

⁸⁸ Best *et al.*, *Book of Leinster*, V, 1220 (for *senchas*) and I, 418 (quoted). This saga is better known under its later-attested plural form as *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó*.

⁸⁹ Reykjavík, Stofnun Arna Magnússonar, AM 132 fol., in Andrea van der Leeuw van Weenen, ed., *Möðruvallabók, AM 132 fol.*, 2 vols (Leiden, 1987), II, fols 62v, 149v and 156r. For a convenient list of these titles, see Patricia Pires Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway: Medieval Sagas and Legal Texts*, Northern World, 17 (Leiden, 2005), pp. 155-6 n. 3.

⁹⁰ *Flateyjarbók*, ed. by Guðbrandr Vigfusson and C. R. Unger (Oslo, 1860-8), II, 144. Both event- and name-related chapter-headings are found in many kinds of text, an early example being the contents-list preceding Ari Þorgilsson’s *Íslendingabók*.

person or nation at the text's centre (*Gesta* or *Historia* for individuals or peoples, *Vita* or *Passio* for individuals).⁹¹ The oldest Gaelic sagas, by contrast, predate the ninth-century revival in secular biographical composition associated initially with Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni*.⁹²

Möðruvallabók also displays one apparent exception to the Norse-Icelandic naming pattern, the family saga known to us as *Njáls saga* ('Njáll's Saga') but known to this redactor and others as *Brennu-Njáls saga* (literally 'The Saga of Njáll of the Burning' or, as Victorian translations had it, 'Burnt Njáll'). The allusion is to the burning of Njáll and most of his family in his house, the saga's culminating event.⁹³ Yet the title also reinforces the standard saga-naming pattern, because it refers to its protagonist's nickname rather than labelling the saga as an account of the burning. Among the very few genuine exceptions to the Norse-Icelandic saga-naming convention are occasional narratives about turning-points in sacred history: an early thirteenth-century rubric to the twelfth-century Latin apocryphal adaptation *Niðrstigningar saga* ('The Saga of the Descent into Hell') and a possibly fourteenth-century rubric to the mid-thirteenth-century *Kristni saga* ('The Saga of [Iceland's conversion to] Christianity').⁹⁴

The contrast between Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic naming conventions is clearest in cases where the same source has been adapted into the two

⁹¹ See Lars Boje Mortensen, 'Comparing and Connecting: The Rise of "Fast" Historiography in Latin and Vernacular (12th-13th cent.)', *medieval worlds*, 1 (2015), 25-39, pp. 1-2.

⁹² Recent overviews of history-writing tend to be nationally or regionally focused. Beryl Smalley's wider-ranging survey *Historians in the Middle Ages* (London, 1974) is still useful; see pp. 67-78 on secular biography.

⁹³ The Möðruvallabók colophon here reads *ok lyk ek þar brennunials saga* ('and there I end the saga of Njáll of the burning' (fol. 61r).

⁹⁴ These title-rubrics survive, respectively, in the second part of AM 645 4to (c. 1225-50), fol. 51v, and in a humanist copy made from a now-lost part of the early fourteenth-century manuscript Hauksbók by Jón Erlendsson (AM 105 fol., c. 1650), fol. 83r. We cannot be certain that the latter rubric is original, but its phrasing (*Her hefur Kristni søgv*, 'Here begins *Kristni saga*') resembles rubrics found in the surviving portions of Hauksbók and is not especially typical of seventeenth-century saga-rubrication practice. Another possible exception is *Blómstrvalla saga* ('The Saga of Flower-Plains'), where the locality of a climactic event provides the title, but this *riddarasaga* survives only in post-mediaeval manuscripts.

vernaculars. The title of the Irish *Togail Troí* ('The Destruction of Troy') focuses on the event, as does the Latin source's title *De excidio Troiae historia*, whereas that of the Norse *Trójumanna saga* ('The Saga of the Trojans') focuses on its protagonists. The same contrast applies to the Irish *In Cath Catharda* ('The Civil War', again mirroring Lucan's title) as opposed to the Norse-Icelandic *Rómverja sögur* ('The Sagas of the Romans'). Unusually, the story of Alexander the Great's conquests ends up very similarly entitled in the two traditions, even though the two texts are based on different sources: *Scéla Alaxandair* in Irish, *Alexanders saga* in Old Norse, both of which might be translated 'Alexander's saga'. But the Irish title survives only in tale-list B (its surviving mediaeval texts lack titles),⁹⁵ and in its full version the pressure to name sagas after actions remains visible: *Scéla Alaxandair maic Pi[l]ip ac gabail righi 7 imperichta in domain* ('The saga of Alexander son of Philip taking kingship and imperial power over the world').⁹⁶ As with *Brennu-Njáls saga*, exceptions like this prove the rule.

It is an open question whether this contrast in title usage reflects any differences in compositional procedure between the two saga corpora. It is certainly possible that the prominence of sacred and secular biography at the beginning of the written Norse-Icelandic saga tradition helped to cement the protagonist-oriented title usage in that corpus, a usage that persisted after the corpus had broadened to include narratives that cannot be described as biographies. Similarly, the brevity of the oldest surviving Gaelic sagas, each treating a single episode in a protagonist's career, may have encouraged the use

⁹⁵ Miles, *Heroic Saga*, p. 55 and n. 18.

⁹⁶ Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, p. 52. For a similar action-oriented amplification of a straightforward 'History of X' title, see the colophon to the Early Modern Irish adaptation of the Fierabras narrative, which entitles it *Sdair Serluis moir ag lenmainn coroine Crist 7 taissi na naemh* ('The history of Charlemagne pursuing the crown of Christ and the relics of the saints'): Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., 'The Irish Version of *Fierabras* (Conclusion)', *Revue celtique*, 19 (1898), 364-93, p. 380. See Erich Poppe, 'Charlemagne in Wales and Ireland: Some Preliminaries in Transfer and Transmission', in Jürg Glauser and Susanne Kramarz-Bein, ed., *Rittersagas: Übersetzung, Überlieferung, Transmission* (Tübingen, 2014), pp. 169-89, at p. 183.

of titles referring to individual actions, which again persisted as a convention even after later sagas were composed using ampler frameworks. But this speculation cannot be extrapolated into a statement about the essential form of a typical Gaelic or Norse-Icelandic saga: the former is not essentially concise, nor the latter essentially biographical (or region-historical).

It deserves emphasis that many sagas in both traditions were assigned titles that relate only indirectly to the main point of their narratives. The prestigious Greenland settler Eiríkr the Red plays only a minor role in the so-called *Eiríks saga rauða* ('The Saga of Eiríkr the Red'), which is really the history of a series of northwest Atlantic explorations and settlement attempts. If it is the saga of any one person, that person is the (initially) lower-status woman Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir. But Eiríkr's settlement initiates the narrative, and so it is named after him. On the Gaelic side, the cattle-raid that gives its title to *Táin Bó Fraích* ('The Cattle-Raid of Fráech') is more a postlude or epilogue than the main body of the saga. These examples suggest that we should not necessarily expect a saga's title to encapsulate the saga in any comprehensive way.

The lack of stability in the titles given, especially on the Gaelic side, reinforces this point and cautions us against treating the Gaelic categorization of *scéla* by event-type as a 'system of genres', as one recent scholar puts it.⁹⁷ This is one reason why I am uncomfortable with the common habit of referring to these event-types as 'tale-types': that label suggests a mediaeval equivalent of the folktale-types that folklorists assign to distinct folktale story-patterns using the Aarne-Thompson scheme and its successors. Unlike the Aarne-Thompson folktale-types, for two Gaelic *scéla* to be listed under the same event-type does not in itself tell us what narrative shape the 'tale' as a whole will necessarily take. It simply tells us that the story will include a similar event or action.

⁹⁷ Lewis, 'Irish and Welsh', p. 46.

Admittedly, some *scéla* assigned to the same event-category do share similar narrative patterns. This is not surprising: elopement stories (*aitheda* in Irish) partake of similar deep structures and even surface details in many cultures around the world, because of social and ideological similarities around marriage, parenting and the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In addition, similarities between Gaelic sagas of the same event-type are often explicable via textual influence and imitation. Both processes can produce a narrative genre or subgenre, as with the *immrama* or voyage-tales. But the fact that genres *can* emerge in this way does not mean that genre is *integral* to the classification of *scéla* by event-type. That assumption is already undermined by the fact that the titles of several *scéla* in the tale-lists assign them a different event-type from that found in rubrics or colophons of their extant mediaeval texts. This discrepancy makes intuitive sense as long as the title-word is seen in terms of an action rather than a narrative genre. The same event can be seen in different terms depending on which character one focuses on.

For example, two sagas in the Book of Leinster are there given titles or title-like incipits which differ from the titles assigned to (what we may reasonably take to be) the same narratives in the same manuscript's text of the A-recension of the Middle Irish tale-lists. The probably ninth-century saga about the elopement, exile and tragic deaths of Derdriu (Deirdre) with Noísiu and his brothers is named in the text's question-incipit (quoted above) and colophon as *Longes mac nUsnig*, 'The Exile of the Sons of Uisnech', focusing attention on the male protagonists' actions.⁹⁸ The same manuscript's copy of tale-list A has no *longes* category at all, but seems to cite the same saga alongside other elopement-tales (*aitheda*) as *A[ithed] Derdrinne re macaib Uislenn* ('The Elopement of Derdriu with the Sons of Uisliu'), which highlights Derdriu's role and the romantic cause of their exile.⁹⁹ The disparity seems not to

⁹⁸ Best *et al.*, *Book of Leinster*, V, 1162 and 1170.

⁹⁹ Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, p. 46.

have bothered scribes or users of the Book of Leinster, probably because it was not seen as a disparity; these were two equally valid ways of referring to the same text by singling out one event described therein.

Similarly, the Book of Leinster's text of the tenth-century saga known to scholars as *Fingal Rónáin* ('The Kin-slaying of Rónán') begins and ends with that title, and the same title is used to cross-refer to the saga in a gloss unique to the same manuscript's text of a relevant genealogy.¹⁰⁰ This title focuses attention on the actions of the eponymous king Rónán, who had his son Máel Fothartaig killed in a situation reminiscent of the Phaedra-Hippolytus legend.¹⁰¹ Switch attention to the son, and this becomes an *aided* or death-tale without any alteration to the story. In the same manuscript's text of tale-list A, no mention is made of *Fingal Rónáin* (or any *fingal* titles), but its list of *aideda* includes *A[ided] Mael Fatharlaig maic Ronain* ('The Death of Máel Fothartaig son of Rónán').¹⁰² Again, the saga is not reducible to either title.

Rather than carrying generic or taxonomic value, then, the Gaels' listing and citing of sagas by 'event' looks more like a filing system based on keywords: the cited titles could be interchangeable with other, equally valid ways of recalling the same narrative to memory. This point also raises questions about how we interpret the strings of multiple events found in some saga-rubrics or (more often) colophons. The saga introduced in the Book of Leinster as the answer to the question of what caused *longes mac nUsnig* ends with a colophon that seems to cite three stories: *Longas mac Usnig in sin 7 Longas Fergus 7 Aided mac nUisnig 7 Drerdrend* ('That was the Exile of the Sons of Uisnech, and the Exile of Fergus, and the Deaths of the Sons of Uisnech and Derdriu').¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Best *et al.*, *Book of Leinster*, V, 1195 and 1201, VI, 1356; M. A. O'Brien, ed., *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962), p. 75 and n..

¹⁰¹ The title could also refer to the killing of Rónán: see Sheila Boll, 'Seduction, Vengeance, and Frustration in *Fingal Rónáin*: The Role of Foster-Kin in Structuring the Narrative', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 47 (2004), 1-16, pp. 13-14

¹⁰² Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, p. 44.

¹⁰³ Best *et al.*, *Book of Leinster*, V, 1170. *Drerdrend* is the manuscript's reading.

It might be tempting to treat this colophon as evidence that the extant saga is a cycle-by-transmission combining three originally distinct sagas, whose dividing-lines have melted to produce a single episodic narrative. But I doubt whether this model of cyclic growth is appropriate here. In its extant form, the storyline about the deaths of the sons of Uisnech is indistinguishable from the storyline about their exile. Exile-stories typically end with a return; for these men, to return is to die. As with the other examples above, rubric and colophon present different ways of viewing the same sequence of events, one labelling the saga in terms of the exile at its centre, the other breaking up the storyline into smaller constituent events. The flexibility of named events to encompass smaller or larger units is confirmed in tale-list A, in which *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is named as a single *scél*, but some of the component episodes of the extant *Táin Bó Cúailnge* are also listed as individual *scéla*.¹⁰⁴ In this light, it is less surprising that singular *scél* and plural *scéla* often seem interchangeable as labels for an individual narrative.

In some manuscripts, the placement of rubrics suggests that some scribes saw sagas' titles not primarily as labels for the whole narrative composition (as modern scholars see them) but first and foremost as labels for the event named in the title. This distinction is a slippery one and so I will give three examples.

In the text of *Acallam na Senórach* ('The Conversation of the Elders') in the fifteenth-century Book of the White Earl (the older section of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 610), the main scribe gave one of the numerous in-*tales* told by Caílte to his various hosts the marginal rubric *Cath Traga Rudraigi inso* ('This is the Battle of Tráig Rudraigi') on fol. 128r, some thirty-three lines after this *scél* has begun.¹⁰⁵ As Mac Cana pointed out, the

¹⁰⁴ Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, pp. 51-2. These include episodes like *Mellgleó Iliach*, which could conceivably be envisaged as an originally self-standing story, but also descriptive set-pieces such as *Caladgleó Cethirn* and *Toichim na mBuiden* which are difficult to imagine as having any independent existence as *scéla* in the narrative sense.

¹⁰⁵ The rubric is only partly visible, six lines down col. 1, in the scan on <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk> (accessed 26 January 2023). For the text, see *Acallam na Senórach*,

scribe showed clear awareness that this saga-within-a-saga began with the opening question by the Ulster king (*Is annsin ro fíarfaig rí Ulad do Chailti: ‘Atait da fêrt ar Tráig Rudraigi annseo, 7 cid dia fuilet?’*), ‘Then the king of Ulster asked Cailte: ‘There are two mounds here on Tráig Rudraigi; how did they come to be there?’), because he or she separated the entire *scél* visually from the preceding narrative unit on fol. 127v (col. 2 line 18) by writing a large coloured ‘IS’ three lines high at the beginning of the line.¹⁰⁶ Here is where one would expect the rubric to be placed if the rubric referred to the *scél* as such. Instead, the rubric is placed where the battle itself happens, and this part of the *scél* is marked off only by a small coloured initial in the middle of a line. This much lower level of demarcation suggests that the battle proper was seen as an integral part of the *scél* rather than as the beginning of a new *scél*. In short: the formatting of this in-tale in Laud 610 indicates that the rubric *Cath Traga Rudraigi inso* refers to an event, not to the saga that narrates it.

A comparable, albeit less striking, example is found in the rubrication of the *Macgnímrada Con Culainn* (‘Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’) section of Recension 1 of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.¹⁰⁷ Here the *scél* begins with the conventional question-and-answer opener, but in the early twelfth-century manuscript Lebor na hUidre (for example) the rubric *Na macgnímrada inso síis* (‘The boyhood deeds here below’) is placed a few lines later, when Fergus first mentions Cú Chulainn growing up. The opening portion of the whole sequence, beginning with Ailill’s question and including Fergus’s eulogistic description of Cú Chulainn, is given a separate rubric, *Inna formolta inso síis* (‘The eulogies here

ed. by Whitley Stokes, in Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch, ed. and trans., *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch*, 5 vols in 7 (Leipzig, 1880-1909), IV, 89; on the rubric’s hand, and for discussion of similar rubrics in the same text, see Eystein Thanisch, ‘What the Butlers Saw: *Acallam na Senórach* and its Marginalia in the Book of the White Earl’, *Aiste*, 4 (2014), 35-57, especially pp. 40-1 and 53. This displacement of the rubric was mentioned without comment by Mac Cana, ‘Narrative Openers’, p. 116 n. 5.

¹⁰⁶ This is much larger than any other initials within this in-tale, except for its closing poem which is also marked off via a large initial (fol. 128r, col. 1).

¹⁰⁷ This example, too, was mentioned by Mac Cana (‘Narrative Openers’, p. 116) to document the ubiquity of the question-and-answer format as a narrative opener.

below’).¹⁰⁸ In terms of formal narrative structure the *inna formolta* section is part and parcel of the whole in-tale, since it (and not the section rubricated *Na macgnímrada*) begins with what Mac Cana identifies as a conventional and widespread narrative opener; Fergus’s initial eulogy leads directly into his narration of Cú Chulainn’s deeds, because that eulogy is what prompts Medb’s scornful comment and Fergus’s decision to defend the truth of his eulogy by citing examples from Cú Chulainn’s boyhood. Here, too, the rubrics draw attention to discrete pieces of narrative content rather than to discrete narrative units *per se*. That distinction is often unworkable in practice, but examples where it does seem to operate, such as these, are very suggestive.

The title’s reference to a story’s core event rather than to the overall saga sometimes emerges even when an author or redactor consciously focuses on the compositional act itself, for example when employing the apparatus of the late-antique *accessus* tradition in defining the *locus*, *tempus*, *persona* and *causa scribendi* of a literary composition. The late Middle Irish B-recension of *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* (‘The Vision of Mac Conglinne’) begins in this scholastic vein, declaring that such questions must be asked *don eladain se* (‘of this composition’) as of any other, and then proceeds to answer them:

Locc don eladain se Corcach Mōr Muman, ocus persu dī Anér mac Conglinde di Eoganacht Glennabrach. I n-aimsir Cathail meic Fhingwine ... dorónad. Is hē didiu fāth airicc a dēnma .i. do díchor in luin crāeis bóí i m-brāgait Cathail meic Fhingwine.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ R. I. Best and Osborn Bergin, ed., *Lebor na hUidre* (Dublin, 1929), pp. 152-3.

¹⁰⁹ Kuno Meyer, ed. and trans., *Aislinge Meic Conglinne: The Vision of MacConglinne, A Middle-Irish Wonder Tale* (London, 1892), p. 3. My translation is based on Meyer’s. This and other Gaelic *accessūs* are discussed by Abigail Burnyeat, ‘*Filidecht nó légend? Compilatio*, Commentary and Critical Practice in the B Text of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*’, in Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha and Jan Erik Rekdal, ed., *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne: Studies on a Middle Irish Tale and its Afterlives* (Uppsala, 2013 in press), pp. 1-17, individual chapter online on the research database of NUI Galway at <http://hdl.handle.net/10379/3768> (accessed 6 February 2023).

The place of this composition is great Cork of Munster, and its author is Aniér mac Conglinne of the Eóganacht Glennabrach. It was made in the time of Cathal mac Finguine The cause of its invention was to banish the demon of gluttony that was in the throat of Cathal mac Finguine.

As the unfolding saga makes clear, what was composed by Mac Conglinne to banish a demon of gluttony was the tale-within-a-tale which readers of the saga encounter only after a large part of the overall saga has been narrated: this is a foody dream-vision recited by Mac Conglinne before the king, first in verse and then in prose (and also once beforehand in a different verse structure, and with divergences of content, before the Cork monks).¹¹⁰ This in-tale is the *elada* ‘composition’ to which the *accessus* refers. It is possible, too, that this in-tale, and not the saga as a whole, is also the *scél* to which the saga’s closing colophon refers, stating a range of benefits conferred by reciting it in different performance-situations (mirroring the practical benefit which the vision’s recitation conferred on the king).¹¹¹ The fact that the vision is reported three times in three different textual and narrative forms elevates its status as a worthy composition, as if it were a gem to be held up to the light and wondered at from different angles.

But what about the saga’s anonymous frame-narrative *about* Mac Conglinne and his exploits? That aspect of the saga is every bit as artfully composed as the central in-tale, and takes up even more textual space than the thrice-uttered vision-account, yet the saga’s prologue and colophon downgrade the frame-narrative to the status of a mere framework for the real thing, not even dignified with the status of prologue (that label, *cennport*, is reserved for

¹¹⁰ On these iterations and the significance of their divergences, see Catherine McKenna, ‘Vision and Revision, Iteration and Reiteration, in *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*’, *Celtic Studies Association of North America Yearbook*, 3-4 (2005), 269-82, especially pp. 275-9.

¹¹¹ Meyer, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, pp. 111-13. This colophon parodies more serious lists of benefits such as that in the Book of Leinster *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in which a blessing is promised to whoever commits the text correctly to memory (McKenna, ‘Vision and Revision’, pp. 279-80).

the metrical food-pedigree of Abbot Manchín which Mac Conglinne composes before relating his vision).¹¹² It is the saga as a whole that scholars today call *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, but for the redactor of the B-recension it would appear that this title referred only to the central *aisling* itself: the event of Mac Conglinne's vision and the artfully composed report of that event which cures the king of his illness.

Perhaps all this amounts to another trick in narrative perspective, in keeping with the sophisticated playfulness at work in the whole saga. Certainly, one effect of the opening *accessus* identifying the author of 'this composition' as Mac Conglinne is to invite the audience to reflect on the relationship between scholastic learning and literary creativity embodied in the saga as well as in Mac Conglinne's own performances.¹¹³ Even so, the underlying attitude towards event and narrative is consistent with the more serious examples discussed above. And, given what Abigail Burnyeat documents of the B-redactor's obsession with the division of the text into appropriate sections and headings,¹¹⁴ it is noteworthy that the lengthy frame-narrative parts of the saga are given no attention in this regard. For the purposes of organizing the *scél* and displaying erudition about it, it is as if those parts of the saga are invisible.

The following provisional conclusions suggest themselves. The closer one looks at how Gaelic texts employed their system of identifying sagas by event-types, the less it looks like a method of dividing up tales by genres or even, necessarily, a way of classifying individual literary works. When we encounter sagas' titles in manuscripts – whether in tale-lists, rubrics and other scribal 'markup', or cross-references – we instinctively assume, as literary scholars, that what they refer to are discrete narrative compositions, stories rather than events *per se*. Some mediaeval writers presumably shared that view,

¹¹² Meyer, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, pp. 31-5.

¹¹³ McKenna, 'Vision and Revision'; Burnyeat, '*Filidecht nó légend?*'.

¹¹⁴ Burnyeat, '*Filidecht nó légend?*'.

but these titles seem at least as often to have been used to refer simply to *events* in legendary history: events which could be recalled to memory through narrative performance. In other words, the system of referencing sagas by event-type may have been even more firmly content-oriented than is our modern division into ‘cycles’. Perhaps the term ‘tale-list’ is itself a misnomer: seen from the perspective of some of the examples cited here, they can be seen to list, first and foremost, events.

My argument here may seem close to earlier scholars’ assertions that the producers of early mediaeval Gaelic literature were interested in recording history rather than producing literary works. As David Greene remarked of the compilers of *Lebor na hUidre*, ‘they were not interested in what we now would call literature’ but ‘were after facts’, as if facts existed in these texts outside their literary matrix.¹¹⁵ More pointedly, James Carney wrote of some of the shorter kings’ sagas that their ‘didactic intent, the emphasis on “history”, has as a result that this type of material rarely achieves a satisfactory literary form: the “facts” are primary, the “form” secondary’.¹¹⁶ But this is a post-Romantic view. When mediaeval historians (including saga-authors) wished to address wider non-learned audiences, their historiographic interests and agendas did not sideline literary or aesthetic ambition, but on the contrary necessitated rhetorical craftsmanship and the desire to move and entertain an audience.¹¹⁷ So, too, the prioritization of ‘event’ over ‘narrative form’ that we sometimes see in the *title* of a saga does not set limits or constraints on the saga-writers’ or tellers’ (or redactors’) artistry. The example of *Aislinge Meic Conglinne* is a case in point:

¹¹⁵ David Greene, ‘Leabhar na hUidhre’, in *Great Books of Ireland: Thomas Davis Lectures*, no named editor (Dublin, 1967), pp. 64-76, at p. 67, quoted and discussed by Patrick Wadden, ‘The Careful Look: Historical Culture in Gaeldom c. 1100’, in Emily A. Winkler and C. P. Lewis, ed., *Rewriting History in the Central Middle Ages, 900-1300*, International Medieval Research, 26 (Turnhout, 2022), pp. 67-100, at p. 78.

¹¹⁶ James Carney, ‘Language and Literature to 1169’, in Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, ed., *A New History of Ireland I: Prehistoric and Early Ireland* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 451-510, at pp. 479-80.

¹¹⁷ O’Connor, ‘*Scélsenchus* Revisited’; Ralph O’Connor, ‘The Ulster Cycle: History, Fiction, or Literature?’ in Elizabeth Boyle and David Stifter, ed., *Ulidia 5: Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Berlin, in press).

here a composition about the event is presented as if it, too, were part of the event. What Gaelic saga-authors were producing could be described, with some poetic licence, as ‘the music of what happens’ – the favourite music of the arch-storyteller Finn mac Cumail, if James Stephens’s folktale version of the *Boyhood Deeds of Finn* is to be believed.¹¹⁸

These considerations confirm that narrative (and its artful performance in speech or writing) was conceptualized as a means of knowing and imparting information, using whichever persuasive rhetorical techniques and methods of holding audience attention were felt appropriate. This idea may be reflected in the haziness with which the Irish term for orally delivered and aurally received information (*scél* or *scéla*) bleeds over into Irish terminology for a narrative (also *scél* or *scéla*), and in the lack of any terminological distinction between the narrating of a story and the explanation or interpretation of that story (*aisnéis* meaning both narration and interpretation). As I will now show, a closely comparable semantic blurring affects Old Norse *saga* as well.

3. THE SEMANTICS OF *SAGA* AND *SCÉL*

Light may be shed on how each culture conceptualized their saga corpus, and how comparable these two conceptualizations were, by investigating the wider semantic fields of the two key terms used to refer to saga narratives (*saga* and *scél*), including their non-narrative senses. The basic sense of ‘utterance’ is common to almost all these wider meanings, but the one exception deserves consideration first because it follows on from the preceding investigation of Gaelic event-type saga-titles.

¹¹⁸ James Stephens, *Irish Fairy Tales*, new ed. (London, 1923), p. 65.

A sequence of events

The words *saga* and *scél* were sometimes used in the Middle Ages to refer, not to a narrative or report of events, but to the events themselves. Scholarly comment on this usage has focused so far only on the Norse term, so I will begin with it here.¹¹⁹

In the semantic development of storytelling terminology, events have been collapsed with their telling several times independently. This semantic transference or broadening has taken place in both directions. Old French *aventure* meant a remarkable event or sequence of events, but in the case of several of its Germanic descendants (for example Low German *éventiir*, giving rise to Old Norse *æfintýr*) it came to mean both a remarkable sequence of events and a narrative of those events.¹²⁰ Latin *gesta* ‘things done, deeds’ became a shorthand for a narrative account of those deeds, and this transferred meaning subsequently became paramount in Middle English *geste*; here the meaning ‘deeds’ is secondary.¹²¹ Conversely, the English word ‘history’ long referred to a narration of past events, but eventually also came to mean a sequence of events itself and (frequently since the eighteenth century) the totality of past time.¹²²

In Old Norse, the same double meaning is found in the word used most frequently to denote ‘news’, namely the plural noun *tíðendi* (whose Norse root gave rise ultimately to English ‘tidings’, which similarly denoted events as well as their telling). In Norse-Icelandic texts, *tíðendi* is most often used (like Irish

¹¹⁹ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘Næsten alle sagaer var skrevet: en kommentar til den såkaldte *Sturlunga*-prolog’, in Finn Hødnebo *et al.*, ed., *Eyvindarbók: festskrift til Eyvind Fjeld Halvorsen* (Oslo, 1992), pp. 333-46, reprinted in Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *At fortælle historien: studier i den gamle nordiske litteratur* (Trieste, 2001), pp. 193-205, at pp. 198-201; Theodore M. Andersson, ‘What is a Saga?’ in Gísli Sigurðsson *et al.*, ed., *Sagnaþing helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum*, 1 vol. in 2 (Reykjavík, 1994), pp. 497-503.

¹²⁰ *ONP*, s.v. *æfintýr*.

¹²¹ On *geste*, see Peter Damian-Grint, ‘*Estoire* as Word and Genre: Meaning and Literary Usage in the Twelfth Century’, *Medium Ævum*, 66 (1997), 189-206.

¹²² *OED Online*, s.v. *history* 7b and 8, www.oed.com (accessed 7 February 2023).

scéla) to refer to news passed on by word of mouth, but is also often used to refer to what happens, the events themselves. The etymology of *tíðendi* (deriving from *tíðr*, ‘current, customary, occurring’) suggests that this sense of ‘what happened’ was the word’s more basic, older sense, from which the sense ‘news of what happened’ arose later. An example of this event-sense of *tíðendi* is a passage in *Njáls saga*: *Þeir Flosi sá öll tíðendi, þar sem þeir vǫru í fjallinu* (‘Flosi and the others saw everything that happened from where they were in the mountain’).¹²³ However, it is not necessarily the case that Old Norse *saga* (or Old Irish *scél*) evolved in the same direction, widening from a sense meaning ‘event’ to include also a sense denoting a report or narration of that event. In the case of *saga*, I believe that the reverse development took place, more along the lines of the evolution of the English word ‘history’.

The ‘events’ sense of *saga* is not separately listed in *ONP*, but it comes across clearly from the citations grouped under the subheading ‘(structured) narrative, story (about s[ome]b[od]y)’ in the subsection for the phrase *er sjá/þessi saga gerisk* (‘when this saga happens’). In practice, all the citations of this phrase (and all the other examples known to me) are in the past tense, underlining the fact that the word *saga* here refers to past events, whether distant or recent.¹²⁴ For instance, in the opening of the short narrative *Qlkofra þátr*, the main character Qlkofri is introduced as follows: *Hann var vel fjáreigandi ok heldr við aldr, er saga sjá gerðisk* (‘He was wealthy and rather elderly when this saga took place’).¹²⁵

Here the word *saga* is clearly being used in the sense of ‘what happened’, yet the narrative sense of *saga* is hardly far away. Indeed, it is a characteristic of most attestations known to me of *saga* in the sense of ‘what happened’ that the

¹²³ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslenzk fornrit, 12 (Reykjavik, 1954), p. 341. For other examples see *ONP*, s.v. *tíðendi*, where attestations of both ‘news’ and ‘events’ senses are grouped together. The sub-entries for phrases such as *gerisk ... til tíðenda*, *kyrr tíðendi* and *sjá tíðendi* are dominated by the ‘events’ sense.

¹²⁴ *ONP*, s.v. *saga* I (5), phrase *er sjá/þessi saga gerisk*.

¹²⁵ Jón Jóhannesson, ed., *Austfirðinga sögur*, Íslenzk fornrit, 11 (Reykjavik, 1950), p. 83.

word is used in a way which involves, or deliberately cultivates, ambiguity between this sense and the *saga*-as-narrative sense. In the example from *Ólkofta þáttur*, the fact that the events are referred to using the phrase *sjá saga* ‘this saga’, rather than via a circumlocution referring to ‘events about to be told’ (especially given that the text itself narrates several distinct events, not just one), draws attention to the *saga*-as-narrative for any listening or reading audience, because it comes right at the beginning of this very *saga* (which its earliest manuscript does call a *saga* and not a *þáttur*).¹²⁶

As Theodore M. Andersson notes, there is a more pointed example of this ambiguity in the prologue to (most of) the compilation of several sagas about relatively recent events in Iceland, *Sturlunga saga*. Here, as befits a prologue to a compilation of several sagas, the word *saga* is used in the plural, but is used in both the senses of event and (written) narrative: *Flestar allar sögur, þær er gerz höfðu á Íslandi áðr Brandr biskup Sæmundarson andaðiz, voru ritaðar* (‘Nearly all the sagas that have taken place here in Iceland before Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson died were written’).¹²⁷ The chronological pointer relating to the death of Bishop Brandr is placed differently in the two surviving versions of this passage, but the usage of *sögur* to denote both narratives and events is identical in both versions.¹²⁸ For the first nine words I here use Andersson’s literal translation; most published translations render *sögur* as ‘sagas concerning events’, which makes for a smoother read but removes the central ambiguity within the word *saga* itself.¹²⁹ In an earlier and more detailed study, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen argued that *sögur* in this passage ought not to be

¹²⁶ van der Leeuw van Weenen, *Möðruvallabók*, II, fol. 147v.

¹²⁷ Gudbrand Vigfusson, *Sturlunga saga*, I, 86. A variant version of this passage is translated and discussed by Andersson, ‘What is a Saga?’ pp. 502-3.

¹²⁸ The version quoted is in AM 122 b fol. (Reykjarfjarðarbók). In the other main manuscript, AM 122 a fol. (Króksfjarðarbók), the phrase about Brandr follows the word *ritaðar*, so that here the sagas were *written* before Bishop Brandr died rather than *taking place* before then. For discussion of the two versions, see Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘Næsten alle sagaer’, pp. 193-6.

¹²⁹ For example, Julia H. McGrew and R. George Thomas, trans., *Sturlunga saga*, 2 vols (Boston, Massachusetts, 1970), I, 55.

considered as referring to ‘sagas’ at all, but as ‘events’ pure and simple, which according to the prologue were subsequently written about by historians (including, but not restricted to, saga-authors). In this context the sense *saga-as-narrative*, in Meulengracht Sørensen’s view, is a red herring which has created misunderstanding about the history of Icelandic saga-writing.¹³⁰

Meulengracht Sørensen was right to underline the sense of *saga* as ‘event’ in this sentence, but it is equally significant that here, again, a text’s audience was actively encouraged to remember the double meaning of *saga*. The preceding sentences in this prologue refer by title to several sagas that are included in the *Sturlunga* compilation or relate closely to its content: *Þorláks saga helga*, *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, *Guðmundar saga dýra*, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarson* and *Íslendinga saga*. Immediately after pointing out how the chronologies of these sagas relate to each other, the prologue begins the sentence quoted above, then mentions Sturla Þórðarson having dictated (*sagði fyrir*) unspecified *Íslendinga sögur*, ‘sagas about Icelanders’, and discusses Sturla’s oral and written sources for those sagas.¹³¹ No wonder some modern scholars have assumed that the word *sögur* in the sentence above referred primarily to sagas-as-narratives: that sense has been kept firmly in the audience’s mind throughout the prologue.

The same is true of many other Icelandic instances of *saga-as-event*. Several of these are found in the genealogical compendium and settlement-history *Landnámabók* (‘The Book of Land-Takings’), extant in recensions from the thirteenth century onwards. As Meulengracht Sørensen pointed out, the recension attributed to Sturla Þórðarson himself presents several examples. One reference to a quarrel between two families is followed by an allusion to a saga

¹³⁰ Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘Næsten alle sagaer’, pp. 199-201.

¹³¹ Gudbrand Vigfusson, *Sturlunga saga*, I, 86. This is the only mediaeval attestation known to me of the phrase *Íslendinga sögur*, today the preferred Icelandic and British English way of referring to family sagas, but here much more likely to refer to sagas about relatively recent Icelanders (what we call *samtíðarsögur*). The phrase probably did not connote any chronological limitation in itself (let alone a genre): it probably meant just ‘sagas about Icelanders’.

that we know in written form as *Porskfirðinga saga* or *Gull-Þóris saga: af því gerðisk Porskfirðinga saga* ('from that [quarrel] *Porskfirðinga saga* arose / took place'). Elsewhere, an allusion to certain events is followed by another cross-reference to an otherwise unknown saga: *Paðan af gerðisk saga Bøðmóðs gerpis ok Grímólfs* ('From that the saga of Bøðmóðr gerpir and Grímólfr arose / took place').¹³²

The fact that *saga*-as-event is so often attested in contexts where *saga*-as-narrative is so heavily foregrounded, even to the extent of naming sagas by title and often with mention of writing, suggests that the sense *saga*-as-event is a secondary use of the term developing from pre-existing senses denoting a narrative or report. This development would then resemble that of the English word 'history', and it would be the opposite line of development from that of *tíðendi*, where the 'event' sense was primary and where the word very often appears (in that sense) independently of any self-reference back to a saga or written account.

The same sense of 'memorable events', rather than a report or narrative about those events, is attested for the Irish word *scél*.¹³³ Here, too, the 'events' sense of the word is often highlighted at moments where the word's narrative sense is also to the fore, in a way which would be consistent with the 'event' sense of *scél* being a secondary development from a pre-existing sense meaning a narrative or report. An analogy to this development is found in another derivative of the Indo-European root *sek^w* 'says'. The primary meaning of Old Irish *tásc* (verbal noun of **to-ad-sech*) is 'notice, announcement, report', but it was often used in the narrower sense 'news of a death', and thus by extension to mean 'death' itself.¹³⁴ Surprisingly, given the obvious resonances with the

¹³² Jakob Benediktsson, ed., *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, Íslenzk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavik, 1986), pp. 154 and 198. The second passage is paralleled in the Hauksbók recension (*Paðan af gerdist saga Bøðmóðs*): Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Hauksbók* (Copenhagen, 1892), p. 52. See also Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, p. 211, for a similar reference.

¹³³ *eDIL*, s.v. *scél* III (a) and (c).

¹³⁴ This line of development is suggested in *eDIL*, s.v. *tásc* (d).

practice of naming sagas by event-type, this aspect of the word *scél* has received virtually no scholarly attention.

This lack of attention has sometimes led to misunderstandings about what a *scél* refers to. I mentioned earlier in this essay that mediaeval Gaelic poets sometimes referred to their own verse narratives as *scéla*, indicating that this narrative category carried no necessary implication of prose or prosimetrum medium. However, many references of this kind turn out to refer to the events rather than their narrative shaping. In the metrical *dindsenchas* of Áth Fadat, the cheville *ba scél ngarb* has been translated by its editor Gwynn as ‘harsh is the tale’, thus referring to the *dindsenchas* itself as the *scél*. But the past tense of *ba* suggests that the true meaning is ‘harsh was the turn of events’. It could alternatively mean ‘harsh was the news’ to those who heard it, using *scél* in the sense of news or information to be discussed below.¹³⁵ Again, in the *dindsenchas* of Ard Macha, the poet promises to narrate *scél diamboí cless cen chobair*, / *Ulaid h-í cless chomgalair* (‘the *scél* from which a spell without cure came about, [i.e.] the Ulaid in the pangs of general sickness’). Macha’s curse did not come about because of a story, but because of what happened to her: *scél* thus means a course of events rather than the poem itself, contrary to Gwynn’s translation ‘tale’.¹³⁶

Most references to *scéla* in Gaelic narrative verse take the form of chevilles such as *mór in scél*. These are typically translated in a narrative sense, such as ‘great the tale’ or ‘strange the tale’, but they lack the context needed to determine whether they refer to events, news, information or the verse narrative being performed. For example, the cheville *mór in scél* in one of the metrical *dindsenchas* narratives about Boand refers to the Dagda managing to stop the sun in its course for nine months: *scél* here could denote the Dagda’s deed, the news or information reporting it, or (less likely given the brevity of its account

¹³⁵ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindsenchas*, III, 156-7.

¹³⁶ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindsenchas*, IV, 124-5.

here) the section of *dindsenchas* in which it is narrated.¹³⁷ The same ambiguity affects *scél* in the account of the presentation of fifty identical women to Eochaid Airem in the metrical *dindsenchas* of Ráth Esa, alluded to as *ba scél n-irdairc rochúala* ('twas a famous *scél*, I have heard').¹³⁸ Metrical narratives of universal history use similar chevilles, as when the twelfth-century poet Gilla in Chomded húa Cormaic interrupted his account of the Scythian kingdom with the phrase *scél nglé* ('a clear *scél*').¹³⁹ *Scél* could refer here to the portion of Gilla's poem being narrated, or to the information it contains; but given the scholarly effort that went into the chronological sequencing of events in poems of this kind it is at least as plausible that *scél* here refers to the events themselves. At the very least, the frequent ambiguity of *scél* in chevilles like this acts as a reminder that the 'events' and 'information' senses of the term were in frequent use during the heyday of Gaelic saga-writing.

In sagas themselves, the 'events' sense of *scél* is sometimes used in ways which are just as self-consciously ambiguous as in the Norse-Icelandic examples discussed above. An excellent example of this double usage of *scél* appears in a passage introducing one of the tale-lists enumerating *scéla* by event-type. Tale-list B survives embedded within a Middle Irish saga about a tenth-century poet, *Airec Menman Uraird maic Coise* ('The Stratagem of Urard mac Coise'). In the lead-up to the tale-list, the king asks Urard for news (*scéla*); Urard responds by declaring that he knows all the traditional sagas (*scéla*) and goes on to list them, punning on the two senses of *scél* as news or story. But the phrasing (in indirect speech) by which he makes this declaration itself goes on to collapse the distinction between *scél*-as-narrative and *scél*-as-event.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindsenchas*, III, 36-7.

¹³⁸ Gwynn, *Metrical Dindsenchas*, II, 4-5.

¹³⁹ Best *et al.*, *Book of Leinster*, IV, 574 (stanza 3 of *A rí richid réidig dam*). Compare the similar usage in a eleventh-century historical poem by Gilla Cóemáin (Best *et al.*, *Book of Leinster*, IV, 485, stanza 118 of *Hériu ard inis na rrig*).

¹⁴⁰ Edition from, and translation adapted from, Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, p. 50. On the semantics of *coimgne*, see Seán Mac Airt, 'Filidecht and Coimgne', *Ériu*, 18 (1958), 139-52; Ralph O'Connor, 'The Semantics of *scél* and the Truth of Stories in Mediaeval Gaelic Culture', in Alice Taylor-

batar mebra laisium coimgneda 7 sceoil 7 senchusa 7 gabala Erend do neoch
forcaomnacair dibh o chétgaphail Erend iar ndilinn cusin n-aimsir sin a mbuí feisne.

there were in his memory the *coimgneda* (= items of historical information), *scéla*,
historical traditions and settlements of Ireland such as had taken place from the first
settlement of Ireland after the Flood until the time in which he himself lived.

Narratives about Ireland's past are here denoted using a wide range of overlapping terms, designed to underline the fact that the *scéla* (subsequently listed) conveyed historical information. Here, however, these *scéla* are presented, not as conveying or containing that information, but as actually taking place. The phrasing and context bear striking similarities with the reference in *Sturlunga saga* to 'nearly all the sagas that have taken place in Iceland' after a specified chronological marking-point, likewise in a passage that lists many extant sagas.

Some mediaeval Gaelic references to individual *scéla* seem to refer only to the events rather than to the narrative compositions enshrining them, as was discussed above. That attitude comes across even more strongly here, where the phrasing of the introductory passage casts the ensuing list of *scéla* (by event-type) as a list of known events. A saga is then envisaged as a narrative medium that can bring those past events into listeners' minds through the power of *mebair* 'memory': the implication seems to be that the event finds itself simply replicated in the narrative told about it. Admittedly, in the saga containing this particular list, the poet-protagonist Urard has his own reasons for identifying narrative with event. The last *scél* which he lists, and which the king then asks him to recite, is a *roman à clef* about damages done to his own property, which the king remedies at the end of the frame-narrative. *Airec Menman Uraird* is no

Griffiths and Seosamh Mac Cárthaigh, ed., *Storytelling in Gaelic Literature from 700 AD to the Present* (Cambridge, in press).

ordinary saga in this regard. But, as was argued above, an identification of narrative and event was already implicit within the wider Gaelic convention of naming sagas as events, a convention on which *Airec Menman Uraird* (like *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*) is self-conscious enough to reflect explicitly.¹⁴¹

We see an equally clear identification of saga narratives as events in a similarly phrased passage in another Middle Irish saga about learned authority, *Suidigud Tellaig Temra* ('The Establishment of the Dominion of Tara'), in which the preternaturally long-lived Fintan mac Bóchra announces his historical knowledge by declaring that *am éolach ina fesaib 7 ina táintib 7 ina toglaib 7 ina tochmorcaib do neoch dorónad díb ó dilind ille* ('I am knowledgeable in the feasts, cattle-raids, destructions and woings such as have been done from the Flood until now').¹⁴² Here the event-types are enumerated by category, but as things that have been done (*dorónad*) – recalling the Latin construction so often used as a shorthand for history-writing, *res gestae* 'things done' – rather than as *narratives* about things done.

One more example, this time resonating with *Qlkoфра þátrr*, is found near the end of the late Middle Irish Recension 2 of *Táin Bó Cúailgne*. In a brief flashback we are told that Bricriu came *bliadain résin scél sa Tánad Bó Cúailnge*, which literally means 'a year before the event(s) in the *Cattle-Raid of Cúailnge*'.¹⁴³ The word *scél* here unambiguously refers to the events rather than the saga. As in many of the Icelandic examples, it uses the singular noun to refer to a whole sequence of events, and interference between the senses *scél*-as-event and *scél*-as-narrative seems intended. In order to locate the event in historical time, the writer goes on to name the saga being narrated: *Táin Bó*

¹⁴¹ On other aspects of this text's reflections on the functions of *scéla*, see Poppe, 'Reconstructing', pp. 44-7.

¹⁴² R. I. Best, ed. and trans., 'The Settling of the Manor of Tara', *Ériu*, 4 (1910), 121-72, p. 128. My translation also draws on Joseph Falaky Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Ithaca, New York, 1997), p. 4.

¹⁴³ Cecile O'Rahilly, ed. and trans., *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster* (Dublin, 1967), p. 134.

Cúailnge, a *scél* in its narrative sense. This shows just how close the senses of *scél*-as-narrative and *scél*-as-event were to each other. This semantic proximity is reinforced by the fact that *táin* is one of the best-known event-types cited in lists of *scéla* (it is either the first or second major event-type enumerated in all the extant tale-lists and shorter summaries of the *scél* corpus (as seen in *Suidigud Tellaig Temra* above).

In Andersson's analysis, the reference to sagas 'happening' in the *Sturlunga saga* prologue suggests a mediaeval Icelandic view of saga-writing in which events happen that are found 'interesting and instructive enough *to talk about*' (his emphasis) and are subsequently written about in sagas, drawing on pre-existing 'talk' in order to represent events as faithfully as possible. For Andersson, this stance is consistent with what he sees as the significant role played by oral tradition in the making of the extant family sagas, before the various divergent word-of-mouth accounts of what happened had taken on 'the dress of the writer's art'.¹⁴⁴

That may be a plausible model for some sagas, yet the presence of the same stance – collapsing the distinction between saga-as-event and saga-as-narrative – in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* warns us against taking that convention too literally. The events of the *Táin* were believed to have taken place almost a millennium before the oldest linguistic stratum in the extant saga, and at one destabilizing moment, the *Táin* records the deaths of its own official chroniclers during the cattle-raid itself.¹⁴⁵ Fortunately for posterity, another mediaeval Gaelic saga tells of how the story of the cattle-raid had been forgotten but then recovered through the supernatural resuscitation of one of its key participants, who told the story to a leading Irish poet.¹⁴⁶ The *Táin* is still presented as a history, but its writers have left room for doubt over some of the details. The

¹⁴⁴ Andersson, 'What is a Saga?' p. 503.

¹⁴⁵ Cecile O'Rahilly, ed. and trans., *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin, 1976), lines 1012-13.

¹⁴⁶ Kevin Murray, ed. and trans., 'The Finding of the *Táin*', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 41 (2001), 17-23.

colophon to the second recension of the *Táin* in the Book of Leinster – the very recension which contains the passage collapsing saga-as-event and saga-as-narrative – crystallizes some of these doubts by stating outright that some of the saga’s contents are untrustworthy.¹⁴⁷ Even in *Droplaugarsona saga*, the one Icelandic family saga whose oldest text names an oral informant as the ‘teller’ of the whole story – last in a chain of witnesses originally designed to link the saga’s events with the author’s own time – one later expanded recension adds an anecdote about the bull Brandkrossi which, we are told, is thought *efanlig* (‘doubtful’) by some, but worth including because it is fun to hear (*gaman at heyra*).¹⁴⁸ One might compare the Gaelic colophon’s reference to *delectatio stultorum* (‘the entertainment of fools’) as a reason for doubting the value of certain episodes.¹⁴⁹

These expressions of doubt were not necessarily designed to invalidate the historicity of the entire saga.¹⁵⁰ But they do show mediaeval saga-authors to have been aware of the fact that their narratives did not preserve events in a completely transparent way. The more widespread trope of acknowledging (and not always judging between) variant accounts of the same events, found in

¹⁴⁷ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*, lines 4921-5. For discussion, see Pádraig Ó Néill, ‘The Latin Colophon to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in the Book of Leinster: A Critical View of Old Irish Literature’, *Celtica*, 23 (1999), 269-75; Poppe, ‘Reconstructing’, pp. 36-7.

¹⁴⁸ Jón Jóhannesson, ed., *Austfirðinga saga*, Íslenzk fornrit, 11 (Reykjavik, 1950), p. 180 (*er sagði sögu þessa*, from the fourteenth-century manuscript Mððruvallabók) and p. 186 (for the doubts over one episode in a prequel added later, *Brandkrossa þáttur*). Interestingly, the two most important texts of *Droplaugarsona saga* which contain both the closing genealogy and the doubtful episode in *Brandkrossa þáttur* do not include the crucial phrase *er sagði sögu þessa* at the end of the genealogy, and this looks very much like deliberate omission. One text, in Reykjavik, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar AM 164 k fol., has a row of dots where those words would be (p. 41); the other, Copenhagen, Det kongelige bibliotek, Thott 1768 4to, has a space big enough for two or three words, followed by the last word of the missing sentence (*þessa*), followed by a comma and then a new sentence (fol. 176v). Both texts are post-mediaeval copies made by the eighteenth-century humanist scholar Ásgeir Jónsson.

¹⁴⁹ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*, lines 4924-5.

¹⁵⁰ Ralph O’Connor, ‘Fabulous Content, Historical Purpose and Scribal Strategy in Irish and Icelandic Saga Narrative: Some Comparative Perspectives on the Colophon to the Book of Leinster *Táin*’, in Axel Harlos and Neele Harlos, ed., *Adapting Texts and Styles in a Celtic Context: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Processes of Literary Transfer in the Middle Ages*, Studien und Texte zur Keltologie, 13 (Münster, 2016), pp. 305-30.

many family sagas and in the first recension of the *Táin*, may be seen as another implicit admission that the link between events and written saga was complex and required the exercise of editorial discretion.¹⁵¹ The potential distortion of a narrative during its transmission over time through attrition, addition, error, exaggeration and other factors was a topic that saga-authors often returned to, especially in Norse-Icelandic texts. Nonetheless, what I have been arguing so far is that some of the same texts also made use of the opposite trope in which a saga could be positioned as an account of past events so transparent that it could be identified with those events. We may not be meant to take that trope literally, but it is certainly a stance that both Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic authors promoted when narrating sagas and other historical accounts.

Both tropes offer different ways of implying that the narrative in question is a truthful history and that those who have produced it are to be trusted. (It is no coincidence that both Urard mac Coise and Sturla Þórðarson were becoming bywords for historical learning as well as literary performance by the time that *Airec Menman Uraird* and the *Sturlunga* prologue were written.)¹⁵² Expressions of uncertainty over specific details forestall adverse criticism and position the writer as a trustworthy and impartial judge of his or her source-material.¹⁵³ Conversely, the collapsing of the ‘event’ and ‘narrative’ senses of *saga* and *scél* in the passages we have examined seems designed to *conceal* the mediating role

¹⁵¹ On the rhetoric of presenting variant accounts, see Gregory Toner, ‘The Ulster Cycle: Historiography or Fiction?’ *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 40 (2000), 1-20, and for Norse-Icelandic examples, see Slavica Ranković, ‘Authentication and Authenticity in the Sagas of Icelanders and Serbian Epic Poetry’, in Panagiotis A. Agapitos and Lars Boje Mortensen, ed., *Medieval Narratives between History and Fiction: From the Centre to the Periphery of Europe, c. 1100-1400* (Copenhagen, 2012), pp. 199-234.

¹⁵² Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, pp. 35-7; Aideen M. O’Leary, ‘The Identities of the Poet(s) Mac Coisi: A Reinvestigation’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 38 (1999), 53-71. On Sturla compare Hannah Burrows, ‘Rhyme and Reason: Lawspeaker-Poets in Medieval Iceland’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 81 (2009), 215-38, pp. 229-31.

¹⁵³ Ralph O’Connor, ‘History or Fiction? Truth-Claims and Defensive Narrators in Icelandic Romance-Sagas’, *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 15 (2005), 101-69, pp. 141-9; Ranković, ‘Authentication’; O’Connor, ‘Fabulous Content’. Compare also Peter Damian-Grint, ‘Truth, Trust and Evidence in the Anglo-Norman *estoire*’, *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 18 (1996), 63-72.

of the writer or narrator, to keep the audience's attention on the narrative at hand as if the events themselves are simply unfolding before the mind's eye, or (in cross-references to other named sagas-as-events) to reassure them in general terms that sagas are implicitly trustworthy embodiments of cultural memory.¹⁵⁴ As such, this convention reinforces the dispassionate narratorial stance so often assumed in saga narratives, purporting to narrate truthfully a sequence of communally agreed events. That stance is best known from the Icelandic family sagas, but it is deployed widely across the saga corpus in both Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic cultures – an art that conceals art which is, in itself, the product of considerable rhetorical effort.

The two conventions – as it were, the managing editor and the invisible editor – contradict each other in theory. But the same can be said of several rhetorical tropes associated with the historian's art: compare the tension between the humility topos and the (same) author's foregrounding of his or her unique credentials. In practice, these contrasting conventions are employed at different moments of narration, each one appropriate to its immediate context. Both involve an implicit claim that the spoken word was an inescapable part of the production and/or delivery of saga narratives. And both form part of a rhetoric of history.

The similarity between the two cultures' collapsing of narrative and event through the words *saga* and *scél* has implications for how we view the obvious differences between the two cultures' conventions of assigning titles to sagas. Norse-Icelandic sagas are named for people, Gaelic sagas for events or deeds, and Gaelic redactors sometimes attended more to the event than to the narrative

¹⁵⁴ On this aspect of saga-writing, see Pernille Hermann, 'Saga Literature, Cultural Memory and Storage', *Scandinavian Studies*, 85 (2013), 332-54; several of the essays in Pernille Hermann *et al.*, ed., *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, Acta Scandinavica, 4 (Turnhout, 2014); Erich Poppe, 'Narrative History and Cultural Memory in Medieval Ireland: Some Preliminary Thoughts', in Jan Erik Rekdal and Erich Poppe, ed., *Medieval Irish Perspectives on Cultural Memory*, Studien und Texte zur Keltologie, 11 (Münster, 2014), pp. 135-76; Max Quaintmere, 'Aspects of Memory in Medieval Irish Literature', unpublished PhD dissertation (University of Glasgow, 2017).

when handling event-type titles. Yet the congruence in usage of *saga* and *scél* around the sense of ‘event’ shows that such differences in titling conventions need not rule out deeper similarities in narrative practice and representation.

Information, news, report, utterance

I suggested above that the ‘event’ meaning of both *scél* and *saga* is likely to have been a secondary development from its sense as ‘narrative’ or ‘report’. I will now turn to what I consider to be a more fundamental, older sense of both words, which also retained its currency through the Gaelic and Nordic Middle Ages – a sense which also reinforces the historical stance of saga-writing and saga-telling throughout the period.

The most frequently attested wider sense of *scél* and *saga* was that of ‘news’, ‘report’ or ‘information’, typically information delivered through word of mouth, with no necessary implication of narrative presentation.¹⁵⁵ In Irish, the sense ‘news’ or ‘information’ is often referred to via the plural *scéla*, while narratives are often referred to using the singular *scél*. But there are so many examples of *scél* meaning ‘news’ or ‘information’ and *scéla* meaning a (single) narrative that we can rarely decide which sense is meant solely on the basis of whether the word is used in the singular or plural.¹⁵⁶ With Old Norse *saga* / *sǫgur*, too, there seems to be no clear semantic dividing-line along the singular-plural axis when the word is used in this wider sense, although number became significant when the word was used in its narrative sense.

¹⁵⁵ *eDIL*, s.v. *scél* I (c), (d) and (e); *ONP*, s.v. *saga* I (1) and (4).

¹⁵⁶ I here differ from (for example) Nagy, *Conversing with Angels*, p. x. Countering such straightforward distinctions between *scél* and *scéla*, Pádraig Ó Fiannachta even suggested that *scéla*, as used in saga-titles such as *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*, might really be a singular *io*-stem: see his review of D. A. Binchy, ed., *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*, in *Éigse*, 11 (1964-6), 76-9, p. 77. However, there is nothing to rule out the possibility that *scéla* here and elsewhere is a grammatically plural word lacking any overtly plural meaning. The analogy with English ‘news’ makes this interpretation plausible.

Some of the senses of *scél* and *saga* listed individually by *eDIL* and *ONP* are more plausibly seen as context-specific or semantically heightened examples of types of information or uttered report, rather than as fully distinct senses of the words *scél* or *saga*. For instance, both words are widely attested in legal discourse in Irish and Old Norse. Depending on context, these words can denote an accusation (in both languages), a claim or statement (in both languages) or a plea or defence (in Irish).¹⁵⁷ All these types of utterances could be construed as differently formalized ways of delivering by word of mouth what the speaker presents as information, albeit not necessarily impartial.¹⁵⁸ Like some other derivatives of Indo-European **sek^w-*, the words *scél* and *saga* are also both used to denote information about the future in the form of prophecy, vague information in the shape of rumour or hearsay, and reported information attached to an individual in the form of fame or reputation.¹⁵⁹

This last sense is attested most frequently in the plural (*scéla*, *sogur*) and can be difficult or impossible to distinguish from the sense that refers to a narrative or narratives because reputation is often built on what someone is remembered to have *done* in the past. In Irish this sense of *scél* typically appears in possessive constructions such as *a scéla*, ‘his reputation’: in a Middle Irish saga about the warrior Fráech, Ireland is said to be full *dia allud 7 dia scélaib*

¹⁵⁷ *eDIL*, s.v. *scél* II (b) and (d); *ONP*, s.v. *saga* I (2) and (3).

¹⁵⁸ The semantic range here bears comparison with that found among some of the other Gaelic derivatives of the Indo-European root **sek^w-* ‘says’, where a combination of prefixes and context-specific usages have resulted in semantic heightening and narrowing of various kinds: *seichid* for ‘asserts’ or ‘declares’, *cosc* for ‘admonishing’ but also ‘punishing’, *tinchosc* for ‘instructing’, *tecosc* for ‘instructing’ but also ‘prophecy’ and ‘reciting a charm’, *tásc* for ‘notice’ or ‘information’ but also ‘fateful report, news of a death’. See *eDIL*, ss.v. *cosc*, *seichid*, *tásc*, *tecosc*, *tinchosc* and, for discussion, Eric P. Hamp, ‘Varia II: *sek^w- “pronounce, speak”’, *Ériu*, 26 (1975), 171-4.

¹⁵⁹ For the prophetic sense, see *eDIL*, s.v. *scél* I (c) (the first citation from *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* is a prophecy, and the penultimate citation in this section refers to a prophecy); *ONP*, s.v. *saga* I (8). On links between storytelling, *scél* and prophecy, see Ralph O’Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Mediaeval Irish Saga* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 181-92. For the senses of rumour and reputation, see *eDIL*, s.v. *scél* I (b) and (e); *ONP*, s.v. *saga* I (4): ‘what is reported, word of mouth, reputation, news, rumour, hearsay’.

(‘of his fame and his *scéla*’).¹⁶⁰ The same sense is attested in the compound *airscéla*, ‘great *scéla*’, which has generally been understood by Celticists in terms of ‘great tales’ or ‘famous tales’ about a person and hence, by extension, a high reputation.¹⁶¹ However, I do not know of any attestation of the term *airscéla* or *scéla*-as-reputation accompanied by an unambiguous sign that narratives were involved (for instance, any mention of the content of such *airscéla*). In my view the term could more plausibly be taken as an intensifying version of *scéla* in the primary sense of reported information about a person (for instance, about their qualities) or reported utterance in the sense of ‘being talked about’, with no narrative shaping implied.¹⁶²

ONP lists ‘reputation’ as one of the meanings attached to *sǫgur* in Norse, in prepositional constructions of the kind *sǫgur af (or frá) honum*, ‘*sǫgur* about him’. For example, the Hauksbók recension of *Hervarar saga* reports of the *berserkr* Angantýr and his brothers that *stórar sǫgur fóru af þeim ok mikil frægð* (literally ‘great *sǫgur* and great renown circulated about them’).¹⁶³ Even more than with the Gaelic examples, it is unclear in such constructions whether the rumour, report or fame is envisaged primarily in terms of narratives or via a more general sense of reported information, but the very frequency with which this ambiguity raises its head underlines the semantic proximity of information and narrative in mediaeval Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic conceptual worlds.

The fact that *scél* and *saga* are so widely attested in these non-narrative-specific senses, encompassing a very broad range of types of utterance and especially those delivering information, is consistent with the narrower narrative sense of *scél* and *saga* having been a secondary development in both cases. This

¹⁶⁰ Wolfgang Meid, ed., *Táin Bó Fraích*, 2nd ed., Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series, 22 (Dublin, 1974), p. 1.

¹⁶¹ Myself included (O’Connor, *Destruction*, pp. 57 and 190).

¹⁶² This uncertainty over *airscéla* is discussed in Robbie MacLeod, ‘Gender and Love in Medieval Gaelic Saga’, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2023 (forthcoming).

¹⁶³ Jón Helgason, ed., *Heiðreks saga: Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, STUAGNL, 48 (Copenhagen, 1924), p. 5.

might seem a counter-intuitive suggestion because the narrative senses of both words overwhelmingly dominate scholarship in the two fields, making it easy to imagine that when we find (for example) the word *saga* being used of an utterance or piece of information consisting of more than just one or two words, that utterance ‘must have had a narrative form, however minimal’.¹⁶⁴ But several of the specialized declarative and legal usages of both terms, along with their ‘reputational’ sense, seem to me to prioritize above all the fact that something is uttered or information provided: any formal aspects of the utterance’s content are determined by the specialized contexts in which this ultimately very general term was used. By analogy with these usages, I suggest that the sense of *scél* or *saga* meaning ‘a narrative’ was another such specialized evolution from the generalized ‘*scél* or *saga* as information or utterance’.

Regardless of their pathways of semantic development, in the surviving texts the two senses of narrative and information implicit in both *saga* and *scél* are closely linked. As with the *saga*-as-event discussed above, this relationship has important bearings on ongoing scholarly debates about the extent to which Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic sagas were viewed by their mediaeval producers and audiences as historical narratives. In its narrative sense, when it appears in Gaelic texts the Irish word *scél* is often translated in English as ‘tale’ or ‘story’. By analogy with ‘folktale’ (i.e. *Märchen*), these terms might be assumed to refer to a narrative whose truth-value is nonexistent or unimportant, and Proinsias Mac Cana asserted that no expectation of truthfulness was implicit in the category *scél* (as also stated by Andersson and Bibire about *saga*).¹⁶⁵ However, as has been argued more recently, closer attention to how the term *scél* was used in mediaeval Gaelic texts strongly suggests that a basic expectation of veracious historical narrative underlay this category, especially in

¹⁶⁴ Clunies Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 15.

¹⁶⁵ Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, p. 24; Andersson, ‘What Is a Saga?’ p. 497; Bibire, ‘On Reading’, p. 3 (but see also the crucial nuances added on p. 10 on the ‘general and implicit truth-claim’ present in Norse-Icelandic sagas’ narrative stance).

the Old and Middle Irish periods but also persisting into the early modern period.¹⁶⁶ I have elsewhere made similar claims about the category *saga*.¹⁶⁷ This point requires more detailed documentation and defence than is possible in the present essay, but it, too, is strengthened by some of the evidence presented here.

A semantic linkage between narrative and information is common to many cultures regardless of terminology. For instance, the word ‘news’ in early modern England initially referred to both journalistic information and narratives; it fell out of use as a specifically narrative term as the semantically related term ‘novel’ took over that function.¹⁶⁸ But there are closer parallels than this to be drawn between the Irish and Norse terms. One of these relates to biblical study, an activity which was fundamental to the development of literacy in both cultures.

Both *scél* and *saga* are presented from a very early period in the two cultures’ literary histories as having an especially close relation to the literal sense of Scripture in biblical exegesis. This level of interpretation relates to the immediate situation presented in a biblical text, as opposed to allegorical, spiritual and other figurative levels of interpretation. In Latin exegesis, the term for the literal sense is *historia*, rendered *stair* in Old and Middle Irish. Both terms also denote a historical narrative. Individual biblical narratives or back-stories are referred to as *scéla*: several examples are found in the eighth- or early-ninth-century Old Irish Milan Glosses.¹⁶⁹ As Poppe has noted, the concept

¹⁶⁶ Poppe, ‘Narrative History’; O’Connor, ‘Semantics of *scél*’. To make this claim about the category *scél* raises questions about the identification of *scél* with *fabula* in some mediaeval Gaelic texts. I am currently preparing a more detailed study of this evidence for publication.

¹⁶⁷ O’Connor, ‘History or Fiction?’; Ralph O’Connor, ‘Romance, Legend and the Remote Past: Historical Framing in Late Medieval Icelandic Sagas’, in Catalin Taranu and Michael J. Kelly, ed., *Vera Lex Historiae? Constructions of Truth in Medieval Historical Narrative* (New York, 2022), pp. 251-306.

¹⁶⁸ Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York, 1983), pp. 42-70.

¹⁶⁹ Poppe, *Of Cycles*, pp. 51-2; Poppe, ‘Reconstructing’, pp. 35-6. For examples from the Milan Glosses see Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, ed. and partial trans., *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1901-10), I, 13 (general comments on *stair*) and I, 18, 38 and 178-9. On the Milan

of *stair* appears to have functioned in Old and Middle Irish as a body of historical information (similar to *senchas*) to which individual *scéla* belong as ‘constituent elements’. The relationship of part to whole is nicely encapsulated, in relation to secular history, in the Old Irish legal tract *Uraicecht Becc* when describing the historical knowledge required of a poet:¹⁷⁰

IS i in sdair, .i. na tana 7 na toghla 7 na tricha primscel 7 na tri fichit foscel.

This is *stair* / *historia*, i.e. the cattle-raids and the destructions and the thirty major *scéla* and the ninety minor *scéla*.

Meanwhile in Old Norse, one of the oldest physically surviving attestations of the word *saga* (in an Icelandic homily-collection written in the first quarter of the thirteenth century) uses *saga* to translate Gregory the Great’s use of *historia* (in the opening of Homily 40 in Gregory’s *Homiliae in Evangelia*) referring to the literal sense of Scripture as opposed to figurative senses. I add Gregory’s phrases in parentheses:

I helgom ritningom er fvirst varþveitandi hōttr saþrar sogo (Gregory: *veritas historiae*),
en siþan er leitanda andligrar scilningar (Gregory: *spiritalis intellegentia allegoriae*),
þvi at þa cōmr betr i hald anlig scilning ef hon stvrcisc af saþri sogo (Gregory: *per historiam in veritatis radice*)¹⁷¹

examples see Harriet Thomsett, ‘Meeting on Whose Terms? The Equation of Latin and Vernacular Literary Terminology in the Old Irish Glosses’, *Quaestio Insularis*, 3 (2002), 107-20; O’Connor, ‘Semantics of *scél*’.

¹⁷⁰ Extract edited in Liam Breatnach, ed. and trans., *Uraicecht na Ríar: The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series, 2 (Dublin, 1987), p. 159 (translation slightly altered from his), quoted and discussed in Poppe, *Of Cycles*, 50-4.

¹⁷¹ Norse text: Þorvaldur Bjarnarson, ed., *Leifar fornra kristinna fræða islenzkra* (Copenhagen, 1878), p. 37, taken from Reykjavik, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 677 4to. Latin text: *Sancti Gregorii magni romani pontificis XL homiliarum*, in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia latina*, 217 vols (Paris, 1844-55), LXXVI, col. 1302.

In holy writings, the mode of true *saga* (Gregory: ‘the truth of *historia*’) is first maintained, and then spiritual senses (Gregory: ‘the spiritual understanding of allegory’) are sought out, for the spiritual sense is better grasped if it is strengthened by [a?] true *saga* (Gregory: ‘through *historia* in the root of truth’).

Like *stair* in the Milan Glosses, and like *historia* of which *stair* and *saga* are vernacular equivalents, the meaning of the word *saga* here glides between a hermeneutic tool and a kind of narrative. Its first attestation in this passage refers to the literal level of interpretation only, but its second attestation could be seen as referring to the level of interpretation, to an actual narrative, or to both (i.e. to a narrative designed to be understood at the literal level). As with *historia* and *stair* (and, I would argue, *scél*), it is unlikely that the two meanings – a form of utterance or text, and an interpretative attitude towards that utterance – were ever experienced fully independently from each other in practice.

Like *stair* in Irish, this usage of *saga* as ‘historical sense’ survived late into the Middle Ages. It reappears in the prologue to a late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century compilation of Old Testament history, narrating the first part of the Pentateuch (a version of the text known more generally as *Stjórn*). Here, too, *saga* translates Latin *historia*, this time from the Latin of the twelfth-century scholar Petrus Comestor’s *Historia scholastica*.¹⁷² In approaching Scripture, Petrus had likened the literal sense or *historia* to the foundation of a building (*Historia fundamentum est*, ‘*historia* is the foundation’), with allegorical and tropological senses functioning as walls and ceiling. The Norse translator rendered Petrus’s prose very freely, but *saga* clearly translates *historia*.¹⁷³

¹⁷² On the dates and versions of *Stjórn* see Kirby, ‘The Bible’, pp. 287-9.

¹⁷³ Norse text: C. R. Unger, ed., *Stjorn: gammelnorsk Bibelhistorie* (Oslo, 1862), pp. 1-2. Latin text: Migne, *Patrologia latina*, CXCVIII, cols 1053-4. *Heimuligr* is not often found in the sense ‘indwelling’, but this whole passage is clearly rooted in St. Paul’s disquisition on the indwelling Holy

Sagan sialf er grunduollr þessa heimoliga guds huss ok herberghis. Su skyring af heilagri skript sem segir huat er huert verkit i saughunni hefir at merkia er hinn hærri ueggrinn. En su þydingin er þekian sem oss skyrir þann skilning af þeim gerdum ok uerkum er sagan hefir i ser

The *saga* itself is the foundation of the house and habitation of this indwelling God. That explanation of Holy Writ which says what each composition in the *saga* signifies is the high wall. And that interpretation is the roof, which elucidates that meaning from the compositions that the *saga* contains.

To reinforce the point, the Norse writer goes on to introduce the first part of *Stjórn* itself as an exposition of the literal sense (*saga*, i.e. *historia*) of Scripture. The text will begin, announces the writer, with the foundation of God's house, *þat er af sialfre sogunni en eigi af hennar skyring eda skilningi* ('i.e. with the *saga* itself and not with its explanation or meaning').¹⁷⁴

I have gone into some detail about this early-attested and emphatically literate sense of *saga* for two reasons. First, as a distinct sense of the word it has to be pieced together from different and more general subcategories in the current *ONP* entry.¹⁷⁵ Second, it vividly illustrates the nexus between narrative and information that is implicit in both *scél* and *saga*, a nexus also seen (via a different etymological pathway) in *historia*.

Considered in the context of mediaeval attitudes towards the authority of Scripture, this exegetical sense of *saga* as *historia* – and the analogy with Gaelic *stair* – chimes irresistibly with the double meaning of *saga* and *scél* to refer to both 'events' and 'a report or narrative about those events'. After all, the idea that a narrative could transparently reflect events was especially applicable to

Spirit within the 'house' of God's church in 1 Corinthians 3:9-17. I am indebted to Paul Bibire for discussion of the *Stjórn* passage.

¹⁷⁴ Unger, *Stjorn*, p. 2.

¹⁷⁵ *ONP*, s.v. *saga*, includes the *Stjorn* examples as part of a special sense 'historical text, foundational text, "the text"' at I (7), but includes the homily example as part of a general sense 'what is said, utterance, oral account, notification' at I (1).

biblical narratives. There was plenty of room for debate about how to understand the more laconic or puzzling episodes in Old Testament narratives, but no room for doubting the principle that the histories related in Scripture (when read according to their literal sense) revealed what had really happened, as long as the words were correctly construed. Here, perhaps, was one reason why prose – especially the matter-of-fact ‘low style’ of much biblical narrative prose – was favoured as the main medium in which history was narrated in the mediaeval Gaelic and Nordic worlds. This possibility deserves further exploration in light of the emphasis on the literal sense of Scripture in mediaeval Gaelic biblical exegesis. That emphasis was paralleled in mediaeval Iceland where biblical translations and adaptations (typified by *Stjórn* but not restricted to it) prioritized narrative and the literal sense.¹⁷⁶

Scél and senchas, saga and fræði

Broadening our focus out from biblical study, *scél* and *saga* (when used of narratives) appear to relate in very similar ways to their languages’ respective words for ‘historical learning’, as Poppe has hinted at in his own Quiggin Lecture. The Irish term *senchas* and the Norse term *fræði* do not have identical meanings, but they are very close, encompassing sacred as well as secular learning.¹⁷⁷ The Irish term refers to historical lore or information (*sen-* means ‘old’), while the Norse term refers to lore or information that is primarily, but

¹⁷⁶ On the literal sense in Gaelic exegesis, see Pádraig P. Ó Néill, *Biblical Study and Mediaeval Gaelic History*, Quiggin Pamphlets, 6 (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 8-9 and 28-9. For Icelandic examples, see Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, ‘Prose of Christian Instruction’, in McTurk, *Companion*, pp. 338-53, at pp. 343-6. Figurative (especially allegorical) levels of interpretation were widely practised as well in homilies and moral treatises (see Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, ‘Prose of Christian Instruction’, pp. 340 and 348), but apart from interpretations of Christ’s parables where the underlying narrative was understood to be ahistorical, allegorical interpretations depended on a firm grasp of the literal sense (as the prologue to *Stjórn* underlines).

¹⁷⁷ *eDIL*, s.v. *senchas*; *ONP*, s.v. *fróði*. See Poppe, *Of Cycles*, p. 58, and for *fræði*, Diana Whaley, ‘A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland’, in Clunies Ross, *Medieval Icelandic Literature*, pp. 161-202, p. 165.

not only, of a historical nature (*fræði* could also refer to geographical or other learning, and by extension it also came to refer to secret or doubtful knowledge such as witchcraft, just as mediaeval scholars in general were often suspected of occult knowledge). Like the event/report ambiguity in *scél* and *saga*, both *senchas* and *fræði* could be used to refer to the knowledge itself and to a text or texts recording that knowledge (including some individual sagas).

But *senchas* was seldom, and *fræði* never, interchangeable with *scél* or *saga* in the narrative senses of those terms. *Senchas* and *fræði* represent broader fields of knowledge, analogous to the wider ‘information’ senses of *scél(a)* and *saga/sögur* but usually connoting prestigious learning rather than just any report or piece of news. Not all texts embodying *senchas* or *fræði* took narrative form. *Senchas* could include compilations of legal tracts, and both *senchas* and *fræði* included genealogies as well. Some shorter texts cited as *senchas* or *fræði* were also non-narrative. The Middle Irish tract which its earliest surviving manuscript calls *Senchas na Relec* (‘The Historical Lore of Burial-places’) begins like a saga but is essentially an annotated list of high-status burials. The late mediaeval Icelandic poem *Grettisfærsla* (‘The Handing-on of Grettir’), referred to in *Grettis saga* as a piece of *fræði* ‘lore’, is a rigmarole: a list of things that its subject Grettir is capable of doing, mostly involving extreme sex.¹⁷⁸ It may be that the saga’s use of the word *fræði* for such ‘lore’ is tongue-in-cheek, given the prestige connotations that *fræði* generally seems to have had, but it is hard to see any joke in its being applied to verse rather than prose.

One vivid illustration of how *senchas* related to *scéla* appears in the twelfth-century Irish manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B. 502, where a lengthy genealogical compilation is supplemented by two discrete collections of individual narrative works, one in verse, the other in prose. The

¹⁷⁸ For *Senchas na Relec*, see Best and Bergin, *Lebor na hUidre*, pp. 127-32. For *Grettisfærsla*, see Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Grettis saga*, Íslenzk fornrit, 7 (Reykjavik, 1936), pp. 168 and 290 n. 2, and Kate Heslop, ‘*Grettisfærsla*: The Handing-On of Grettir’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 30 (2006) 65-94 (including an edition, translation and discussion of the poem itself).

verse narratives are given the collective title-rubric *Láidsenchas Lagen* ('The Verse *senchas* of the Laigin'), whereas the prose ones – the sagas, as it were – are given the title-rubric *Scélsenchas Lagen*, which given the implied contrast is perhaps best translated as 'The Prose-Narrative *senchas* of the Laigin'.¹⁷⁹ Note here that *scél* is used in contrast to verse narrative: clearly the view of some *dindsenchas*-poets that a *scél* could be in verse was not universally held.

In short, *saga* was to *fræði* what *scél* was to *senchas*, and histories to information. They purported to present information about the past in narrative form. The fact that the very categories *scél(a)* and *saga/sögur* also denoted information *tout court* only tightens the entanglement between the concepts of storytelling and information in mediaeval Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic cultures.

On the Gaelic side, this entanglement is underscored by the fact that several discrete narratives that are *de facto* sagas survive only as bursts of narrative in genealogical compilations. In the genealogies in Rawlinson B. 502, for instance, not only are sagas included as a self-standing collection of *scélsenchas*, but also the genealogical tracts themselves frequently move away from bare enumeration into passages of narrative about people(s) listed. Some are brief and undramatic, but others strike the modern reader as fully-fledged literary works, complete with direct speech, dialogue and dramatic structuring. A few are included in other manuscripts as discrete *scéla*, freed from their genealogical matrix.¹⁸⁰ Whether each narrative originated as an explicit or implicit part of an oral or written genealogy, or was borrowed by a redactor into the extant compilation by drawing on a pre-existing saga to amplify a bare genealogy, the relationship between saga and genealogy is symbiotic. As such it

¹⁷⁹ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B. 502, fols 47v and 71v, discussed in O'Connor, 'Scélsenchas Revisited'. For the genealogies in this manuscript, see O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae*. My own rendering of *scélsenchas* as 'narrative historical lore' (O'Connor, 'Scélsenchas Revisited', p. 19) unfortunately glosses over the fact that several of the *láidsenchas* are narratives as well.

¹⁸⁰ On this phenomenon, see Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Irish Origin Legends and Genealogy: Recurrent Aetiologies', in Tore Nyberg *et al.*, ed., *History and Heroic Tale* (Odense, 1985), pp. 51-96; O'Connor, 'Scélsenchas Revisited'.

bears comparison with the relationship between sagas and annalistic chronicles.¹⁸¹

This situation is paralleled in the Icelandic *Landnámabók*, a text dominated by non-narrative enumeration – genealogy and boundary-marking – which nonetheless contains numerous anecdotes about important settlers that are, or may once have been, narrated in more detail elsewhere (orally or in writing). Today’s distinction between history and literature, with genealogical tracts and dynastic histories on the history side and sagas on the literature side, would not have made any sense to mediaeval writers in either culture. This point has been emphasized by Ármann Jakobsson in his comparison of *Landnámabók* and *Egils saga*,¹⁸² but it holds good beyond the family sagas too. As Bibire has written of the Norse-Icelandic saga corpus, ‘Genealogy may be a central link between entertainment and veracity’, with heroic legend often functioning as a genealogical starting-point. For sagas’ genealogical claims to function at all, the (to us often fantastical) narratives in which they are rooted must have been accepted by their audience as, in some sense, historical, just as the anecdotes in *Landnámabók* are presented as fleshing out the bare enumeration. In Bibire’s words, ‘Entertainment and acceptance of veracity are not mutually incompatible, and the one may follow from the other’.¹⁸³ This principle is beautifully embodied in the sandwich structures of so many Norse-Icelandic sagas, including several *riðdarasögur*, where the central narrative portion – the ‘saga proper’, as it were – emerges from and then folds back into dense thickets of genealogical, geographical and geopolitical enumeration. The

¹⁸¹ O’Connor, ‘*Scélsenchus* Revisited’. Compare Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, ‘Irish World Annals and Universal Chronicling: Medieval Irish Scholars and Their “Global Turn”’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 40 (2021 [published 2023]), 1-31, on a similar symbiosis between sagas and annalistic chronicles. I am grateful to Máire Ní Mhaonaigh for sharing a copy in advance of publication.

¹⁸² Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Hvað á að gera við *Landnámu*? Um hefð, höfunda og raunveruleikablekkingu íslenskra miðaldasagnarita’, *Gripla*, 26 (2015), 7-27.

¹⁸³ Bibire, ‘On Reading’, pp. 8-9. On the audience-engagement aspects of saga genealogies, see O’Connor, ‘Romance’, pp. 258-60.

flow of information does not stop just because direct speech and dramatic description come into view; it merely enters a different narrative mode.¹⁸⁴

In Norse-Icelandic texts, when oral utterances are mentioned, there is no clear dividing-line between *saga* as information (with no necessary narrative content) and *saga* as a narrative. Only the context enables that dividing-line to be drawn, if at all. But we are on firmer ground when it comes to references to written texts. As far as I can tell, references to written texts as *sögur* in Old Norse always seem to denote narrative texts, even though the word's wider, less specific 'information' sense remained in wide use throughout the Middle Ages when referring to words spoken. It would seem that written *sögur* in Norse are narratives by definition.

By contrast, this kind of definition is not available in Irish. Here, usage of the word *scél* maintains the blurring of any clear distinction between information in general and narrative in particular, even when referring to written texts. Most written texts referred to in Gaelic manuscripts using a title-rubric with *scél* or *scéla* are what we would call sagas, such as *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó* ('The Saga of Mac Dathó's Pig'). But a few texts entitled *scéla* are not narrative texts at all, and their rubrics use *scéla* in the non-narrative sense of news or information. Two examples appear in one of the earliest surviving manuscripts to contain a large number of vernacular Gaelic texts, *Lebor na hUidre* (late eleventh and/or twelfth century): these are the theological treatise or sermon *Scéla na Esérgi* ('Tidings of the Resurrection') and the sermon *Scéla Laí Brátha* ('Tidings of Judgement Day').¹⁸⁵ The latter text is introduced as

¹⁸⁴ These structures are analysed in O'Connor, 'Romance'.

¹⁸⁵ Best and Bergin, *Lebor na hUidre*, pp. 77-88; Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., 'Tidings of Doomsday', *Revue celtique*, 4 (1879-80), 245-57. See also Elizabeth Boyle, 'Neoplatonic Thought in Medieval Ireland: The Evidence of *Scéla na Esérgi*', *Medium Ævum*, 78 (2009), 216-30. As Elizabeth Boyle points out to me (pers. comm.) it would be possible to understand the plural *scéla* in *Scéla na Esérgi* in terms of 'the information reported by the authorities whose opinions are cited'. The so-called *Scéla Conchobair maic Nessa* 'Tidings of Conchobar mac Nessa' is another largely non-narrative tract, but its title is the invention of its editor and translator Whitley Stokes in 'Tidings of Conchobar mac Nessa', *Ériu*, 4 (1910), 18-38, p. 18; its extant manuscripts assign no title to it.

having been spoken by Jesus (*Iss e ro ráid na scéla*, ‘He is the one who spoke these *scéla*’) and then written down by St. Matthew (*Iss é ro scríb 7 ro lesaig na scéla so*, ‘He is the one who wrote and preserved these *scéla*’). The attribution to Jesus recalls the concept of the Gospel itself as ‘good news’, a revelation that is more than just a narrative: in Irish, the word for a gospel is *soiscél(ae)*, meaning at once ‘good news’ and ‘good narrative’.¹⁸⁶

Similar blurring in the other direction affects the word *senchas*. Like Norse *fræði*, it was often used to label non-narrative texts (*Senchas na Relec* being an example), but it was also – and in this respect unlike Norse *fræði* – sometimes used within the titles or colophons of written saga-like narratives to label an individual story. One example is *Senchas Fagbála Caisil* (‘The *senchas* of the Finding of Cashel’) in one fifteenth-century manuscript.¹⁸⁷ In another late mediaeval manuscript, a short narrative about the origin of the feast-day custom ‘Michael’s morsel’ ends with a colophon that first refers back to the story as *Senchas Cháirech Fhéili Michil oculus Míri Michil* (‘The *senchas* of the Michaelmas Sheep and Michael’s Morsel’), but then points readers to the same story’s lesson using the word *scél*: *do réir an sceóilsi* (‘according to that *scél*’).¹⁸⁸

I have not found many examples in mediaeval Gaelic texts of this blurring of the boundary between *scél* = narrative and *senchas* = a body of historical lore. But its presence in the examples just mentioned, and the lack of self-consciousness in such usage, suggests that the category *scél* is even more difficult to isolate in its narrative sense from wider senses and words connoting ‘information’ than is the category *saga* in Old Norse. *Scél* is not a straightforward synonym for *saga*. Sometimes it is not clear whether the word

¹⁸⁶ Best and Bergin, *Lebor na hUidre*, p. 77; *eDIL*, s.v. *soiscél*.

¹⁸⁷ Trinity College Dublin, MS H.3.17, col. 768, in Myles Dillon, ed. and trans., ‘The Story of the Finding of Cashel’, *Ériu*, 16 (1952), 61-73, p. 64. On *Senchas na Relec*, see above, p. 68.

¹⁸⁸ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B. 512 (fifteenth or sixteenth century), fol. 108v, edited and translated in Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (London, 1887), p. 558.

scél is being used in a narrative sense or not, as with the early Classical adaptation *Scéla Alaxandair*, named as such in one of the Middle Irish tale-lists.¹⁸⁹ This possibly tenth-century text about Alexander the Great has demonstrably literary origins, despite appearing in a list of a poet's putatively oral repertoire of sagas. It adapts and links up three discrete narratives about Alexander. The fact that they share the same protagonist means that we could translate the title as 'The Saga of Alexander'; the fact that it is tripartite might tempt us to call it ('Sagas / Narratives of Alexander'), but *scéla* when applied to narrative seems to have had little or no inherently plural meaning even when grammatically plural.¹⁹⁰ Alternatively, the word *scéla* could be used here simply in the sense of 'information', reflecting the manifestly encyclopaedic purpose of this particular narrative. *Scéla Alaxandair* is a good example, not only of the place of highly bookish texts in a secondary-oral culture, but also of how hard it is with *scéla* and *sogur* alike to disentangle the concept of narrative from the concept of information. Narrative emerges as a means of organizing and delivering information.

In Irish, this semantic entanglement is further reflected in the fact that there were no words meaning 'to narrate' or 'storytelling' as distinct from other ways of providing information. *Scélaigeacht*, like *scél* itself, could mean 'news' as much as 'storytelling', while the two main verbs used to refer to the telling of stories, *as-indet* and *ad-fét*, were both very commonly used to refer to a wide range of utterances (declaration, explanation, information, statement, proclamation).¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, p. 52.

¹⁹⁰ Ó Fiannachta, review of Binchy, *Scéla Cano*, p. 77.

¹⁹¹ *eDIL*, ss.v. *scélaigeacht*, *as-indet*, *aisnéis*, *ad-fét*.

4. CONCLUSION

It has become clear from this investigation that, in mediaeval Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic textual culture, *scél* and *saga* connoted a very similar set of meanings in both their narrative and non-narrative senses. It has also emerged that the potential for overlap or interference between the non-narrative and narrative senses of both words was exploited by mediaeval writers in similar ways, reflecting a common approach to the conceptualization of narrative prose of the kind we call ‘sagas’. Some of these semantic overlaps are also found in Latin and other languages’ terms for historical narrative, especially *historia* and *gesta*: awareness of those terms’ usage must have helped to shape the usage of *scél* and *saga* in the narrative sense, as vernacular approximations to those Latin terms. But the full suite of parallels is seen only when we compare *scél* and *saga*. As became clear when analysing the contrasting patterns in title-forms in the two traditions, even some of the most marked differences turn out to reveal continuities in attitude.

I have argued against the common view that the primary senses of *scél* and *saga* have to do with narrative. The wider non-narrative meanings of both words centre on the notion of ‘utterance’, primarily utterances which transmit information of some kind. A range of more specialized senses of *scél* and *saga* is attested in specific contexts, for example in certain legal procedures. I have argued that the idea of a *narrative* presentation of information is another such specialized sense of *saga* and *scél*, with the branch of narrative that we call ‘sagas’ emerging within specific contexts of performance and learned activity in both cultures. In a further development, the assumption that narratives conveyed information about past events then seems to have manifested itself in a collapsing of the distinction between events and their telling (often for specific rhetorical purposes) in the usage of both *scél* and *saga* to denote events rather than, or as well as, accounts of those events.

The linkage between storytelling and information remains strong in the closely comparable relations between each term and wider categories of historical learning in both cultures, *senchas* and *fræði*, as well as in the direct and indirect connections between *scél* and *saga* and the literal sense of Scripture in the two cultures. In my view, the strength of the semantic linkage between storytelling and information is also visible in the tenacious grip which basic expectations of historical veracity had on the way in which sagas were presented to audiences in both cultures (expectations which, in some cases, defied plausibility). Meanwhile, the spoken word remained an important source of resonance for the narrative senses of both *scél* and *saga*, even when the narratives in question were plainly literary in origin (as with the Classical adaptations in the Gaelic tale-lists), and both words continued to be used of oral and written narratives alike.

There were, of course, many differences in usage of the two categories within their host cultures: they were not exact synonyms for each other. One important difference concerns their application to written texts. In this literate domain, so far as I have found, *saga* was used to refer only to works of narrative prose or prosimetrum. Hence a corpus of Norse-Icelandic sagas was able to crystallize from a relatively early date. By contrast, written *scél(a)* could take narrative or non-narrative form. As we have seen, Old and Middle Irish verse narratives occasionally refer to themselves as *scéla* too, even though rubrics in Rawlinson B. 502 and the Book of Uí Mhaine use *scél* as an indicator of prose.¹⁹² There are enough unambiguous examples of *scél* referring to verse narratives to make it difficult to claim that a *scél* has to be in prose or prosimetrum.¹⁹³ Regardless of medium, the baseline sense of *scél* as information

¹⁹² For the first example, see above, p. 69; for the second, see Myles Dillon, ed., ‘Scél Saltrach na Rann’, *Celtica*, 4 (1958), 1-43, where the word *scél* indicates a prose adaptation of the originally metrical narrative *Saltair na Rann*.

¹⁹³ See above, pp. 17-18 and 51-2.

or report comes through strongly in these usages, above and beyond any specific narrative sense of the term.

The higher level of semantic blurring – or simply semantic generality – seen in the category *scél* makes it impossible to rely on mediaeval usage of that term alone (for instance in a rubric or colophon) to indicate a text's membership of a group we might call 'sagas', as we might with *saga* in Norse-Icelandic texts. Hence we cannot always take as read the conventional boundaries drawn between Gaelic sagas and other kinds of narrative which scholars generally do not describe as sagas. For instance, even if we stick to prose or prosimetrum, the question of whether prose or prosimetrum *dindsenchas* belong among the Gaelic sagas still requires proper exploration, regardless of what kind is thought to have been composed earliest and despite the undisputed emergence of a clearly delineated *dindsenchas* genre as the Middle Irish period wore on.¹⁹⁴

These manifestations of a fuzzier boundary around the concept of a written *scél* compared to that of the written *saga* may seem to undermine any attempt to delineate a Gaelic prose narrative corpus by analogy with the Norse-Icelandic saga. But we need not despair of this. What I have shown of the similarities and semantic resonances between the terms *saga* and *scél*, combined with the many structural and functional parallels between the two bodies of narrative that we call 'sagas' in the two cultures, justifies the attempt to gain sharper definition by way of the Norse-Icelandic analogy.

My cautionary observations underline the need to treat such an investigation as provisional. It should begin by etching out as sharply as possible the more stable profile of Norse *saga* as a corpus-category, and in particular, how sagas were defined in the Nordic world against other kinds of narrative. The resulting picture can then be used as a standpoint from which the hazier outlines of any comparable Gaelic corpus can be more clearly sketched.

¹⁹⁴ Valuable discussions of the relationship between sagas and *dindsenchas* are found in Murray, 'Genre Construction', especially pp. 16-18, and Theuerkauf, *Dindshenchas Érenn*, pp. 87-121.

The possibility can then be tested whether, despite lacking a term directly equivalent to either Old Norse *saga* or modern English ‘saga’, the Gaels distinguished in practice between what we call sagas and what we assign to other categories.

Alternatively, the whole idea of a Gaelic or Irish saga may turn out to be a figment of the modern scholarly imagination. But if that concept ends up vanishing in a puff of smoke, at least its pursuit will have taken Scandinavianists and Celticists alike on a journey outside their own familiar habitat and into a neighbouring narrative ecosystem that they might not otherwise have thought to visit. To undertake such a journey brings out some unexpected patterns of mirroring, likeness and difference. It also prompts us to become more aware of, and in some cases to challenge, our basic assumptions about these narratives. The resulting comparisons may not necessarily be felt to justify speaking of a single cross-cultural narrative genre, but they do shed new light on the forms, functions and conceptualizations of prose narrative in both cultures.

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