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PARATEXTUAL REFERENCES TO THE GENRE TERM *ÍSLENDINGA SÖGUR* IN OLD NORSE-ICELANDIC MANUSCRIPTS

Lukas Rösli

THE SCHOLARLY DEBATE ON GENRE TERMINOLOGY and its nomenclature in the study of Old Norse-Icelandic literature is probably as old as the field itself,¹ and it is hardly surprising that this discussion had its peak in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s during the zenith of structuralist theories, culminating in a dispute between Lars Lönnroth, Joseph Harris, and Theodore M. Anderson in 1975, published in *Scandinavian Studies* 47. On the one hand, Lönnroth, who published several ground-breaking articles and books on this

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¹By far not the first one to discuss the genre terminology, but certainly one of the most prominent scholars during the first half of the twentieth century in the studies of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, was Sigurður Nordal. Influenced by ideas which Konrad Maurer and Björn M. Ólsen produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Sigurður Nordal established a way of thinking which is known as the Icelandic School today. The Icelandic School categorically opposed the idea of saga literature being historically accurate, and favoured the idea of sagas being mainly literary fiction. This basic insight was not intended to criticise, but rather solidify the idea of modern literary genre distinctions being a direct representation of the reception, the understanding, and the production of Old Norse-Icelandic literature in the Middle Ages. For one of the most influential contributions to the ideas of the Icelandic School, see Sigurður Nordal 1953: 180–273. It is important to stress the fact that Sigurður Nordal himself is already building his opinion on *Ísleðinga sögur* as a genre term on the basis of “[d]en traditionelle inddeling af sagaerne i forskellige større grupper efter deres emner [...]” (Sigurður Nordal 1953: 180), and thus refers to a scholarly tradition of genre distinction.

topic,² convincingly argued that there was no such thing as a structurally distinct genre called *Íslendinga sögur* in the medieval period (Lönnroth 1975: 419–26), and “[...] that medieval saga-writers did not have any definite concept about different genres of sagas” (Lönnroth 1965b: 7). Harris, on the other hand, argued in favour of a distinction between “ethnic genres”, which are genre labels used in the very time a certain literary text was produced, and “analytic categories”, which are modern scholarly distinctions for studying a given literary text (Harris 1975: 427–36).³ The third opponent in this debate, Theodore M. Anderson, was in favour of a very detailed structuralist catalogue of distinct stylistic qualities to justify the “generic nuclei” of what he referred to as *Íslendinga sögur* (Anderson 1975: 441). The question concerning the concept of genre in Old Norse-Icelandic literature has recently gained more interest after the discussion had been neglected for some years.⁴ However, literary genre concepts and genre terminologies have always been a subliminal part of the scholarly discourse, because scholars of Old Norse-Icelandic literature are in the habit of tacitly categorising narratives into different genres, often without verifying the usefulness or historicity of the respective terminology. The most prominent literary genre in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, at least as far as the medium of prose is concerned, is without a doubt the one scholars tend to label as *Íslendinga sögur*.⁵ The problem with this term, however, is that *Íslendinga sögur* – used as a part

² Some of Lönnroth’s most influential works on this topic include “Tesen om de två kulturerna” (1965), *Njáls saga. A Critical Introduction* (1976), and “The Transformation of Literary Genres in Iceland from Orality to Literacy” (2003).

³ In this article, Harris introduced Ben-Amos’ concepts of *ethnic genres* and *analytic categories* to the studies of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. For the original article by Ben-Amos, see Ben-Amos 1969.

⁴ Examples for such a revival of a theoretical discussion about the concept of genre are the symposium on “Literary Genre in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature”, which took place from 19–20 April 2018 at Università Ca’Foscari in Venice, and the forthcoming “Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre” edited by Massimiliano Bampi, Carolyne Larrington, and Sif Ríkhardsdóttir; as well as the critical discussion of genre in Bampi 2017.

⁵ A recent form of evidence that *Íslendinga sögur* are still regarded as the most prominent genre in medieval Old Norse-Icelandic prose literature is the fact, that the central theme of the triennial principal scholarly event in the field of Old Norse-Icelandic studies called the ‘International Saga Conference’ (<www.sagaconference.org>), which this time took place from 12–17 August 2018 in Reykjavík and Reykholt, was *Íslendinga sögur*.

of a genre taxonomy to classify and systematise medieval Old Norse-Icelandic narratives – is, as I shall present in this article, an early modern classification with no generic equivalent in medieval manuscripts.

Old Norse-Icelandic prose narratives are typically referred to as *Íslendinga sögur* if the events narrated in these texts are mainly set in Iceland in the time between the *landnámsöld* ('Age of Settlement of Iceland') and shortly after the Christianization of Iceland around the year 1000, a time often referred to as *söguöld* ('Age of Sagas'), and if the main character or characters are Icelandic.⁶ Moreover, there is a traditional tendency to include the *Íslendinga sögur* in a literary history based on the assumed time of their first composition, and thus to date the whole genre back to the Middle Ages.⁷ The aim of the present article is to re-evaluate the genre term *Íslendinga sögur* on the basis of manuscript witnesses to give a more historico-cultural insight into when and why the previously unmarked saga narratives came to be labelled with the genre term *Íslendinga sögur*.⁸

⁶For a thorough introduction to the concept of *Íslendinga sögur* as a genre and the respective scholarly tradition, see for example Clover 2005, Vésteinn Ólason 2005, and Schier 1970: 34–59.

⁷For a discussion of the implementation of the term *Íslendinga sögur* within the history of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, see Vésteinn Ólason 2005: 112–14. In an appendix (114–16) to his chapter, Vésteinn Ólason presents a useful list of *Íslendinga sögur* and their dating in accordance with different sources. The apparent differences between the indicated dating of the *Íslendinga sögur* on the basis of actual evidences from material sources and as stated in the *Íslenzk fornrit* (ÍF) editions is particularly noteworthy, since ÍF dates all the sagas to least some decades and sometimes even centuries before the oldest known manuscripts. For a more critical discussion of the first manuscript witnesses, see Schier 1970: 44–46, who does not fail to mention the fact that most of the early text witnesses are fragments of just a few remaining folios. However, he does not remark on the problem of dating fully formulated narratives on the basis of fragments. For a critical discussion of the dating of the oldest *Íslendinga sögur* on the basis of an assumed date of origin of the genre and its individual sagas, see Mundal 2013. For a critical discussion on the analytical level of explicit and implicit criteria for the dating of sagas, see Glauser 2013: 9–30.

⁸There are often cited exceptions supporting the existence of literary genres in Old Norse-Icelandic literature where there is some sort of original generic distinction to be found in the Middle Ages. Terms such as *konungasögur* and *riðdarasögur* which are understood as discerning subgroups of an overall medium of saga literature are attested by medieval manuscripts. The compound *konunga sögum* (dative pl.) is first attested in the manuscript Stockholm, National

Of paratexts and genres

Following the arguments brought forward by Lönnroth, Harris, and Anderson, among many others, that scholars use the term *Íslendinga sögur* according to an analytic category, one should start asking what the terms *Íslendinga saga* as the designation of a single representative of the alleged category and the plural *Íslendinga sögur*, used to label the category as a whole, refer to exactly? The main problem is that the use of *Íslendinga sögur* as an analytic category does not necessarily afford the possibility to use the same term to refer to an ethnic genre which would reflect a medieval perception of a genre in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Therefore, the questions have to be: Why do we use the analytic category *Íslendinga sögur* as though it corresponds to an ethnic genre? Furthermore, does *Íslendinga sögur* refer to a rather strictly defined literary genre, as we treat it today, or does it simply refer to stories about Icelanders, without the rigid quasi-historical boundaries implied when used by scholars?

In order to discuss the questions above, it is necessary to use a new philological approach,⁹ and thus to start from the manuscript evidence in order to verify the actual use of the word *Íslendinga sögur* as a generic term as it occurs in transmitted text witnesses. Such an approach is necessary as (modern) editions

Library of Sweden, Holm perg 7 4to, dated to c. 1300–1325, and the compound *riddara sögur* (nominative/accusative pl.) in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM Dipl isl fasc v 11, dated to 1396. Having said this, the fact that there are only very few such terms to be found in medieval Old Norse-Icelandic manuscripts designating what often is thought of as being genre terminology triggered a trope in academic literature: “While the term *konungasögur* and *riddarasögur* are attested in manuscripts from the Middle Ages, we do not find any occurrence of, for example, the terms *fornaldarsögur* or *Íslendingasögur* in medieval sources” (Bampi 2017: 5–6); or this statement by Driscoll: “Unlike many of the standard saga genre designations – *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, *riddarasögur*, etc. – which are actually attested in the medieval literature, the term *fornaldarsaga* is a modern coinage” (Driscoll 2018: 9). However, Driscoll is wrong in assuming that the compound *Íslendinga sögur* as some form of literary genre designation would be verifiable in manuscripts before the seventeenth century.

⁹For an introduction into the theories and approaches subsumed under the term ‘new philology’, see Driscoll 2011 or Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir 2012. For the fundamental text marking the beginning of the scholarly paradigm known as ‘new philology’ today, see Cerquiglini 1999.

represent a second-order process, in which contemporary genre assignments and analytic categories have exerted much influence on the reception and on the presentation of the texts in question.¹⁰ As Cerquiglini states: “It is clear that editing obscures the segmentation of medieval literary exposition, at the level of words as well as at that of larger elements, whether it is hesitant or innovative or follows a model” (Cerquiglini 1999: 25). Hence, in order to analyse the self-referential implications of a text concerning some sort of genre terminology in the time of its production it is necessary to specifically concentrate on the *paratexts* in a manuscript.¹¹

According to Gérard Genette’s theory on paratexts (Genette 1997b), a text, no matter if it is printed in a book or written down in a manuscript, is rarely presented as a mere sequence of verbal statements, but most often structured by additional information – called *paratexts* – such as titles, subheads, incipits or colophons, “[...] to ensure the text’s presence in the world [...]” (Genette

¹⁰One of the best examples of the influence of such a second-order process is the text series known as *Íslenzk fornrit* (ÍF). The ÍF-editions, which are frequently used by scholars as reference texts to Old Norse-Icelandic literature, authorise or at least reconfirm the different modern sub-genres attached to Old Norse-Icelandic literature, as the editors of ÍF group and publish narratives according to certain scholarly genre labels based on analytic categories. In this system of circular dependencies, both editors and scholars take an active part in the canonization and institutionalisation of analytic categories as alleged ethnic genres.

¹¹“The transfer, the manipulating and ordering of a medieval work that is represented by modern publication, can be seen more generally when scribal inscription becomes a book. The materialization of a text intended for readers – which for us, out of cultural necessity, amounts to making a printed book – obeys rules that bring into play a finite set of pertinent elements (from format to author’s name, from epigraph to subheadings) whose typology and functioning were described very well by Gérard Genette in *Seuils*. A synchronic and structural analysis of the ‘paratext,’ it opens the way for a historical survey of moments of genesis and rupture. [...] The genesis of this medieval paratext is a good illustration of the tabular and type foundation of ‘graphic reason’: the written word is not simply a deposit of knowledge; it is above all an incomparable means of classifying and retrieving it” (Cerquiglini 1999: 26).

1997b: 1).¹² According to Genette, the paratext is a *threshold*¹³ that conveys an option between the inside and the outside of a text. Paratexts structure both the textual layout of a manuscript or a book and its textual memory by referring into the narrative, in terms of, for example, classical rubricated headings which often resemble a very short summary of the following text passage, as well as to the world outside the text, for example in the form of a title which makes it possible to refer to a certain text.¹⁴ By analysing these paratexts, we can identify self-

¹²The full citation runs like this: “A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations. And although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book.”

¹³“For us, accordingly, the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a ‘vestibule’ that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” (Genette 1997b: 1–2).

¹⁴“It is an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, ‘a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the texts.’ Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies).” (Genette 1997b: 2. Genette’s perception of the paratext rests, of course, on the specifics of his research subject, which is modern French literature. The paratexts analysed by Genette are to be found in modern, printed books, written by authors which are known by name, and edited and published by modern publishing houses. Such a modern author-based perception of the paratext is in total contrast to the conditions of production and transmission of Old Norse-Icelandic literary texts, which are predominantly anonymously textualized as well as transmitted (at least until scribes began to apply the paratextual layout of printed books, such as title pages or colophons, to manuscripts). For a short introduction into the discussion of authorship with regard to *Íslendinga sögur*, see Clover

referential patterns in texts which give us indications to both the self-perception of a text and the outside perspective of scribes during a certain period of time. In other words, paratexts are the actual evidence of what Harris – in accordance with Ben-Amos – called an “ethnic genre”, as paratexts may be used to label a particular narrative as being representative of a specific genre in the time of its textualization.¹⁵

From *Íslendinga saga* to *Íslendinga sögur*

The use of the plural term *Íslendinga sögur* to designate a very loose group of narratives is not found in manuscripts or books before the mid-seventeenth century. The *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* (ONP), for example, covering references until the end of the fifteenth and sometimes the beginning of the sixteenth century, does not support any evidence of the compound *Íslendinga saga* or *Íslendinga sögur* in a paratextual use, but only as part of the narratives in manuscripts of *Sturlunga saga* and *Biskupa sögur* from between c. 1350–1510.¹⁶ Lönnroth already noticed the irony in the fact that the genitive singular compound *Íslendinga saga* is used to label part of the *Sturlunga saga* complex, which today forms a part of the genre commonly labelled as *samtíðarsögur* (Lönnroth 1965a: 21). But, and this seems to be the crucial point, there is, as we shall see, no paratextual proof of the compound *Íslendinga saga* in medieval manuscripts. The two oldest existing manuscripts from the fourteenth century containing *Sturlunga saga* are fragmentary and do not provide any titles or headings.¹⁷ The first evidence of paratextual references to *Íslendinga saga* occurs in manuscripts

2005: 245–48; for a more complete survey of the general authorship discussion concerning Old Norse-Icelandic saga literature, see Mundal 1977: 141–275.

¹⁵In this article, I shall omit the discussion of references to the terms *Íslendinga saga* and *Íslendinga sögur* which are part of the narrative of the main or continuous text. This is due to the fact, that the mentioning of such a term as part of the narrative is, simultaneously, a part of the diegesis, and as such it is not verifiable with regard to its significance outside the textual narrative.

¹⁶For a detailed reference to the narratives in the manuscripts and the respective dating, see the lemma *Íslendinga saga* in the ONP, at onpweb.nfi.sc.ku.dk (18.09.2018).

¹⁷The two oldest manuscripts of *Sturlunga saga* are *Króksfjarðarbók*, AM 112 a fol, dated to c. 1350 to 1370, and *Reykjarfjarðarbók*, AM 122 b fol, dated to c. 1375 to 1400, both of which

from the first half of the seventeenth century, where one can find the title *Íslendinga sagan mikla* (AM 439 4to, 1r; 1600–1650)¹⁸ and *Íslendinga saga* (AM 115 fol, 1r; 1639) in manuscripts containing what we know as *Sturlunga saga*.¹⁹

During the same period in the seventeenth century, another well-known narrative, known today as *Njáls saga*, is paratextually identified as an *Íslendinga saga* in manuscripts. There are at least six manuscripts from the seventeenth century paratextually associating the narrative called *Njáls saga* or *Njála* with the term *Íslendinga saga* or the plural form *Íslendinga sögur*. In a more or less chronological order, based on the dating of the manuscripts available on handrit.org, these titles read as follows: “Hér byrjast Íslendinga saga, kölluð Njála” (AM 470 4to, 1r; 1620–1670); “Njáls sögubók. Sem er einn partur af Íslendinga sögum” (AM 555 c 4to, 1r; 1640–1660); “Njála eður Íslendinga saga” (AM 163 d fol, 7v; 1650–1682); “Hér byrjar Njáls sögu eður Íslendinga sögu” (AM 555 a 4to, 1r; 1650–1699); “Hér byrjar Íslendinga sögu þá sem Njála heitir” (GKS 1003 fol, 65r; 1670); and “Njála eður Íslendinga saga” (AM 396 fol, 100r; 1675–1700). These combinations of the designation of a narrative (*Njáls saga*) and the term *Íslendinga saga* or *Íslendinga sögur* in the above-mentioned titles can be read as two different semantic implications: The disjunctive pattern or collocation establishes synonymy in the paratexts by calling the narrative either *Njála* or *Íslendinga saga*. Both paratextual designations – *Njála* and *Íslendinga saga* – are thereby used to refer to the same concept, and either designation can be used as a proxy to refer to the intratextual narrative of the respective main text following the paratextual heading, or to refer to an extratextual discourse about the content of the narrative or its material manifestation. The meronym pattern or collocation establishes a hierarchical relation between a hyponym (*Njála* or *Njáls sögubók*) and a hypernym (*Íslendinga saga* or *Íslendinga sögur*). In the first instance, *Njáls saga* seems to be the Icelandic story or history, in

are fragmentary and do not contain any form of headings or titles. For a recent discussion of the fragmentary narratives in these two manuscripts of what we call *Íslendinga saga* today, see Rohrbach 2017.

¹⁸ For images and descriptions of this and the following manuscripts, unless otherwise indicated, see the collaborative portal of The National and University Library of Iceland (<handrit.org>).

¹⁹ All transcriptions from manuscripts are presented in a normalized spelling as the present paratextual analysis does not call for a palaeographical approach.

the second instance *Njála* is part of an otherwise undefined complex of stories. The case of *Njáls saga* being labelled in such a way seems to be rather unique to the seventeenth century, but in the eighteenth century there are also instances where, for example, *Laxdæla saga* (Rask 29, 113v; 1750–1800) or *Eyrbyggja saga* (ÍB 76 4to, 101r; 1770–1802) are labelled as *Íslendinga saga* in paratexts. Hence, one might wonder why it is *Njáls saga* and part of *Sturlunga saga* that are identified as *Íslendinga saga*, and thus becoming the first sagas in Old Norse-Icelandic literary production that are marked in paratexts as being specifically Icelandic narratives?

My hypothesis, at least with regard to *Njáls saga*, is that this is due to two other texts written around the turn of the seventeenth century. Both texts make extensive use of *Njáls saga* to promote this specific narrative as a valuable example for the historicity of Old Norse-Icelandic literature to international scholars. The texts in question are *Brevis Commentarius de Islandia* (Copenhagen 1593) and *Crymogæa sive Rerum Islandicarum Libri III* (Hamburg 1609), both written by Arngrímur Jónsson. According to Jakob Benediktsson, both texts can be considered the polemic works of a patriotic Icelander who felt hurt by how international scholars of his time portrayed Iceland, its society, and its culture (Jakob Benediktsson 1957: 32–9). In both texts Arngrímur Jónsson uses the character of Njáll as an example of a heroic, wise, and faithful Christian Icelander of his time.²⁰ Arngrímur Jónsson also used material from other sagas, from *Landnámabók*, and from other Old Norse-Icelandic texts to which he had access via manuscripts,²¹ when referring to what he calls the Icelandic *historia*, *narratio* or *literatura* (Arngrímur Jónsson 1609: 1–7; 1593: 1r–3v). The exemplary status of the story about Njáll is obvious to the international reader. Jakob Benediktsson also states that even if the *Brevis Commentarius* and *Crymogæa* were received by scholars as polemic, as they were intended, it was nonetheless these texts that “[...] stressed the excellence of the Icelandic

²⁰ Such an exaltation of the character of Njáll can, for example, be found in the chapter on *Nialus*, *Sapientia et Prudentia valens: tum filiorum ac generi fama clarissimus*, see Arngrímur Jónsson 1609: 160–63; for another laudatory section paying tribute to Njáll, see Arngrímur Jónsson 1593: 51v–53r.

²¹ For an overview of the manuscript sources used by Arngrímur Jónsson in his texts, see Jakob Benediktsson 1957: 82–109.

works and their importance for the study of Scandinavian history” (Jakob Benediktsson 1957: 39). The same fact may have had consequences for the part of the *Sturlunga saga* complex, which was paratextually labelled as an *Íslendinga saga* for the first time in the first half of the seventeenth century, as mentioned above. At least in *Crymogæa*, Arngrímur Jónsson retells parts of what is known as *Íslendinga saga* today, to refer to what he believed to be the writing of Icelandic history (Arngrímur Jónsson 1609: 106–21).²²

Arngrímur Jónsson’s emphasis of *Njáls saga* as an exemplary narrative and his underscoring of the character of *Njáll*, whom he treats as though he were a historical Icelandic person, seems to have influenced the Icelandic scribal community at the beginning of the seventeenth century. At least the temporal proximity of Arngrímur Jónsson’s publications and the appearance of the aforementioned collocations in the paratexts of some manuscripts containing *Njáls saga* suggests that some parts of the Icelandic scribal community reacted to Arngrímur Jónsson’s attempt to stress the usefulness of medieval Icelandic literature as source for the study of the history of Scandinavia and Iceland by paratextually marking the very narrative that Arngrímur Jónsson used as an example as being some sort of archetype of a specifically Icelandic saga literature.

According to *Ritmálssafn Orðabókar Háskólans* online (<lexis.hi.is>), the first proof of the term *Íslendinga sögur* – used as a genre term – is to be found in two books published in Iceland in the year 1756.²³ One is called *Agiætar Fornmanna Sögur* (Björn Markússon 1756b), the other one *Nockrer Marg-Frooder Sögu-Þættir Íslendinga* (Björn Markússon 1756a). Both were edited by Björn Markússon and printed in 1756 at Hólar.²⁴ *Agiætar Fornmanna Sögur* prints five narratives – *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Króka-Refs saga*, *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*,

²² For the passages from *Sturlunga saga* generally used in *Crymogæa*, see Jakob Benediktsson 1957: 99.

²³ The *Ritmálssafn Orðabókar Háskólans* mentions a third reference to *Íslendinga sögur* from 1756, purportedly found in a passage of *Æfisaga Jóns Þorkelssonar skólameistara* (1910), but this could not be verified.

²⁴ For an insightful discussion of the scribal and printing situation at Hólar at this time, see Margrét Eggertsdóttir 2017: 127–65, who discusses the preface to *Agiætar Fornmanna Sögur* from a medial perspective, reflecting the opinions expressed in the preface towards printed books (Margrét Eggertsdóttir 2017: 147–48).

Gísla saga Súrssonar, and *Víga-Glúms saga* – all of which would be referred to as *Íslendinga sögur* according to modern genre distinction. *Nockrer Marg-Frooder Sögu-Þættir Íslendinga* prints nine different narratives which would be referred to as either *Íslendinga sögur* or *Íslendinga þættir* today. Both books contain a short preface which refers to the stories as *Íslendinga sögur* (Björn Markússon 1756b: 2; 1756a: 3). As these two books are the first collections of such sagas ever printed in Iceland, they laid the foundation, at least in the medium of the printed book, for the genre of *Íslendinga sögur* by arranging several narratives in one group and labelling them with the term.

Somewhat earlier, however, is Lbs 203 fol, dated between 1722 and 1747, which states on its title page: “Íslendinga sögur samt öðrum historíum eru ritaðar á þessari bók” (Lbs 203 fol, 1r). This manuscript contains thirteen narratives – *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Þórðar saga hreðu*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Bolla þáttur*, *Um Melkorku kóngsdóttur*, *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, *Brandkrossa þáttur*, *Grettis saga*, *Áns saga bogsveigis*, *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinssonar*, *Yngvars saga víðförla*, and *Samsons saga fagra* – which today would be labelled as part of the modern genre distinctions *Íslendinga sögur*, *fornaldar sögur* and *riddara sögur* respectively. Lbs 203 fol seems to contain the oldest paratextual instance of the term *Íslendinga sögur* used with the function to describe some form of genre, as the paratext differentiates a group of narratives called *Íslendinga sögur* from other stories called *aðrar historíur*. But the distinction remains unclear, since the manuscript does not indicate which stories should be classified as *Íslendinga sögur* and which as *aðrar historíur*. Furthermore, this collection of sagas, of which at least some are paratextually accounted for as being a part of a cluster with the attached generic name *Íslendinga sögur*, does not contain *Njáls saga*, which was characterized as the archetypical *Íslendinga saga* in some of the paratexts in manuscripts from the seventeenth century. This shows that the criteria used in the seventeenth century to label a certain saga narrative as being specifically Icelandic have changed towards a more extensive range to subsume more and different narratives under the umbrella term *Íslendinga sögur*. The disclosure of a reference to such an umbrella term on the title page can, in accordance with Genette (1997a: 1, 4–5) function as an *architext*. The architext tries to establish and articulate some form of generic perception on the basis of a paratext, and it “[...] is known to guide and determine to a considerable degree the readers’

expectations, and thus their reception of the work” (Genette 1997a: 5). The question arises, however, as to what extent such a paratextually stated architext, an appendage depicted on a single title page of a manuscript, can be read as indicating an actual literary or ethnic genre.

Íslendinga sögur as Res Islandica

While genre indications – as shown in the case of Lbs 203 fol – are typically located on the title page of a late pre-modern manuscripts there are other ways to establish and, in particular, to consolidate the assignment of specific narratives to a certain genre on the basis of paratexts. The simplest way to generate such a genre assignment are lists categorizing different narratives in accordance with the established genre indications (Genette 1997: 94–103).

One of the first extensive classification of sagas, written by Einar Bjarnason (1785–1856), who was a labourer in the district of Skagafjörður in northern Iceland and an active scribe taking part in the copying of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, provides access to an *ethnic genre* systematization at its time of writing. His autograph, AM 1055 4to, written between 1820–1838, gives an alphabetic list of poets and writers before and after the Reformation, listing the works attributed to each of them.²⁵ After his list of medieval poets and writers, Einar Bjarnason has compiled a register of Icelandic sagas to supplement his list of authors, since so many Icelandic sagas from the Middle Ages are anonymous and therefore do not register in a list of known authors, as he explains in the preface (AM 1055 4to, 32). On 33–46, we find five classes of sagas listed: “Íslendinga sögur” (33–36), “Norðurlanda sögur” (37–39), “Ýmislegar sögur, flestar mér ókendar, nema að nafninu einu” (40–44), “Helgra manna sögur” (45–46), and “Sögur þessar, ásamt öðrum fleiri, hafa á seinni tímum samansettar verið” (46). The first list, containing narratives paratextually labelled as *Íslendinga sögur*, has entries for more than 130 sagas and *þættir*. Among them are such diverse Icelandic sagas as *Laurentius saga* (35), *Landnáma* (35), and *Sturlunga saga* (35), which according to modern genre classifications would be categorised as belonging

²⁵ Images of AM 1055 4to are available online at The Arnarnagnæan Collection in Copenhagen (<digitalesamlinger.hum.ku.dk>).

to the genres *Biskupasögur* and *samtíðarsögur* respectively. Einar Bjarnason's list of *Íslendinga sögur* illustrates that he did not use the term in the same narrow sense as modern scholars. Consequently, the list is proof of the fact that in the mid-nineteenth century the concept of *Íslendinga sögur*, if used as a genre indication in a paratext providing the narratological function of an architext, was not intended to be understood in such a narrow way as it is today. During this time period in Iceland and with regard to its contemporary scribal culture, the modifier *Íslendinga-* clearly does not only refer to narratives dealing with what we commonly call *söguöld*, but to something one could call "Res Islandicæ" or just "stories dealing with Icelandic topics". This is exactly what the introduction to the lists of different saga-genres states in the manuscript: "Allar hygg eg sögur þær, Íslandi viðvíkjandi, sem enn eru til, ásamt hinum, sem týndar eru, ritaðar eður útlagðar frá því um miðja 11^{tu} öld, og fram til enda hinnar 15^{du} aldar, og til gamans set eg hér registur yfir þær allar, sem eg hefi nefndar heyrt, eður í ýmsra manna sögu registrum fundið" (AM 1055 4to, 32). Einar Bjarnason writes down every title of a story written between the middle of the eleventh and up to the end of the fifteenth century which he has heard of or which he has found in others' lists of sagas. By doing so, he by no means classifies the sagas according to any sophisticated motivic or elaborated thematic criteria, or the period of time covered in the narrative or its diegesis, but based on the simple fact of the "Res Islandicæ", the time of the assumed textualization of these narratives, and on other people's mediation of knowledge. The last criterion is probably the most important one, as it can be read as proof of a contemporary Icelandic discourse on Old Norse-Icelandic saga literature and more specifically *Íslendinga sögur*, which gives us access to the understanding of the term *Íslendinga sögur* as an ethnic genre.

Concluding remarks

As I have shown in this article, the term *Íslendinga sögur*, used as some sort of genre distinction, did not exist in Old Norse-Icelandic literature prior to the seventeenth century. Furthermore, the term *Íslendinga sögur* does not refer to the same concept, if used by the Icelandic scribal community between the

seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, as scholars use it today. Consequently, and as demonstrated on the material basis of manuscripts, there is no proof that there ever was something of an actual medieval awareness of a genre called *Íslendinga sögur* at all.

A genre distinction separating those narratives forming a group around what I have called “*Res Islandicæ*” from other Old Norse-Icelandic narratives does not emerge until the seventeenth century. As I argue above, the development of the genre we call *Íslendinga sögur* seems to be in response to an aroused international interest in Old Norse-Icelandic literary production. This sharing of literary knowledge with people outside the Icelandic community was the moment in Old Norse-Icelandic scribal culture, when the Icelandic scribes began to distinguish between narratives with a main focus on Iceland and their own past constructed in these narratives, and other narratives produced and transmitted in the same literary community. If scholars simply reassign the late pre-modern and early modern genre indication *Íslendinga sögur* to the medieval versions of the narratives in question, they project an ahistorical view on both the specific medieval and on the late pre-modern and early modern Old Norse-Icelandic literary culture.

As it is very rare that a narrative in a continuous text of a manuscript refers to itself in relation to its own literary genre, it is necessary to look into the texts surrounding these narratives. A paratextual study of Old Norse-Icelandic manuscripts will probably not lead to an exhaustive diachronic insight into the Old Norse-Icelandic literary production, due to the fact that there was no uniform idea of such a literature generically structured in the way we are used to treat literary genres today. However, the study of paratexts helps us understand the diversity of Old Norse-Icelandic literary production in synchronic time periods and can at least give us an idea of how the members of the scribal community assessed their own literature at a given time.

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Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Aufsatz setzt sich mit der Frage der Genrehaftigkeit der Bezeichnung *Íslendinga sögur* auseinander. Ausgehend von der Diskussion, inwiefern wissenschaftlich-analytische Kategorien, welche von der Saga-Forschung zur Genrebildung verwendet werden, als ethnische Genre aufgefasst werden können, wird die Problematik des Begriffs *Íslendinga sögur* thematisiert. Die Bezeichnung *Íslendinga sögur* wird bisher zur Beschreibung eines Textkorpus verwendet, dessen Diegese in der sogenannten Sagazeit auf Island zu verorten ist und dessen Protagonisten Isländer sind. Gleichzeitig dient der Begriff dazu, eine Literaturgeschichte zu schreiben, bei der die *Íslendinga sögur* zu einer literarischen Gattung des Mittelalters stilisiert werden, obschon aus dieser Zeit keine selbstreferentiellen Genrezuweisungen in den fast nur als Fragmente erhaltenen Manuskripten erkennbar sind.

Um der Forderung nach einer selbstreferentiellen Zuweisung eines Textes hinsichtlich seiner Genrezugehörigkeit gerecht zu werden, wird im vorliegenden Aufsatz ein neuphilologischer Ansatz in Kombination mit der Paratextualitätstheorie von Gérard Genette angewandt. Diese methodologisch-theoretische Verschränkung erlaubt es, die Bezeichnungen *Íslendinga sögur* und *Íslendinga saga* in Manuskripten hinsichtlich ihrer Aussagekraft einer Genrehaftigkeit in einem kulturhistorischen Kontext zu beurteilen. Dabei zeigt sich, dass das erste Saganarrativ, welches erst im 17. Jahrhundert mit dieser Gattungsbezeichnung versehen wurde, die *Njáls saga* war. Als mögliche Ursache für die Bezeichnung der *Njáls saga* als *Íslendinga saga* im 17. Jahrhundert dürfen zwei Texte Arngrímur Jónssons gelten, die versuchten, das Ansehen der altnordisch-isländischen Literatur in Europa zu stärken. Da Arngrímur Jónsson als wichtigstes literarisches Zeugnis der altnordisch-isländischen Kultur die *Njáls saga* nennt, wird im Aufsatz die These aufgestellt, dass die Bezeichnung dieses Narratives als prototypische isländische Saga in Manuskripten des 17. Jahrhunderts eine selbstbemächtigende Reaktion des isländischen Schreibermilieus war. Eine textkorpusbildende Verwendung des Begriffs *Íslendinga sögur* kann erst im 18. Jahrhundert anhand einer Handschrift (Lbs 203 fol) und den beiden ersten auf Island gedruckten Sagasammlungen nachgewiesen werden. Anhand des Manuskripts AM 1055 4to wird ferner aufgezeigt, dass die Bezeichnung *Íslendinga sögur* in Sagalisten des 19. Jahrhunderts als korpus- respektive gattungsbildender Terminus verwendet wurde. Dabei zeigt sich jedoch, dass der Begriff *Íslendinga sögur* zur Bezeichnung von Narrativen diente, die im weitesten Sinne "Res Islandicæ" zum Inhalt haben.