

Lassen, Annette. 2025. *The Sagas of Icelanders: An Introduction to All Forty Sagas with Summaries*. Translated and adapted into English by Marianne Kalinke and Kirsten Wolf. Routledge Focus. 120 pages. ISBN: 978-1-032-81449-0.

This reviewer is often asked where to start with the sagas. Until now, I have pointed in the direction of any of the Penguin Classics editions and hoped for the best. I welcome this deceptively slim volume as a much-improved answer. Through twelve short essays and forty separate summaries, Annette Lassen provides a thorough and readable introduction to the broad field of saga studies.

The essay that begins the volume, “Sagas and *Pættir*,” begins by problematizing both terms. The following essay, “Toward a Definition of the Genre,” emphasizes that “they encompass a diverse range of accounts written over a long period with changing literary tastes” (4). In “Iceland’s Literature in the Middle Ages—Influence and Taste,” Lassen takes care not to treat the sagas as an utterly distinct art form left to decay as they encountered other vernacular literatures, but to slot them neatly into medieval European writing as a whole. In “Transmission,” Lassen draws attention to the fact that even the collection in Mōðruvallabók (a large, well-preserved fourteenth-century manuscript containing twelve family sagas) does not mean the sagas of Icelanders were considered to be a discrete genre by their medieval redactors. “Age” groups the sagas into older, middle, and younger periods. Lassen stresses uncertainties, remarking that “a saga can move from the oldest group to the youngest, or vice versa” (12). Lassen summarizes scholarly opinion on the older sagas as “characterized by a style that can be considered simple, with occasional elements that may seem unrefined or uneven” (14). She goes on to dispute that this style is a hallmark of age, but this reviewer would have liked her to push back against the idea that the “simple style” is “simple” in the first place: as Lassen herself stresses throughout the work, tastes evolve over time.

The next four chapters deal with tradition, transmission, authorship, and historicity. Chapter 9, “Icelanders—Nordic Storytellers and Bookworms,” is a brief study of medieval literacy that seems out of place and would have perhaps been better served if folded into the last chapter, which is a lengthy overview of medieval Icelandic society. “Style and Literary Technique” once again has Lassen cautioning against comfortable anachronism. “Skaldic Poetry” is more concerned with the use of verses in the sagas than the technicalities of the form but does take time for a brief discussion of syntax, kennings, and style.

“The Society of the Sagas of Icelanders” is by far the longest chapter, running thirty pages. Lassen begins by emphasizing the Christian context of the sagas and attempts to touch, at least briefly, every possible part of medieval Icelandic life as displayed in the sagas. Given that Lassen began the volume by problematizing the very term *saga*, the reviewer was slightly disappointed that she did not nod towards at least some questioning of the historicity of the *goðar* system. The most extensive section of this chapter is a three-part treatise on gender: “Gender,” “Women,” and “Unmanly Men and the Limitation of Men’s Roles.” Lassen further addresses honour, the economy, farm life, and maritime activity. The illustrations of the farms and the boats add an archaeological dimension that is otherwise mostly absent.

The forty summaries of the sagas run about three-quarters of a page each and end with a summary of the extant manuscripts, their condition, and their errors. Each summary is clear, concise, and accurate. If a saga is poorly preserved, Lassen makes sure to note why. The bibliography following is brief but contains a good portion of field standards, and the index is well-organized.

This volume certainly achieves its goal as a useful introduction to the sagas. Lassen is an engaging, clear writer, translated with care by Kalinke and Wolf. The saga scenes she chooses as illustrative are often quite entertaining. While she does not cite much recent secondary literature, it is clear that her aim is more to gently dismiss the inaccurate mythologizing around the sagas than to offer her own interpretations. She is careful to emphasize the incongruities, uncertainties, and impossibilities in the sagas, as well as the historical controversies in saga studies. The volume highlights so many points of interest in such a small space that it should feel overstuffed, but it manages to be both streamlined and rich. What omissions exist are understandable; as an example, while the book does not address the paranormal in the sagas as a separate concern, it does analyze paranormal occurrences to illustrate questions in style.

My primary quibbles concern editing. The anglicization, though consistent for names, is overall mystifying. It is distracting to see untranslated Old Norse words running up against names rendered as *Hord* and *Ketilrid*. The titles of sagas are translated, but the Icelandic names of manuscripts—*Flateyjarbók*, for example—remain as they are. Translating “Ragnar Lothbrok” immediately as “Shaggy-breeches” baffles: if following the patterning of the rest of the book, shouldn’t he be *Loðbrók*, with italics? The Danishism “Haakon” survived the translation process to dangle unnecessarily in front of “Hákon”. The character “Snorri the Godi” does not fit well next to the use of *goði*. I would argue that this haphazard anglicization works against Lassen’s desire to demystify the sagas by separating the language from the reader: the normalized Old Norse, next to the anglicized names and titles, looks alien and impossible.

Another problem is the brevity of the bibliography. Given the breadth of the contextualizing essays, it is too short. Notably, the secondary literature

contains only one citation of a volume published after 2020 (Lassen's own). The bibliography could have been expanded, or perhaps even doubled, especially given that some of the sagas summarized are not familiar to the beginner and not necessarily accessible in English.

Despite those small annoyances, this book is a wonderful, accessible introduction to the sagas. It should become a shelf staple for both undergraduates and graduate students. Anyone interested in Norse literature would do well to pick up a copy.

Colin Fisher
University of Iceland, 2025