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# In the Refracted Light of the Mirror Phrases *sem fyrr var sagt* and *sem fyrr var ritat*: Sagas of Icelanders and the Orality–Literacy Interfaces

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Even as we speak of revolutionizing effects of new communication technologies, in practice, processes of cultural transition from one dominant mode of interaction to another tend to be evolutionary, as the new media not only never fully supplant the old but also often adopt, adapt, and semantically appropriate some of the existing facets and etiquettes of communication. Thus with no recourse to carbon paper whatsoever, we still “cc” (“carbon copy”) our emails and routinely refer our readers to what we have “already said,” although no actual sound either escapes our mouths or ever reaches their ears.

In fact, the latter formula as employed by the writers and scribes of the sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) is just what the present study is about. In Old Norse literature we encounter two basic types of reference to already conveyed information that also relate to the medium of communication: *sem fyrr var ritat/ skrifat* (as was written before/ as already written),<sup>1</sup> which directly invokes writing, and the appropriated oral-mode mirror phrases *sem fyrr var sagt/ getit/ nefnd/ talat/ mælt/ rætt* (as was said/ mentioned/ named /told /spoken of /talked of before).<sup>2</sup> In what follows,

Research for this article was conducted at the Centre for Medieval Studies in Bergen (a Norwegian Centre of Excellence 2002–12). I would like to thank my colleagues at the CMS, especially the fellow members of the “Arrival of Writing” team led by Else Mundal, for the stimulating input, advice, and unstinting support they extended during every stage of this project. My thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewer of this article for the many discerning comments and useful suggestions.

1. While the Latinate verb *skrifat* as a part of this formula appears in other genres (unsurprisingly, most often in religious literature and the bishops’ sagas), it is almost never used in the sagas of Icelanders, which show preference for the indigenous *rita* (almost invariably the weak form of the verb, though the verb’s strong counterpart *rita* is favored by some of the kings’ sagas). In fact, no instances of the formula featuring *skrifat* instead of *rita* could be found in the Íslenzk fornrit editions of the sagas. Of the manuscripts I consulted, the sole instance featuring *skrifat* in the sagas of Icelanders is to be found in the 1350 Wolfenbüttel version of *Eyrbyggja saga* (see instance 30 in Appendix II).

2. The verbs are cited here in the order of frequency with which they are used as the part of the discussed formula. *Tala*, *mæla*, and *ræða* are very rare in this context, and the latter two are in fact not featured in the Íslenzk fornrit editions of the sagas of Icelanders. Of the

I examine patterns of these phrases' usage in the saga corpus and show how sustained preferences on the part of the saga authors/scribes for either the literal (written) or metaphorical (oral) mode of self-reference might be indicative of the changing attitudes toward the two media in medieval Iceland. In this way I hope to shed more light on the orality–literacy interface period during which the distinction between these two kinds of reference still lingered or mattered enough to make an aesthetic difference in a given text, as well as play a role in the writer's assertion of authority and his social status.

“BACK-REFERRING FORMULAE”:  
ORAL AND WRITTEN MODES

In a little-known article, Alfred Jakobsen included *sem fyrr var sagt* and *sem fyrr var ritat* among what he termed *bakovervisende former* or “back-referring formulae,” which, he noted, tend to occur in complex, multistranded narratives.<sup>3</sup> These formulae serve to remind the reader of previously mentioned events, actions, people and their whereabouts, itinerary, and any other specific details.<sup>4</sup> For example: “hann átti Þórdísi spákonu, sem fyrr var getit”<sup>5</sup> (his wife was Thordis the fortune teller, who was mentioned before)<sup>6</sup>; “[þ]at sumar, áðr bardaginn var í Álptafirði, hafði skip komit í Dögurðarnes, sem fyrr var sagt”<sup>7</sup> ([t]hat summer, before the battle at Alftafjord, a ship had docked at Dagverdarness, as was told earlier)<sup>8</sup>; “Egill

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manuscripts I consulted, again, only Wolfenbüttel features *ræða* (this time in its rendering of *Egils saga*; see instance 40 in Appendix III), and none has *mæla*.

3. Alfred Jakobsen, “Om ‘bakovervisende formler’ i norrønt,” *Motskrift: Arbeidsskrift for språk og litteratur*, 2 (1983), 69–80. I am very grateful to Jonas Wellendorf for directing me to Jan Ragnar Hagland’s article, “*Segja frá* eller *rita*, *lesa* eller *heyra* i kongesagalitteraturen—frå variasjon, eller ulike perspektiv på overgang frå ‘orality’ til ‘literacy’?,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 117 (2002), 86–96, which in turn led me to Jakobsen’s study. My heartfelt thanks are also due to Kristel Zilmer, who was always at hand when reading these articles became too challenging for my Norwegian, and I owe further debts of gratitude to Theodore M. Andersson, Joseph Harris, Gísli Sigurðsson, Sverrir Tómasson, and Jan Ragnar Hagland, who have all kindly and thoughtfully responded to my queries regarding previous research on this formula.

4. See Jakobsen, “Om ‘bakovervisende formler’ i norrønt,” pp. 73–74.

5. *Kormáks saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, VIII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1939), p. 282.

6. *Kormak’s Saga*, trans. Rory McTurk, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, 5 vols., ed. Viðar Hreinsson et al. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), I, 215.

7. *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk fornrit, IV (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1935), p. 125.

8. *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, trans. Judy Quinn, in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson et al., V, 190.

sigliði út á haf um nóttina, sem fyrr var ritat”<sup>9</sup> (Egil sailed out to sea at night, as written earlier).<sup>10</sup>

Back-referring formulae tend to either appear in the opening chapters of the sagas or in the later ones that *feel* like openings, for example, when the character briefly introduced at the beginning of the story will now get to play a more significant role, or when the narrator is picking up the thread of a previously discontinued narrative. Thus back-referring formulae sometimes perform a similar function as the related but, according to Jakobsen, still distinct “transitional formulae” (*overgangsformler*), such as those he quotes from *Njáls saga*: “Nú víkr sǫgunni vestr til Breiðafjarðardala”<sup>11</sup> (Now the setting of this saga shifts west to the valleys of Breiðafjord)<sup>12</sup>; “Nú er þar máls at taka, er Unnr hefir látit allt lausafé sitt”<sup>13</sup> (To tell now about Unn, who had lost all her money).<sup>14</sup>

As might be expected, in terms of their place within a chapter, the back-referring formulae tend to appear close to the beginning,<sup>15</sup> and they are often a part of the actual first sentence. This place for them appears to be natural, to which testifies the fact that in different redactions of a saga or in specific manuscripts, a sentence containing this formula is chosen to break what in the exemplar was a single chapter. In fact, the above example from *Egils saga* may be the case in point. While in the A-redaction this sentence occurs in the middle of a long chapter, in all B-redaction texts it marks the beginning of a new one.<sup>16</sup> The same is true

9. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, II (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1933), p. 166.

10. *Egil's Saga*, ed. Bernard Scudder, in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson et al., I, 111.

11. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, XII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), p. 6.

12. *Njal's Saga*, trans. Robert Cook, in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson et al., III, 2.

13. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 58.

14. *Njal's Saga*, trans. Robert Cook, in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson et al., III, 25. Both of these instances are cited in Jakobsen, “Om ‘bakovervisende formler’ i norrønt,” p. 69. However, on how the back-referring and transitional formulae can sometimes completely overlap, see note 19, below.

15. Alternatively, these formulae tend to mark a new section/paragraph (see Jakobsen, “Om ‘bakovervisende formler’ i norrønt,” p. 69). They can also be found at the very end of a chapter (see, e.g., chaps. 25 and 34 of *Laxdæla saga*), but such cases are rare and usually refer to something in close proximity, i.e., already related within that same chapter or paragraph.

16. Of course, it is quite possible that B-redaction here preserves chapter division of the lost first version of the saga, although, of the three redactions, A is usually considered to be on the whole closest to the “original.” Jón Helgason had shown that at places, B-redaction of *Egils saga* (Wolfenbüttel) indeed preserves “more original readings” than A (Möðruvalabók). See Jón Helgason, “Observations on Some Manuscripts of *Egils saga*,” trans. Michael

of some seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century *Laxdæla saga* manuscripts in which a new chapter begins with precisely the sentence in which the formula occurs, although this is not the case in some of the older manuscripts, most notably the mid-fourteenth-century Möðruvallabók on which the standard Íslenzk fornrit (henceforth ÍF) edition is based.<sup>17</sup> What had in such cases prompted scribes to stray from their exemplars (or correct them, depending on the point of view) was that they most likely encountered the formula in this position many times before in saga literature. Otherwise, this place simply felt like a logical break.

The main goal of Jakobsen's study was to identify back-referring formula as a special category and to define its function. It was only two decades later that his colleague at Trondheim, Jan Ragnar Hagland,<sup>18</sup> pointed to the potential significance of his predecessor's findings relating to the specific subset of the back-referring formulae—the mirror phrases *sem fyrr var sagt/ritat*—for the study of the orality–literacy interface in medieval Iceland. Indeed, unlike other, semantically, functionally, and phraseologically cognate expressions such as *sem fyrr var greint* (as already described) or *sem fyrr var frá horfit* (that which was left off earlier),<sup>19</sup> *sem fyrr var sagt/ritat* directly references the medium of communication. Hagland suggests that the specific choices of verbs by medieval Icelandic authors and scribes—“to say” or “to write,” and also “to read” or “to hear”—are hardly arbitrary or merely motivated by the need for variation, but rather indicate varying degrees of the writers' awareness of the medium in which they work, thus potentially offering important insights for the study of orality–literacy interrelationships in Old Norse literature and culture.

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Chesnutt, *Opuscula*, vol. 12, Bibliotheca Arnماغæana, 44 (1956; repr., Copenhagen, 2005), p. 5; also see Jón Helgason, ed., “Introduction,” in *The Saga Manuscript 9.10. Aug. 4to in the Herzog August Library, Wolfenbüttel*, trans. Desmond Slay, Manuscripta Islandica, 3 (København: Munksgaard, 1956), p. vii. Regardless of the “original” chapter division, the example here is still indicative of the formula's application context.

17. For example, instances 6w and 4o (see Appendix I) that in chaps. 24 and 78 of the standard edition of the saga do not occur in the first sentence in fact mark beginnings of new chapters in some later manuscripts of the saga that I considered. Although I have not covered all the available late manuscripts, I take the following nine from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (selected at random) to be a fair sample: AM 126 fol. (1635–48), AM 158 fol. (1630–75), AM 932 4to (1821), ÍB 71 4to (1700–50), ÍB 225 4to (1686–87), ÍB 226 4to (1680–99), JS 160 fol. (1772–99), Lbs 232 fol. (1800), and Lbs 129 4to (1823). Out of these, the instance 6w occurs in the first sentence of a new chapter in ÍB 225 4to (41r), JS 160 fol. (22v), and AM 932 4to (23r), while the same is true of 4o in AM 158 fol. (66v), ÍB 71 4to (195v), ÍB 226 4to (82r), Lbs 232 fol. (132r), and Lbs 129 4to (105v).

18. See Hagland, “*Segja frá* eller *rita*.”

19. Jakobsen classes this one as “transitional” rather than back-referring formula (see “Om ‘bakovervisende formler’ i norrønt,” p. 69). However, in certain cases, the two can functionally completely overlap and thus be used interchangeably. The case in point is the Melabók version of *Eyrbyggja saga* (see 2w in Appendix II) where one finds *sem fyrr var frá horfit* instead of *sem fyrr er ritat* as the instance is rendered in chap. 28 of the standard edition based on Vatnsþyrna.

The nature of Hagland’s inspiring article is exploratory, aiming to illustrate the benefits of close analysis of the usage patterns of these medially connotative terms, as well as to motivate more systematic studies of this kind, which is attempted here. Although on the whole encouraging of statistical analyses such as Jakobsen’s, Hagland rightly cautions that any future endeavor that would use such an approach to study orality–literacy interrelationships would have to discriminate more than Jakobsen does<sup>20</sup> between the employment of the formula in different genres and at different times, as well as be sensitive to idiosyncratic, text-specific applications. By primarily focusing on the use of the written and oral-mode back-referring formulae in the sagas of Icelanders, the present study strives to heed these cautions. In addition to formula varieties featuring the verbs *segja* and *rita* that Jakobsen and Hagland considered, I will, however, also include *tala* (to tell), *geta* (to mention), and *nefna* (to name) among the oral-mode type. In particular, the latter two verbs, even though not as explicit as others, nevertheless allude to the oral context of remembrance/commemoration in the case of *geta* (the verb is often featured in runic inscriptions and skaldic verse)<sup>21</sup> and the performative act of naming (as in naming witnesses in legal proceedings) in the case of *nefna*.

Before proceeding with a presentation and analysis of the data that the *Íslendingasögur* yielded, two general obstacles that present themselves at the outset of this study should be addressed:

*What exactly can one hope to learn from the usage patterns of the two formula varieties when both are so strictly bound to the context of writing?*

The oral and written modes of the formula both literally refer to something that writers or scribes have written about earlier in the text *at hand*:<sup>22</sup> the reference to the “already said” in these cases *always* means “already written”<sup>23</sup> and hence does not appear to have any kind of palpable connection

20. Hagland, “*Segja frá* eller *rita*,” pp. 94–95. Of course, for Jakobsen’s own purposes of identifying the back-referring type of formula, this was not strictly necessary.

21. I am grateful to Kristel Zilmer and Else Mundal for drawing my attention to the connection of the verb *geta* with these two ancient genres.

22. For this reason, “self-referring” formula or “self-reference” are in this case as fitting terms as “back-referring” formula or “back-reference,” despite the passive voice in which the phrases are rendered.

23. I have checked all 129 instances of the formula I found in the *Íslendingasögur*, and in the vast majority of cases, these are true references to people/events already mentioned within the same text. In the rare cases where the reference cannot be identified, this is usually due to the lacunae in the manuscripts concerned. For instance, *Bjarnar saga Hítuðlakappa* and *Svarfdæla saga* feature such cases. Alternatively, I did not have access to the manuscripts in which they feature and was therefore unable to check them. The single potentially “false” reference I found is in *Laxdæla saga*, and it involves a certain Þorsteinn *surtr* (p. 19). While this character was indeed mentioned before, the fact that he lived in Þórsnes (and that is what *sem fyrr var ritat* relates to in the sentence) was not. In his edition of the saga (p. 19,

with the oral tradition. This fact sets the oral-mode varieties of the formula quite apart from *svá er sagt* (so/it is said), *svá segja sumir menn* (some people say), and similar expressions that are more general and are pointing to the material outside the text. Thus some scholars, most notably Theodore M. Andersson, persuasively argued that, at least in some cases, such phrases can be taken to refer to the actual concurrent oral tradition.<sup>24</sup> This, as already mentioned (!),<sup>25</sup> is emphatically not the case with *sem fyrr var sagt* and other oral-mode varieties, which raises the question of how can anything about the interface period be learned from this formula when the process of appropriation of the oral mode seems over, the phrase being completely absorbed within the written medium.

Moreover, the option of employing “as already said” to mean “as already written” may have been available to medieval Icelandic authors from the start. After all, the introduction of writing was not a simple matter of disciplining the hand to master its technical aspects, but had also included the pragmatics of writing, learning through example from the texts in Latin<sup>26</sup> and perhaps also other languages of exporting cultures, which already made use of fictionalized orality. This means that the oral mode of back-reference will have, at least in principle, been available for import from the very outset of writing in the vernacular, whether medieval Icelanders *actually* adopted it straight from their textbooks or reinvented it for themselves.<sup>27</sup>

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note 4), Einar Ól. Sveinsson notes that, unlike the *Y-flokkur*/ *Möðruvallabók*, on which the edition is based, a *Z-flokkur* manuscript Stokkhólmsbrotið (2 parchment leaves from the 14th c.) “hefur *getit* f. *ritat*, og er það betra (þá getur *sem* átt við Þorstein)” (has *getit* instead of *ritat*, and that is better [because *sem* relates to Þorsteinn])—i.e., rather than the fact that Þorsteinn lived “í Þórsnesi.” For this reason, it is more likely that the instance in point was an accidental slip on the part of the writer or scribe, rather than a truly false reference or some sort of empty mannerism.

24. Theodore M. Andersson, “The Textual Evidence for an Oral Family Saga,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 81 (1966), 1–23. See in particular pp. 14–20 for examples of the instances that Andersson considers to be “genuine” references to oral tradition as opposed to the “spurious” or “purely manneristic” ones.

25. The fact that I will not be able to make do without this phrase myself during the course of the present discussion (even though I distinctly felt a sting of self-irony every time I used it), testifies to how generically conditioned its use is, how indispensable it has become to scholarly discourse. So much so, in fact, that I felt obliged to resort to this note that will meta-acknowledge the acknowledgement of the already mentioned.

26. I am grateful to Aidan Conti for drawing my attention to the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* in this context. This teaching text was popular throughout the Middle Ages (including Iceland) and features such turns of phrase as *ut ante diximus* (as we said before), possibly reflecting the lecture format.

27. It is difficult to determine which exactly is the case here, among other reasons because, available as they may have been in Latin, medieval Icelandic authors still use these phrases in their own distinct way. For instance, as we were discussing this, Aidan Conti mentioned that Latin historians do not tend to make much use of self-references but rather “appeal to outside authorities” (quoted from personal correspondence). On the other hand, Icelandic historiographers and saga writers amply employ both rhetorical/authenticating devices.



Can we then speak of the orality–literacy interface in the case of medially connotative back-referring formulae? If our goal is to uncover the specific stage(s) when the actual appropriation of “as already said” to mean “as already written” was taking place, then perhaps we cannot. If, however, we want to track the changes in the saga writers’ attitudes toward the two media based on their usage of the two different modes of reference, then the prospect seems much brighter. Even if both modes were readily available to them, we must not lose sight of the fact that early Icelandic authors and scribes must have experienced writing books as a novel and rare skill for a long while (not least because of the presence of a strong indigenous oral tradition), and that this experience is likely to have left some trace upon the texts they produced. It would, therefore, not be surprising if they employed the two modes of self-reference discriminately, at least for a while. After all, it is these people (and not the phrases in themselves) that were the *loci* in which the dynamic processes of interaction between the two media were playing out. What then becomes of crucial importance is not whether they used both modes of self-reference from the onset of writing,<sup>28</sup> but how they used them, whether (and if so, when) they preferred one type to another and in what kind of texts. Were these preferences changing in time during the manuscript transmission, which in Iceland lasted well after the introduction of the printing press, well into the nineteenth century even? My contention (and Hagland’s, too) is that, if any patterns, such as these, emerge, we can potentially learn from them a great deal about the interface period and the Icelandic authors’ and scribes’ changing attitudes toward (and uses of) orality and literacy, as well as their expressed or implied awareness of the medium in which they were created. This leads straight to the problem number two:

*What kind of awareness does the more dominant usage of one formula mode over the other indicate?*

Put differently, does the preference for *sem fyrr var ritat* index an author whose mindset is more self-consciously “literate” than that of an author who shows more predilection for oral-mode varieties? This seems implied in Hagland’s view of the employment of the formula in the kings’ sagas, and other scholars have also pointed out that some of the early Icelandic authors’ use of terms connected to writing represents a self-conscious

28. Indeed, one finds back-references in both the oral and written modes in some of the very early Icelandic texts, such as the *First Grammatical Treatise* (*Fyrsta málfraeðiritgerðin*) for example, dated to the twelfth-century. In this particular case, however, it must be taken into account that the earliest surviving manuscript of this treatise, Codex Wormianus (AM 242 fol.) is dated only to the mid-fourteenth century, which means that there is no certain way of determining to what extent this text reflects the twelfth-century usage of the formula.



distancing from the oral tradition. For example, Diana Whaley considers significant the fact that the titles of early histories of Iceland “end in *bók* rather than *saga*,” thus expressly indicating “something to be read, not to be heard,”<sup>29</sup> while, pertinent to our formula, Forrest S. Scott takes the fact that in a certain place, the *Eyrbyggja saga* author employs the written rather than the oral mode to be a sure sign that “[l]ike many saga-writers, the narrator of *Eyrbyggja saga* is conscious of his position as an author who has his readers in mind.”<sup>30</sup>

While I agree that these explicit efforts to draw attention to writing indeed signify the authors’ awareness of their medium, the implied opposite assumption about those who opt for using the oral mode references (i.e., that they are somehow *less* aware of their written medium or had inertly carried on with the habits of oral discourse) does not follow as a matter of course. For one, there is not even a way of knowing for sure that *sem fyrr var sagt* arose in the oral context first, and then, as writing got introduced, it served as a model for *sem fyrr var ritat* so as to better correspond to the new medium. In fact, with this precise phrase and its function as a back-reference, things could have just as well happened the other way around and *sem fyrr var ritat* could have instead served as the model for *sem fyrr var sagt*. Thinking chronologically, saying, of course, precedes writing, but unlike in writing, repetition of material in oral storytelling is no stylistic aberration, is ubiquitous, and so useful as a mnemonic aid to both the storyteller and the listeners that it hardly warrants a special acknowledgment or justification.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the need for back-reference is far more urgent in the context of the written, especially learned, discourse than in oral communication where it is at most optional, if not completely unnecessary. Obviously, the chronological primacy of either of the modes is improvable, which again presents us with the problem of how we can use this formula to learn anything about the interface period.

My approach to both the issues raised was not to resolve them in advance but to adopt an empirical, bottom-up method and first see if there are any discernable patterns of stratified usage of these two modes (beyond idiosyncratic employments of individual authors/scribes) and then speculate on their causes. As will be discussed in more detail, the data gathered indeed

29. Diana Whaley, “A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland,” in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 166, 169.

30. Forrest S. Scott, “Introduction,” in *Eyrbyggja saga: The Vellum Tradition*, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ, 18, ed. Forrest S. Scott (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels, 2003), p. 26\*.

31. I am grateful to Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen for alerting me, in the context of this discussion, to the fact that in Eddic poetry internal text references such as the back-referring formulae “are exclusively to be found in prose . . . and the prose sections are in these cases likely to be scribal comments (or the responsibility of some ‘editor’), not traditional” (quoted from personal correspondence).

reveal such patterns. Furthermore, it suggests that, for the medieval Icelandic authors, who showed preference for the oral mode of the formula, the medium of writing had been habitualized to the point that it became transparent. Thus, contrary to expectation, there are grounds to conjecture that their mindset was *more* rather than *less* literate than that of their counterparts, who predominantly used the literal, written mode of the formula.

#### DATA ANALYSIS: GENERAL REMARKS

The results of my preliminary searches of standard editions of various kinds of Old Norse texts available online (*Landnámabók* [*Sturlubók*], *Fyrsta málfræðiritgerðin*, *Heimskringla*, *Snorra Edda*, *Íslendingasögur*, *þættir*, and *fornaldarsögur*)<sup>32</sup> suggest that, if the formula is used at all, early works, such as *Landnámabók* or *Heimskringla*, tend to have more *rita* than *segja* varieties, while the opposite is the case with the late texts, such as *fornaldarsögur*. This order of things ties well with what Else Mundal notices about the titles of early medieval Icelandic books: while the works written before 1200 do not contain the word *saga* (based on *segja* ‘to say’) but rather *bók* (book; see also Whaley, above) or *skrá* (dry parchment, book), the opposite becomes the norm “from the beginning of the thirteenth century onwards.”<sup>33</sup> As one of the explanations for this trend, Mundal offers the following: “As the written culture developed and grew strong, it was perhaps not felt as necessary as before to underline the ‘writteness’ of the text by using titles containing words such as *bók* or *skrá*.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, growing accustomed to the medium had slowly obviated the need of the authors to draw special attention to the fact of writing as such and freed them for a more metaphorical use of language and stylistic exploitation of the immediacy of the spoken word.

Thus rather than representing a simple inertia of an oral habit that crept into written texts imperceptibly, the use of *sem fyrr var sagt* and

32. Except for *Fyrsta málfræðiritgerðin* and *Snorra Edda*, which were accessed at <http://etext.old.no/gramm/> and [http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Edda\\_Snorra\\_Sturlusonar](http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Edda_Snorra_Sturlusonar), respectively, all other texts were accessed at <http://www.snerpa.is/net/fornrit.htm>.

33. Else Mundal, “Modes of Authorship and Types of Text in Old Norse Culture,” *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, ed. Slavica Ranković et al. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2012), p. 219.

34. Mundal, “Modes of Authorship,” p. 219. As a further example of this relaxation in attitudes toward writing, a story involving Jón Ólafsson, an eighteenth-century scribe and the associate of Árni Magnússon, may be illuminating; namely, while reconstructing the parts of the *Heiðarvíga saga* that perished in the infamous Copenhagen fire (1728), Jón refers to *Landnámabók* as “Landnámásaga” (see *Heiðarvíga saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, *Íslensk fornrit*, III (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), p. 238, n. 1). It is likely that Jón takes the existence of both this work and the sagas as written texts for granted and can thus use these titles interchangeably.

other appropriated oral-mode varieties of the formula in the sagas most likely points to a more relaxed attitude toward writing, its becoming more transparent and internalized as a technology.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, the apparent factual pedantry reflected in the usage of *sem fyrr var ritat*, where the corresponding mode of back-reference is paired with the corresponding medium of communication, seems to be suggestive of an anxiety on the writer's part to emphasize the special status of writing as a relatively new medium while also stressing his own proficiency in what he and his target audience perceived as a rare and socially desirable skill. Logically, then (though somewhat counterintuitively), the data seems to suggest that the earlier the text is written, the latter attitudes tend to be more prominent than the former, and *sem fyrr var ritat* more likely to be preferred to the oral mode varieties, even as the oral mode can, of course, be featured as well.

As Hagland predicted, in addition to the age of the text, genre also seems to affect the usage patterns of the formula so that the more factually/historiographically oriented texts (e.g., *Landnámabók*, *Heimskringla*) show more propensity for the formula in general and the written mode in particular, whereas those in which the fictional aspect predominates (e.g., *fornaldarsögur*) more often either do not feature the formula at all or, when they do, they opt for the mode that is less obtrusive to the narrative flow, that is, the oral mode. When it comes to generically discriminate usage of the formula, *Snorra Edda* seems particularly instructive, as it employs the formula differently in its different parts. While, for example, *Gylfaginning* features only oral-mode instances (3–5),<sup>36</sup> *Skáldskaparmál* has as many as 18 instances of *rita*, 3 of *segja*, 2 of *nefna*, and 1 of *geta*. What these different patterns of usage within a single text written by a single author<sup>37</sup> seem to suggest is that the more pronouncedly instructive character of *Skáldskaparmál* (in contrast to *Gylfaginning's* stronger narrational slant)

35. On “interiorization of writing,” see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), especially pp. 56, 82.

36. The precise number depends on whether we should count the instances that perform narrative functions in addition to the literal back-referencing, such as “Sól ok Bil eru talðar með ásynjum, en sagt er fyrr frá eðli þeira” and “er nú var frá sagt,” as spoken by a character (Hárr) rather than the narrator. The dilemma is itself telling of a more narratively engaged nature of *Gylfaginning*. Regarding the remaining two parts of *Snorra Edda*, *Prologus* features no instances of this formula, while *Háttatal* has four instances with *rita* and one with *kveða* (relating to already quoted verses).

37. This is one of the factors to take into account if attempting to use formula analysis as a method of ascertaining authorship, which Jakobsen proposes (and briefly illustrates) in “Om ‘bakovervisende formler’ i norrønt,” pp. 77–79. When, based on usage of this formula, he concludes that one and the same author (i.e., Snorri) could not have written both *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla*, he does not take into account that the same author can exhibit different habits of usage in different genres and texts (especially if some of his works were modelled on already existing written accounts about the same events while others were his original creation), and perhaps also at different periods of his life.

Table 1. Data Analysis: Patterns of Usage in the *Íslendingasögur* (ÍF Statistics)

Number of sagas containing the formula:	27 out of 40/39 <sup>1</sup>	Comment: This is approximately two thirds. Note that all 27 sagas feature the oral mode of the formula, while only 7 have the written mode too.
Total number of instances (both modes):	129	Comment: 110 oral-mode instances and 19 written-mode ones.
Number of oral-mode instances:	110	Comment: Out of 110, 77 instances feature <i>segja</i> as the main verb, 17 <i>geta</i> , 13 <i>nefna</i> , and 3 <i>tala</i> .
Number of written-mode instances:	19	Comment: 18 instances feature <i>rita</i> as the main verb, while 1 (in <i>Kormáks saga</i> ) has the strong version of the same verb— <i>rita</i> .
Saga with the largest number of oral-mode instances:	<i>Grettis saga</i> (24) <sup>2</sup>	Comment: 0 written-mode instances
Saga with the largest number of written-mode instances:	<i>Laxdæla saga</i> (9)	Comment: In addition, it has 5 oral-mode instances with (or 4 without) <i>Bolla þátr</i> . <i>Laxdæla saga</i> is also the <i>only</i> saga in the corpus in which the written-mode instances outnumber the oral-mode ones.

## Notes

1. The total number of the sagas depends on whether one considers *Qlkofra saga* to be a short saga or a longer *þátr*. Scholars have variously opted for either.

2. *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu* is another strong contender for this position. Amounting to about a third of the size of *Grettis saga*, *Reykðæla saga* in fact features a proportionately higher number of instances—13, all in the oral mode.

probably invited more usage of the back-referring formula in general and that of the *rita* variety in particular. This claim, however, requires a more thorough investigation, which is beyond the scope of the present study that, as already mentioned, concentrates on the *Íslendingasögur*.

With the exception of *Njáls saga* (see notes 39 and 48), the statistics presented in Table 1 are based on the standard ÍF editions and therefore do not reflect the state of the formula as represented by the sagas' rich extant manuscript tradition. However, although limited, less varied, and on the whole poorer, we must bear in mind that the picture ÍF editions offer is far from being arbitrary since the common editorial practice to ground any given text in its fullest oldest version should make the results of the presented searches coherent (if not exact) and on the whole representative (if not complete) of the usage of the formula across the corpus. Moreover, it was a common practice of the ÍF editors to reflect on pertinent manuscript variations themselves, which included our formula, thus already modifying the results and sharpening further our intuition about its use. Even so, although I did not go through all manuscripts of all the sagas, I have in fact examined a fair selection of manuscripts of *Kormáks*

saga, *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Egils saga*, the detailed results of which are presented in Appendices I–III.<sup>38</sup> The reasons for choosing these specific sagas as samples will become clear. First, however, I would like to briefly compare the patterns emerging from the results of my examination of the ÍF editions of the sagas of Icelanders (see the Table 1) with the more general picture suggested by the rough searches of other Old Norse texts. In particular, I focus on how the chronological and generic parameters discussed above affect the usage of the two modes of the back-referring formula in *Íslendingasögur* and suggest additional factors worth considering—regional and/or personal preferences.

### DATA ANALYSIS: CHRONOLOGY

In terms of chronology, the usage of the formula in the *Íslendingasögur* (henceforth ÍS) complies well with what has been noted about other Old Norse texts: as small as the number of the written mode instances is (only 19), the majority of them (16) still occur in the sagas that are considered early (or at least relatively early): *Egils saga* (3), *Laxdæla saga* (9), *Eyrbyggja saga* (3), and *Kormáks saga* (1). The remaining three comparatively late sagas—*Gull-Þóris saga*, *Fljótsdæla saga*, and *Njáls saga*—feature 1 instance each.<sup>39</sup> Since the former four are the oldest<sup>40</sup> sagas containing the largest

38. The results from *Kormáks saga* are not presented in a separate appendix since, unlike with the other three sagas, they are easily summarized. For further details, see the “Manuscript Evidence for the Evolution of the Formula’s Usage” section (below).

39. In the case of *Njáls saga*, this particular instance is in fact extant only in the fourteenth-century manuscripts Reykjabók (AM 468 4to; 1300–15) and Kálfalækjarbók (AM 133 fol.; 1300), as well as their later copies. Another two early manuscripts, Gráskinna (GKS 2870 4to; ca. 1300) and Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.; ca. 1350) do not include it. I have nevertheless counted the instance in, since Einar Ól. Sveinsson included it in his ÍF edition (see note 48).

40. The mid-thirteenth-century AM 162 fol., frag. ʋ is the earliest surviving manuscript of an *Íslendingasaga* in general and *Egils saga* in particular. The first written version of *Egils saga* is thought to predate this fragment by a couple of decades (ca. 1230). For a recent discussion of the dating of *Egils saga*, see Jonna Louis-Jensen, “Dating the Archetype: *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*,” in *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions*, ed. Else Mundal (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013), pp. 133–47. In his contribution to the same volume (“Redating *Fóstbræðra saga*,” p. 56), Theodore M. Andersson concurs with Louis-Jensen in reaffirming the traditional early thirteenth-century dating of the saga. *Kormáks saga* is also thought to have been written in the early thirteenth century (see Einar Ól. Sveinsson’s “Formáli” to his ÍF edition of *Kormáks saga*, pp. lxxx–cx). *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* are considered to be younger than the former two and are usually dated to the mid-thirteenth century, with the earliest surviving fragments, such as AM 162 E fol. (which spans both of these sagas), dated roughly to the year 1300 (or a few decades earlier in the case of *Laxdæla saga*’s one leaf fragment, AM 162 D 2 fol.). For a recent discussion of the dating of these two sagas, especially *Eyrbyggja saga*, see Torfi H. Tulinius, “Dating *Eyrbyggja saga*: The Value of ‘Circumstantial’ Evidence for Determining the Time of Composition of Sagas about Early Icelanders,” in *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions*, ed. Else Mundal, pp. 115–32.

number of the *rita* instances, I conjectured that a detailed manuscript study of *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Kormáks saga*, and *Egils saga* instances (both the written and the oral modes) will present a good opportunity to further test the hypothesis about the written-mode instances being more characteristic of earlier times and texts. Namely, if it can be shown that the later scribes swapped the written-mode instances for the oral-mode ones (or omitted them), and conversely, if the manuscripts older than (or contemporaneous with) those taken as bases for the ÍF editions reveal more written-mode instances, then we would be closer to something resembling a proof. More importantly, even as a sample diachronic cross-section of the corpus, the manuscript study of the four sagas mentioned should yield a more complete and nuanced picture of the evolution of the formula within the ÍS as a genre.

I will discuss the results of this study in more detail later, in a separate section. Suffice it to say for now that, with some noted exceptions, the manuscript data on the whole corroborates the hypothesis about the written-mode instances being more common in older texts. In addition, it reveals a potential further stage in the orality–literacy interface attitudes as reflected in the late scribes' decision to occasionally omit the formula altogether.

#### DATA ANALYSIS: GENRE

Within the system of Old Norse genres, the sagas of Icelanders are usually taken to inhabit the space in between the more factually and more fictionally inclined texts, with some of them exhibiting more historiographical ambition or outlook than others, especially in the opening chapters. From this perspective, too, it is not surprising to find that *Laxdæla saga*,<sup>41</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Egils saga* feature most of the written-mode instances. Apart from being considered fairly early, these three sagas also exhibit a strong historiographical concern, and the written-mode formula contributes to their overall sense of authenticity, learnedness, and authority that one also encounters in the more historical genres such as the kings' sagas, some of which (*Heimskringla*'s two Óláfrs' sagas in particular) feature profusely the written-mode variety of the formula. Of course, as will be touched upon in the next section, one other important factor to consider is that the production of all these works—the three western ÍS and *Heimskringla*—is tightly connected with the Sturlung family (Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Þórðarson in particular) and their social circle.

41. Note in particular that in *Laxdæla saga*, the formula is most intensely applied in the first third of the narrative, the part that is mostly concerned with the settlement of Iceland. Seven out of nine written-mode instances are used before the main protagonists of the saga's romance, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Kjartan Ólafsson, are even mentioned.

The generically intermediate position of the ÍS may also account for the fact that, although a large number of them feature the formula, the oral-mode instances nevertheless greatly outnumber the written mode ones (110:19). In fact, as can be seen from the Table 1, *Laxdæla saga* is the only one in which the number of written-mode instances is larger than that of the oral-mode ones, while in all the others, including *Egils saga* (possibly the oldest of the ÍS),<sup>42</sup> the ratios are decidedly in favor of the oral mode. While the need for back-referencing was obviously felt in some of the sagas that have no written-mode instances of the formula—partly to manage their complexity, partly for the mentioned documentary air the formula provides—oral-mode varieties were probably on the whole a more attractive choice since they perform these functions more elegantly than their written-mode counterpart, at a lesser cost to the flow of the story. In other words, after the novelty of writing as such started to wear off, the oral mode was in all likelihood more and more appreciated for being able to strike a particularly good balance between the scholarly and the narrational demands of the genre.

In addition to the significantly larger number of instances, the fact that the use of the oral mode of the formula in the ÍS is far more flexible than that of the written mode is another testimony to how more organic the former seems to be (or to have become) to this genre. The sagas feature both shortened and extended varieties of the oral mode,<sup>43</sup> with additional adverbs/prepositions, varying tenses of the verbs, substitutions of *sem* with the relative pronoun *er*, different word order, and the adverb *fyrir* relatively frequently being replaced with either *áðr* or *nú*, or even with both.<sup>44</sup> This degree of variation (I found 49 different formulations) is much greater than that of the written-mode instances, the use of which is almost completely stable and circumscribed (*sem fyrir var/er ritat*), not least when it comes to the main verb.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, the more rigid employment of the written mode of the formula in the ÍS suggests it as more of a

42. There are actually four times as many oral-mode instances in *Egils saga* (twelve) as there are written-mode ones (three); see Appendix III. This, however, is not terribly surprising since, as noted at the outset of this study, the oral mode was most likely available to the medieval Icelandic authors ever since the inception of writing and is therefore likely to occur (and does occur) in *both* early and late texts. It is rather the presence of the written mode of the formula and, as we shall see, any sustained substitutions of it with the oral mode (in later manuscripts of a given work) that draw attention to themselves and are of potential significance in the present context.

43. Compare, for instance, the short phrase “*sem fyrir segir*” (e.g., in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 58) with the more elaborate expression such as “*er nú hefir verit frá sagt um hríð*” (*Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Íslensk fornrit, XI [Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950], p. 319).

44. For example: “*nú var áðr frá sagt*,” *Laxdæla saga* (*Bolla þáttur*), ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 230.

45. See note 1.



mannerism that could have been imported from other genres—as noted above, probably from the kings’ sagas, or perhaps the *Landnámabók*<sup>46</sup> in which the usage of the written mode is at least as varied and as flexible as that of the oral mode is in the ÍS.

#### DATA ANALYSIS: REGIONAL AND/OR PERSONAL PREFERENCES

In addition to the discussed chronological and generic parameters, the results suggest other potentially important factors that affect the usage patterns of the formula—regional and personal partialities toward one or the other mode, or conversely, a tendency not to use the formula at all. Namely, the northern and western sagas show far more propensity for the formula than the southern and the eastern ones,<sup>47</sup> with the western sagas, as we have seen, featuring nearly all of the written-mode instances. Of course, as already noted, this result might not be so surprising given that *Egils saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Laxdæla saga* arose in the cultural milieu dominated by the Sturlungs. Both Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* and Sturla Þórðarson’s version of *Landnámabók* make copious use of the written mode of the formula, though a more systematic and careful study should be conducted in order to ascertain the extent to which these are indeed personal preferences of the two authors and to what extent they are inherited habits traceable to Snorri and Sturla’s respective sources. Similarly, the apparently overwhelming presence of the oral mode in the northern sagas, which feature almost a half of the ÍS total (51 out of 110), is due to the fact that the majority of the instances (37) appear in two sagas—*Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu* (13) and *Grettis saga* (24). In other words, it seems that the personal preferences of the authors of these two sagas account for the apparent “northern” predilection for the oral mode of the formula.

The statistic in general needs to be further modified by the fact that the number of the sagas in the northwest is on the whole significantly higher than that in the southeast. Still, the results are not wholly unsuggestive:

46. *Landnámabók*’s relationship with *Laxdæla saga* has long been acknowledged. For an overview, see Judith Jesch, “The Lost Literature of Medieval Iceland: Sagas of Icelanders” (PhD diss., Univ. College London, 1984).

47. In ascribing regional provenance, one should be careful, of course, not to mix up the region in which the action of the saga takes place with the region in which it was written. At the same time, it is not unlikely that the two often coincided, considering that the descendants of the prominent characters and/or contemporary owners of their farms would be the people who had vested interests in writing that saga (or commissioning it). The statistics presented here are, however, based on regional provenance assigned to the sagas by the Íslenzk fornrit editions and *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*.

if the back-referring formulae were as commonly used in the south and east as they seem to have been used in the northwest of the country, one would expect that *Njáls saga*, the largest and one of the most complex ÍS, would feature more than 3 instances, only 1 of which is common to all three of its manuscript families (*flokkar*)—X, Y, and Z.<sup>48</sup> Puzzled by the fact that this saga makes so little use of the back-referring formula,<sup>49</sup> despite the abundance of opportunities the narrative offers for its application, Alfred Jakobsen was forced to conclude that *Njáls saga* is simply “unntaket som bekrefter regelen” (the exception that proves the rule).<sup>50</sup> However, the saga’s origin in the south of Iceland could be a more plausible (and more satisfactory) explanation. The patterns of usage involving regional and personal preferences thus represent one potentially very fruitful line of inquiry, but one that warrants a separate and a more dedicated investigation than can be offered at present.

#### MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE FOR THE EVOLUTION OF THE FORMULA’S USAGE

As noted above, the four of the earliest ÍS that, in addition to the oral, also feature the written-mode instances have been selected for a more detailed examination—one that will include their manuscript histories with the goal of investigating whether any sustained changes during the long period of transmission occurred. However, before proceeding further, it seems prudent to briefly introduce each of the considered sagas’ redactions and their main manuscript representatives.

The extant manuscripts of *Laxdæla saga* fall into two classes—Y and Z. The chief representative of the Y-Class is AM 132 fol., better known as Möðruvallabók, a saga codex written ca. 1350<sup>51</sup> and used as the base text

48. The instance common to all three redactions of the saga occurs in chap. 97 of the standard ÍF edition (based on Möðruvallabók) and features *tala* as the main verb (*er nú var talit*). However, the editor Einar Ól. Sveinsson included further two instances—one in the written mode from Reykjabók (AM 468 4to, ca. 1300–15), which he introduced into the main body of his edition (*Njáls saga*, p. 442; also n. 5 on the same page), and one in the oral mode, which seems unique to Gráskinna (GKS 2870 4to, ca. 1300), which he placed in a footnote (*Njáls saga*, p. 235, n. 1). See also note 39, above.

49. For some reason, Jakobsen only takes into account the instance that appears in chap. 97 of the standard edition, but not the one from chap. 154, which Einar Ól. Sveinsson also included (from Reykjabók; see the previous note).

50. Jakobsen, “Om ‘bakovervisende formler’ i norrønt,” p. 76.

51. This dating is according to Michael Chesnutt, “English Summary,” in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar: Bind I A-Redaktionen*, Editiones Arnarnagagnæanæ, 19, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, (København: C. A. Reitzels, 2001), p. lxxviii. A more broad time margin is 1320–70, with Einar Ól. Sveinsson arguing for the earlier portion (1320–50), and Jón Helgason for the later (1350–70).

for the ÍF edition of *Laxdæla saga*. Another important manuscript belonging to the Y-Class is the late fourteenth-century Vatnshyrna, as represented by the late seventeenth-century paper manuscript ÍB 225 4to,<sup>52</sup> while the oldest surviving manuscript of this class is the fragment AM 162 D1 fol., written ca. 1300. The saga's two other earliest surviving fragments, AM 162 D2 fol. and AM 162 E fol. (written ca. 1250–1300 and ca. 1300, respectively), belong to the Z-Class. However, as we do not have any extant medieval Z-Class representatives of the entire saga, we must instead rely on later paper manuscripts such as, for example, the seventeenth-century AM 158 fol. or ÍB 226 4to.

According to Forrest S. Scott, there are also two main manuscript classes of *Eyrbyggja saga*—\*C and \*B.<sup>53</sup> The chief witnesses of the \*C-Class are the already mentioned late fourteenth-century saga compilation Vatnshyrna (as represented by the seventeenth-century paper manuscript AM 448 4to) and the late fourteenth-, early fifteenth-century Melabók. The main representative of the saga's \*B-Class is the mid-fourteenth-century codex Wolfenbüttel (also containing *Egils saga*),<sup>54</sup> and two leaves of the already mentioned fragment AM 162 E fol. belong to \*B-Class as well, this fragment also being one of the earliest extant witnesses of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Even though the Vatnshyrna version forms the basis of the ÍF edition of the saga (partly due to aesthetic considerations, and partly because it offers the only complete version of the saga), Scott considers the Wolfenbüttel version to be closest to the archetype.<sup>55</sup>

*Egils saga* survives in three redactions—A, B and C. As already mentioned (see note 40), the earliest extant saga manuscript, the mid-thirteenth-century AM 162 fol., frag. ʒ, is of *Egils saga*, and it belongs to its A-Redaction.

52. As is well known, the famous saga codex Vatnshyrna burned in the notorious 1728 Copenhagen fire. However, Ásgeir Jónsson's paper copy of *Laxdæla saga* (ÍB 225 4to) is usually taken to faithfully represent the Vatnshyrna version of the saga (e.g., Einar Ól. Sveinsson includes it in his ÍF edition of the saga). Ásgeir Jónsson is generally considered a reliable scribe and had copied a large number of Old Icelandic manuscripts, many of which under the supervision of the rigorous Árni Magnússon, who seldom found it necessary to further correct Ásgeir's copies. For a recent study of Ásgeir Jónsson's scribal activity, see Giovanni Verri, "Um Rithendur Ásgeirs Jónssonar: Nokkrar skriftrafræðilegar athugasemdir," *Gripla*, 22 (2011), 229–58. Also see Már Jónsson, "The Saga Heritage: Árni Magnússon and the Collecting of Icelandic Manuscripts," Margaret and Richard Beck Lecture, University of Victoria, Canada, delivered on March 24, 1998, [http://web.uvic.ca/~becktrus/assets/text/jonsson\\_02.php](http://web.uvic.ca/~becktrus/assets/text/jonsson_02.php).

53. Previous editorial practice was to operate with three, rather than two, manuscript classes. For example, in his ÍF edition of *Eyrbyggja saga*, Einar Ól. Sveinsson considers the Melabók version to belong to its own separate class. Scott, however, offers compelling evidence that Melabók in fact belongs to the \*C-Class. For more detail, see Scott, "Introduction," in *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 15\*–17\*.

54. Jón Helgason provides this dating in his "Introduction," in *Saga Manuscript 9.10. Aug. 4to . . . Wolfenbüttel*, p. ix.

55. See Scott, "Introduction," in *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 10\*–11\*.

The chief representative of this redaction, and the base text for the saga's ÍF edition, is Möðruvallabók, whereas the mentioned version in Wolfenbüttel (see above) is the main witness of the saga's B-Redaction. While, as noted before, these two codices both date ca. 1350, the main representatives of the saga's C-Redaction are the seventeenth-century manuscripts AM 462 4to (K<sup>1</sup>) and AM 453 4to (K<sup>2</sup>) written by Ketill Jörundsson (the maternal grandfather of Árni Magnússon) and named Ketilsbækur after him. They both derive, however, from a fifteenth-century manuscript.<sup>56</sup> Although the C-redaction is the youngest of the three, it sheds important light on the development of the saga, acting as “an arbiter between A and B.”<sup>57</sup> While in its wording this redaction is closer to A, “B and C have common omissions *vis à vis* A and share two short passages at the end that doubtless belonged to the original saga but are wanting in A.”<sup>58</sup>

As for so many other sagas, the chief representative of *Kormáks saga*'s sole redaction is, again, Möðruvallabók, while its earliest surviving witness is the fourteenth-century fragment AM 162 F fol., consisting of a single leaf.

Using as the point of departure instances that appear in the manuscripts that served as bases for the ÍF editions of *Kormáks saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Egils saga*, I have tracked their fates<sup>59</sup> in a fair selection of the available earliest, intermediary, and latest representatives of each redaction of a given saga, including some confluents.<sup>60</sup> The ages of the manuscripts consulted in the present study range from ca. 1300 vellum fragments, such

56. For more detail, see Michael Chesnutt, “English Summary,” in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar: Bind III C-Redaktionen*, Editiones Arnarnænar, 21, ed. Michael Chesnutt (København: C. A. Reitzels, 2006), pp. lix–xi.

57. Chesnutt, “English Summary,” in *C-Redaktionen*, p. lviii.

58. Chesnutt, “English Summary,” in *A-Redaktionen*, p. lxiii.

59. The problem with this approach is that I may have missed the possible “extras,” i.e., the instances that, like the one from the Reykjabók version of *Njáls saga* (see nn. 39 and 48), did not appear in the ÍF base manuscripts and instances where the editors—being either less conscientious than Einar Ól. Sveinsson or simply embracing a different editorial style—perhaps did not consider a variation worth reporting. In my study of the chosen four sagas' manuscripts, I have come across a couple of such “extra” instances by accident. For example, one such additional instance (*sem áðr er sagt*) appears in the sentence following the illegible version of 60 on 65r of the nineteenth-century *Eyrbyggja saga* manuscript ÍBR 2 4to (see Appendix II). Despite this methodological weakness, the results should still present us with reliable enough a sample.

60. Some of the searches were made easy by Bjarni Einarsson and Michael Chesnutt's editions of A and C redactions of *Egils saga*, as well as Forrest S. Scott's 2003 edition of the vellum tradition of *Eyrbyggja saga*. In most other cases, however, I have resorted to the digitized manuscripts at <http://handrit.is/>, made available through the praise-worthy joint efforts of Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum in Reykjavík and its sister institute, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling in Copenhagen, as well as Landsbókasafn Íslands—Háskólabókasafn, also from Reykjavík. I would like to thank Else Mundal for sparing no effort to help me in these fledgling attempts at palaeography and for kindly lending her superior skills whenever the going got too tough for me.

as the already mentioned AM 162 E fol.<sup>61</sup> (comprising five leaves of *Laxdæla saga* and two of *Eyrbyggja saga*), to nineteenth-century paper manuscripts, such as Lbs 232 fol., which, judging solely by the use of our formula, is a representative of the *Laxdæla saga*'s Z-Class but has at a later stage been heavily amended by its scribe, Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin,<sup>62</sup> with what appear to be the Y-Class readings. The reason for including very late manuscripts was to track any additional changes in the usage of the formula that might reflect the influence of the printing press and the ensuing new attitudes on copying, authorship, and style.

The manuscripts consulted and the results of my searches are all presented in the tables included in Appendices I–III. Of the four sagas examined in this way, only *Kormáks saga*'s results are not represented in a dedicated table. This is because they are easy to summarize: the saga's two instances, *sem fyrr var getit* and *sem fyrr er ritin* (ÍF chaps. 22 and 24, respectively) appear unchanged in all the manuscripts that were available to me (20 out of 31 extant ones)<sup>63</sup> or feature such minute variations that are of no consequence to the present query.<sup>64</sup> Two notable exceptions are the early nineteenth-century manuscripts ÍB 368 4to (1810–20?; see 148v) and Lbs 143 4to (1823; see 14v–15r), both of which omit the written-mode instance of the formula while retaining the oral-mode one. This may be of some significance if the fact is taken into account that, as the tables in the appendices will corroborate, such omissions of the formula seem to be a part of a more general trend characteristic of late manuscripts.

My specific choices of manuscripts and closer engagement with the results presented in the tables warrant a separate and more detailed discussion. For the present purposes, however, and so as to keep the focus on the arguments introduced thus far, I will only present an overview of the more prominent patterns emerging from the results in the tables. Before

61. I am very grateful to Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and Sigurgeir Steingrímsson of the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum for providing me with black-and-white scans of this fragment. Based on the information available at <http://handrit.is/> regarding the content of the other two early fragments of *Laxdæla saga*, AM 162 D1 fol. (five leaves) and AM 162 D2 fol. (one leaf), I have judged them unlikely to feature our formula and have thus not requested their scans. My thanks are also due to Svanhildur and Sigurgeir's colleague at Stofnun, Emily Lethbridge, who kindly provided me with Gráskinna, Reykjabók, and Kálfalækjarbók readings of the oral-mode instance from chap. 97 of *Njáls saga*.

62. Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin is otherwise most famous for producing the first transcription and the first printed edition of the Old English epic masterpiece, *Beowulf*.

63. Of the remaining eleven manuscripts, ten are still awaiting digitization, while one is the already mentioned fourteenth-century fragment AM 162 F fol.. This fragment consists of a single leaf, which, judging from the information available at <http://handrit.is/> regarding its content, does not seem likely to feature any instances of the formula.

64. For example, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century manuscripts ÍB 65 4to (86r) and IB 300 4to (77v) both have *ok fyrr er ritin* instead of *sem fyrr er ritin*, a variation that is negligible in the present context.

proceeding to do so, however, I will first offer the reader some guidelines for reading the tables in the appendices, which, being indicative of my methodology, will hopefully be of interest to all readers and not only those intent on studying the tables in greater detail.

#### INSTRUCTIONS FOR READING APPENDICES AND OTHER REMARKS

The first column in each of the three tables gives the number of the instance (in its order of appearance in the saga) and indicates the mode in which it is featured in the standard edition. The same column also provides the number of the ÍF chapter in which that instance can be located. To avoid repeating cumbersome, if more accurate, phrases demarcating each instance—for example, “the 5th oral-mode instance,” or “the 3rd written-mode instance”—in the tables and the ensuing discussion they will be referred to as simply 5o, 3w, etc.

The second column cites the instances as they appear in the manuscript taken as the base for the ÍF edition of the saga in question. The subsequent columns give the results of the searches of representative manuscripts (both early and late) of each redaction of a given saga (including some conflation).

Each column normally features results from two manuscripts,<sup>65</sup> the second of these either being a later copy of the first or belonging to the same manuscript class (*flokkur*). While the instances from the first manuscript are cited in full, only the divergent readings from the second are given, preceded by an asterisk. In all other places, it is to be assumed that the instances are exactly the same as in the first featured manuscript. This is to avoid cramming the tables with unnecessary repetition and to make them as clearly readable as possible.

“NA” (not available) means that the instances in question could not be checked due to the manuscript being either a fragment or featuring lacunae in places where particular instances are expected to occur. On the other hand, “X” marks the absence/omission of an instance.

65. When the column features more than one extra manuscript, as is the case with “Eyf3” (see Appendix III), these manuscripts all have the same readings. On the other hand, some columns have only one manuscript that contains subsequent corrections that affect the use of the formula. The cases in point are AM 447 4to based on Vatnshyrna but subsequently corrected according to Melabók (see Appendix II) and the already discussed Lbs 232 fol. (see Appendix I). In these cases, the readings from base manuscripts are given first, and only divergent emendations are cited.

To keep the focus on the formula, I have not striven to reproduce the exact spelling of individual manuscripts. Rather, I have normalized it and extended all the abbreviations according to the practices of the ÍF editors.<sup>66</sup>

DISCUSSION OF THE MANUSCRIPT DATA:  
*LAXDÆLA SAGA AND EYRBYGGJA SAGA*

With some exceptions, the data roughly confirm the tendency of early manuscripts to feature more written-mode instances than the later ones, which either tend to replace *rita* with *segja*, or, for the lack of a better word, “omit” (i.e., not feature) some instances altogether. Thus, for example, the ÍF edition’s base manuscript, Mōðruvallabók (henceforth M), written ca. 1350, features 9 *rita* instances in *Laxdæla saga*, whereas the ca. 40–45 years younger Vatnshyrna version of the same saga (as represented by the seventeenth-century ÍB 225 4to) has only 3, with the remaining 6 written-mode instances either rendered in the oral mode (1w, 4w, 6w, and 8w) or omitted (7w and 9w; see Appendix I). Vatnshyrna’s (henceforth V) preference for the oral mode in general and the short form *sem fyrr segir* in particular is also evident in its version of *Eyrbyggja saga* (as represented by the seventeenth-century AM 448 4to), which, like its *Laxdæla saga*, features only 3 *rita* instances, while the remaining 6 are all rendered in the oral mode (see Appendix II).<sup>67</sup> That this is a specific characteristic of V

66. In most cases, these extensions merely involved the adverbs *sem* and *fyrr*, or the auxiliary verb *vera*. The main verbs (which are of more importance in the present context) were usually clearly discernable. The rare exceptions are noted at the relevant places in the appendices.

67. Of course, an objection could be made that what I present here as Vatnshyrna results reflects much later attitudes and preferences, namely, that of the eighteenth-century scribe Ásgeir Jónsson, who copied both ÍB 225 4to (V’s *Laxdæla saga*) and AM 448 4to (V’s *Eyrbyggja saga*). Apart from the fact that scholars consider Ásgeir a particularly faithful copier (see n. 52, above), I find it unlikely that the specific choices of the formula here are his own. This is because another manuscript (AM 126 fol.) written approximately 40–50 years before Ásgeir’s and by another scribe (Jón Gissurarson) also contains *Eyrbyggja saga*, thought to be a copy of the V version, yet it features the same instances as those found in Ásgeir’s own copy. The only difference is that Jón Gissurarson seems to have had a particular preference for the present tense of the auxiliary verb *vera* (*er*), which becomes evident when his formula instances in *Eyrbyggja* are compared with those in his copy of *Laxdæla saga* (M version), also in AM 126 fol. (see Appendix I). The same comparison, however, will, on the other hand, corroborate that Jón Gissurarson was on the whole a faithful scribe too, since the two sagas he copied show such different applications of the formula that can only be explained by Jón’s close copying of his exemplars. Moreover, the short form *sem fyrr segir* does not occur in Jón’s copy of *Laxdæla saga* (M version), which means that this short form must have indeed been characteristic of V itself.



becomes clear when its instances are compared to those from the ca. 1350 Wolfenbüttel (henceforth W) version of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Although the first third of the saga is missing in W, this nearly half-a-century older manuscript nevertheless features 5 written-mode instances and had at least had 6 before it was damaged.<sup>68</sup> We know this because in his edition of the saga's vellum tradition, Forrest S. Scott shows that, on the basis of a shared scribal error, W and the late fifteenth-century AM 309 4to (henceforth G) had the same ancestor,<sup>69</sup> and in the first third of the saga that is missing in W, G features a written mode instance in place of V's 10, as indeed do other \*B Class manuscripts (see Appendix II). In addition, it may be of significance that the late fourteenth-, early fifteenth-century Melabók version of *Eyrbyggja saga*, which, like V, belongs to the \*C, rather than \*B Class, nevertheless also features a written-mode instance in place of V's 10. Now that there are grounds to believe that V's scribe imposed his own style of formula usage (as evidenced by the preference for the phrase *sem fyrr segir*), it becomes possible to conjecture that not only \*B but also perhaps \*C Class and ultimately the first written version of the saga had a written-mode instance in this place.

The same argument can be used to suggest that 10 of *Laxdæla saga* (see Appendix I) could have been a written-mode instance at an earlier stage, considering that not only Z-Class manuscripts but also AM 126 fol. (1635–1648) have *sem fyr er ritat* in this place, despite the fact that it belongs to the same Y-Class as M which instead has *sem fyrr var sagt* in this place. This is also the case with quite a few Y-Class manuscripts that I could not fit into the Appendix I table—the late seventeenth-century ÍB 226 4to (41v), Lbs 978 4to (43v), and ÍBR 52 8vo (25v); eighteenth-century Lbs 35 fol. (92r), Lbs 979 4to (41r), and ÍB 472 4to (32v); as well as the nineteenth-century Lbs 1001 4to (44v), Lbs 1212 4to (27v), and Lbs 2328 4to (235v). Unless the change originates with AM 126 fol. itself and *all* the manuscripts cited above directly or indirectly derive from it, then a speculation that 10 may have been a written-mode instance could perhaps be justified.<sup>70</sup> To sum up, there seems to be enough ground here

68. This is where my method of using the ÍF editions' instances as a starting point is at its weakest. Considering V's penchant for the oral-mode instances, it would not be surprising if additional written-mode instances are to be found in W's version of *Eyrbyggja saga*. I hope to pursue this line of investigation in the near future.

69. Scott, "Introduction," in *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 7\*-8\*.

70. In this context, it may also be worth noting that Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin did not change this particular written-mode instance "back" into an oral one while amending his Z-Class base text in Lbs 232 fol. with Y readings. It is therefore possible that he had a Y-Class text that differed from M in this instance, a text like AM 126 fol. At the same time, despite Thorkelin's good scholarly reputation, we cannot dismiss a possibility that this may not have been a deliberate choice but rather a simple omission on his part. For example, he does not intervene at the instance 5w either, and this does seem to be a slip (see Appendix I) since there are no other Y-manuscripts that have an oral-mode instance here to suggest that this could have been a deliberate act.

to suggest that both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga* are likely to have had more written-mode instances at their earlier stages as written texts.

The most important counterexample that I found is AM 162 E fol. (henceforth E). This, as already mentioned, is one of the earliest fragments of *Laxdæla saga*'s Z-Class and of *Eyrbyggja saga*'s \*B class written ca. 1300 (i.e., about half a century earlier than M and W). Although only 5 disconnected leaves of *Laxdæla saga* survive in E, the uncommonly fortuitous coincidence of survival of these particular ones enabled me to check as many as 5 instances, 1 of which (3w) turned out to be the same as in M, 2 of which were not featured (2w and 7w), 1 written mode instance that was rendered as oral (5w), and 1 (1w) that is illegible at the most interesting point: *sem fyrr var . . .* and then the crucial main verb is obliterated (see Appendix I). The remaining 2 leaves of E contain *Eyrbyggja saga*, and the sole instance that I could check reads as *sem sagt var*, although in both V (\*C class) and W (\*B class), this is rendered as a written-mode instance (3w; see Appendix II).

Early though it is, the evidence that fragment E offers is inconclusive, not only because there is not enough of it or because any trends are also bound to have some countercurrents, but also because, despite being ca. 50 years older than M and W, E does not necessarily reflect an earlier state of the formula's usage than the other two codices. The inconsistent and saga-specific employments of the formula in both M and W<sup>71</sup> suggest close adherence to the exemplars rather than personal preference on the part of their respective scribes.<sup>72</sup> In other words, both manuscripts point to usages that predate them, which then brings their instances temporally too close to those featured in the fragment E for the chronological factor to play a very significant role.

Besides, E's tendency to use the formula less and to prefer oral to the written mode could as well be the scribe's own or stem from the scriptorium/writing center in which he was schooled/worked. This seems supported by the fact that, like E's, W's version of *Eyrbyggja saga* belongs to the same class (\*B; see Appendix II), yet W itself as well as the later manuscripts of \*B class feature *sem fyrr var ritat* in this place. Moreover, at least when it comes to *Eyrbyggja saga*, W readings should carry more weight than E readings since, according to Jonna Louis-Jensen (and Forrest S. Scott), "W is the single manuscript that gives the best picture of

71. Consider, for instance, that W's *Eyrbyggja saga* has five or six *rita* instances while its *Egils saga* has none. Also M's *Laxdæla saga* has nine *rita* instances, while its *Njáls saga* has none.

72. W features only one hand, and although M had four scribes, only one was responsible for all the prose parts of the codex. If either of them exhibited personal preferences rather than followed their exemplars, one would expect a more homogenous application of the formula across the codex and not such differences in number and particular phrasing from saga to saga.

the archetype of *Eyrbyggja saga*, even in some respects better than the old fragment E (AM 162 E fol.), which is both very short and marred by scribal errors.”<sup>73</sup>

#### DISCUSSION OF THE MANUSCRIPT DATA: *EGILS SAGA*

Since *Egils saga* boasts the earliest surviving fragment of the ÍS, the data analysis of its manuscripts seemed particularly promising. The results, however, are not as conclusive as one would hope them to be, and, disappointingly, the part of the saga that coincides with the famous fragment Ƿ does not happen to feature any instances of the formula. The two earliest chief representatives of A- and B-redactions of the saga (M and W, respectively) feature a vastly different usage of the formula in general and the written mode in particular. While M has 15 instances in total, 3 of which are rendered in the written mode, W only has 5, none of which is in the written mode (see Appendix III). How are we to explain this difference when both codices date to ca. 1350 and both, moreover, reflect habits of usage that predate their scribes?<sup>74</sup>

Although the A-redaction is thought to be older on the whole (through its relation to the fragment Ƿ), Jón Helgason has argued that at places W's *Egils saga* preserves “more original readings” than M's,<sup>75</sup> so it is not possible to claim with absolute certainty that the formula usage as reflected by the M version of the saga (i.e., A-redaction) is older. At the same time, whatever other modernizing tendencies Jón Helgason found in M, they are extremely unlikely to have included the present formula. As already mentioned, like W's own scribe, M's too seems to have closely followed his exemplar: one only need compare the 9 *rita* instances in M's *Laxdæla saga* to 0 in its *Njáls saga* or on the whole more rigid usage of the formula in *Laxdæla* to the more plastic and varied one in *Egils saga* to appreciate that M's scribe could not have imposed his own personal habits of usage. If this is so, then perhaps A-redaction as represented by M could be allowed to retain its chronological advantage with respect to the formula's possible usage in the lost archetype, even if that advantage can only be slight.

An alternative explanation for the significantly lower number of the formula's instances in B-redaction may lie in its attested “tendency to abbreviate.”<sup>76</sup> One can easily imagine that, if faced with the task of con-

73. Louis-Jensen, “Dating the Archetype”, p. 138. Also see Scott, “Introduction,” in *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 10\*-11\*.

74. See notes 71 and 72.

75. See note 16.

76. Chesnutt, “English Summary,” in *A-Redaktionen*, p. lxxvi.

densing the saga, the narrative signposts, such as back-referring formulae, would be among the first things to go. However, while this may possibly account for the low number of instances in general, it does not explain the complete lack of the written-mode ones. Despite the two lacunae in W's *Egils saga*, all three places where in M we encounter written-mode instances are extant in W, thus enabling a comparison in the two redactions' attitudes toward the formula. The text around 1w is indeed condensed in W, and so this instance is likely to have fallen victim to abbreviation. However, in the other two places corresponding to M's written-mode instances 2 and 3, we find instead oral-mode alternatives *sem áðr var frá sagt* (43v) and *sem sagt var* (46v). Again, as in the case of M, W does not here reflect its scribe's own preferences concerning the usage of the formula, since it also evidences divergent/inconsistent usages of the formula in its two sagas.<sup>77</sup> Rather, we must take the data (both the "omission" of instances and conversion of the written to oral ones) to be characteristic of B-redaction of *Egils saga* at least from before 1350 (i.e., sometime in the first half of the fourteenth century), if not of the B archetype itself.

#### DISCUSSION OF THE MANUSCRIPT DATA: LATE MANUSCRIPTS

The later manuscripts show a further tendency toward the exclusion of the formula. Already, the late medieval C-redaction of *Egils saga*<sup>78</sup> features a unique omission with regard to the two older redactions, A and B (see 3w, Appendix III), while an eighteenth-century copy (ÍB 165 4to) of C's chief representative, K<sup>1</sup> (AM 462 4to), has an additional two (see 5o and 2w, Appendix III). On the other hand, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conflations of A- and B-redactions of the same saga, Lbs 1408 4to, Lbs 2963 4to, Lbs 1421 8vo ("Eyf 3"), and AM 560 d 4to,<sup>79</sup> leave out 8o (see Appendix III). Late seventeenth-century manuscripts of *Eyrbyggja saga*, AM 447 4to (\*C Class) and AM 112 8vo (\*C+B Class), both omit 5o, while the nineteenth-century ÍBR 2 4to in addition leaves out 2o and 3w (see Appendix II). Based on V's version of *Laxdæla saga* (Y-Class), the

77. See notes 71 and 72.

78. See the introduction to *Egils saga*'s three redactions, above. As noted there, the C-redaction is said to act as "an arbiter between A and B" (Chesnutt, "English Summary," in *C-Redaktioner*, p. lviii). With regard to the usage of our formula, this role is reflected in the fact that C accords well with B-redaction at the beginning, while toward the end of the saga, its usage patterns largely overlap with A. For more detail, see Appendix III.

79. Note that these conflations show a pattern of usage of the formula that is in opposite symmetry to C-redactions (see the previous note). While, save for the very first instance, in the first half of the saga they largely overlap with A, in the second half they seem to follow B's pattern of the formula usage.

nineteenth-century AM 129 4to omits instances 2w, 3w, and 4w, while in Lbs 232 fol., Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin seems to have initially omitted instance 9w while copying from his Z-Class exemplar. Later, as he emended the text according to the saga's Y-Class, he inserted the instance in question (see Appendix I). Finally, even though they do not really exhaust the list, I will mention again the nineteenth-century manuscripts of *Kormáks saga*, ÍB 368 4to and Lbs 143 4to, both of which omit the saga's sole written-mode instance.

What these omissions seem to be pointing to is an additional, later phase of the orality–literacy interface as reflected in the attitudes of scribes long steeped in the culture of writing, and in the case of very late manuscripts, print culture as well. In particular, in the latter manuscripts one notices two opposing tendencies, both most likely connected with the advent of the printing press. One of them is related to postmedieval scribes' ideas of textual fixity and a more reverent attitude toward authorship as such, which is reflected in the aspiration toward the printing-press-like, “content-insensitive”<sup>80</sup> copying. Unlike their medieval predecessors, these late scribes were more reluctant to change written-mode instances into oral-mode ones and *vice versa*. This tendency toward preservation is in some of these manuscripts taken even further as they manifest archaizing inclinations regarding the script, orthography, and other features of the exemplars. The second tendency that worked against these preservationist impulses appears to be of an aesthetic kind, perhaps tied to experiencing the sagas' formulaic expressions as clichés, empty phrases that performed no substantial narrative function and were felt as extraneous to the story. Thus their occasional omission was probably not regarded as a great transgression against the saga authors and earlier scribes. Still, in most cases, the first of these two embattled tendencies prevailed.

## CONCLUSIONS AND AFTERTHOUGHTS

From the above discussion emerge the following main points about the use of the oral and written modes of back- (or self-) referring formula in the sagas of Icelanders:

80. I have elsewhere proposed the distinction between content-sensitive and content-insensitive technologies of reproduction as a more fruitful one than that between the oral and the written. See in particular Slavica Ranković, “Oral-Written Continuum as a Space,” in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, ed. Slavica Ranković et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 39–71; and Slavica Ranković and Miloš Ranković, “The Talent of the Distributed Author,” in *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, ed. Slavica Ranković et al. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 2012), pp. 52–75.

1. The overwhelmingly larger number of oral- compared to written-mode instances in the ÍS (110: 19) and their more flexible application suggest that, by the time the sagas were being put on parchment, writing had become well internalized as a technology. In other words, there was not as much prestige to be gained from emphasizing the fact of writing alone, unlike what seems to have been the case with earlier texts in the vernacular, such as *Landnámabók* or the kings' sagas.
2. Even so, both the horizontal study of the formula instances across the standard editions of the sagas and the vertical manuscript study of four early sagas that contain the majority of the written-mode instances (*Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Kormáks saga*) show a compliance of the ÍS with the hypothesis that the earlier the text, the better the chance that it will contain written mode instances.
3. Apart from the chronology, genre also plays a vital role when it comes to understanding the ÍS's preference for the oral mode. In all likelihood, this mode better complied with the generic demands of the ÍS and their intermediary position with respect to the more historically inclined kings' sagas on the one hand and the more fictionally oriented *formaldarsögur* on the other. The oral mode of back-referring formula allowed the authors to imbue their stories with the air of the documentary/historiographical at no cost to the narrative flow.
4. Personal preferences of the writers and scribes, as well as the region in which they were based (or schooled), also suggest themselves as important factors in terms of the predilection for one or the other formula mode. It is probably not a coincidence that the three sagas with the largest number of written-mode instances—*Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Egils saga*—all originate in the west of Iceland, within the cultural domains of the Sturlungs. In particular, the examined evidence suggests that the former two sagas had a stronger preference for the written mode of the formula and featured a larger number of them than can be gleaned from the standard editions. This is perhaps not so surprising when taking into account that these two sagas are thought to originate within the same geographical, literary, and power spheres of influence of the famous lawman and author Sturla Þórðarson and are also often paired together in manuscripts on account of their overlapping events.
5. The manuscript evidence suggests that there were two waves of scribal-changing attitudes toward the formula. While early and late

medieval scribes tend to both convert the written-mode instances into oral-mode ones and/or omit the formula, post-seventeenth-century copiers either preserve the *status quo* or omit the formula altogether. I have argued above that this is probably due to the new interface dynamic brought about by the rise of print culture with its content-insensitive manner of textual reproduction, more reverent attitude toward authorship, and a growing aversion to the formulaic.

It is interesting to notice that some of the scribal attitudes and dilemmas discussed in this study seem to be shared by the present-day translators. Despite the current trend that in seeking a balance between faithfulness to source texts and free translation, the tendency is to lean slightly toward the former, saga translators nevertheless also choose to sometimes omit or rephrase our formula, or, more often, to convert written-mode instances into the oral-mode ones.<sup>81</sup> To take Keneva Kunz's translation of *Laxdæla saga* in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* as an example,<sup>82</sup> of the 9 written-mode instances, only 2 survive as such (6w and 7w),<sup>83</sup> and 5w is translated as "as previously described,"<sup>84</sup> with the connotations of the Latin root of the verb still keeping this instance within the written-mode variety. Of the remaining 6 instances, however, 1 has been omitted (1w),<sup>85</sup> 1 rephrased (2w),<sup>86</sup> and 4 (3w, 4w, 8w, and 9w) converted into oral mode: "as was previously mentioned" / "as was mentioned earlier."<sup>87</sup> Most likely, the present-day aesthetic expectations and sensibilities make the general reader experience the formula—especially its written mode—as a tad too obtrusive.

One general and quite frequent feature of modern-day usage of the back-referring formula is substitution of the temporal adverbs "before" and "earlier" with the spatial "above": "as mentioned above." Strictly speaking, the phrase is an oxymoron,<sup>88</sup> yet one rather revealing of our conceptualization of text in material terms, or more specifically, in terms of page lines. And although *er upp var talit* (as was said above) already appears in Reykjabók's version of *Njáls saga* (ca. 1300; 50v) this is a true

81. This in fact seems like a good way of striking the balance between being true to the source language and yet pleasing to the ear of the target linguistic community.

82. *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Keneva Kunz, in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson et al., V, 1–130.

83. *Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Kunz, pp. 33, 41.

84. *Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Kunz, p. 27.

85. *Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Kunz, p. 2.

86. *Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Kunz, p. 9.

87. *Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Kunz, pp. 9, 24, 47, 82.

88. I am grateful to Ilya Sverdlov for drawing my attention to this fact, following my presentation of a version of this paper at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds in July 2012.



exception indeed since, the manuscripts derived from this particular codex notwithstanding, no other version/manuscript of this or any other ÍS examined here features the phrase. However, its popularity in our own times suggests that, immersed as we are in the intense process of internalizing, experiencing the effects of, and experimenting with the newest communication technologies, the process of interface between the oral and the written is still at play, even as it is absorbed into the broader, more complex frameworks of multimedial interactions.

Appendix I: *Laxdæla saga*

Íf Ch; instance type & number	Y-Class	Y-Class	Z + Y-Class?	Z-Class	Z-Class
	M (ca. 1350) & *AM 126 fol. (1635–48)	V (ca. 1391–95)/ ÍB 225 Lbs 232 fol. (1800?) & *Subsequent Y-readings *S (ca. 1390–1400) <sup>1</sup>		E (ca. 1300) & *S (ca. 1390–1400) <sup>1</sup>	AM 158 fol. (1630–75) & *ÍB 226 4to (1680–99?)
Ch. 3: 1w	sem fyrr var ritat	sem fyrr segir	sem fyrr var getit *sem fyrr var ritat [“getit” struck through, “ritat” inserted]	sem fyrr var ? <sup>2</sup> *NA	sem fyrr var getit
Ch. 10: 2w	sem ritat var	sem ritat er *X	X *sem ritat var [added in the margin]	X *NA <sup>23</sup>	X
Ch. 10: 3w	sem fyrr var ritat	sem fyrr var ritat *X	sem fyrr var ritat *[no intervention]	sem fyrr var ritat *sem fyrr var getit NA	sem fyrr er ritat X
Ch. 20: 4w	sem fyrr var ritat *sem fyrr er ritat	sem fyrr segir *X	X *sem fyrr var ritat [added in the margin]		
Ch. 21: 5w	sem fyrr var ritat	sem fyrr var ritat	sem fyrr var sagt *[no intervention]	sem fyrr var sagt *NA	sem fyrr var sagt
Ch. 24: 6w	sem fyrr var ritat	sem fyrr segir	sem fyrr var ritat *sem fyrr var ritat [“sagt” struck through, “ritat” inserted]	NA	sem fyrr var sagt
Ch. 25: 1o	sem fyrr var sagt *sem fyrr var ritat	sem fyrr segir	sem fyrr er ritat *[no intervention]	NA	sem fyrr er ritat
Ch. 31: 7w	sem fyrr var ritat *sem fyrr er ritat	X *sem fyrr er ritat	X *sem fyrr er ritat [inserted]	X *NA	X

Ch. 34: 8w	sem fyrr var ritat	sem fyrr segir *sem áðr er sagt	sem fyrr [ʔ] <sup>4</sup> ritat *[no intervention]	NA	sem fyrr var ritat *sem fyrr er ritat
Ch. 40: 2o	sem fyrr váru nefndir	sem fyrr váru nefndir	er áðr váru nefndir	NA	er áðr váru nefndir
Ch. 52: 9w	*er fyrr váru nefndir sem fyrr var ritat	X *sem fyrr var ritat	*[no intervention] X	NA	*er fyrr váru nefndir sem fyrr var ritat *sem fyrr er ritat
Ch. 63: 3o	sem fyrr var sagt	sem fyrr var sagt	sem áðr váru talðir	NA	er áðr var sagt
Ch. 78: 4o	*er fyrr var frá sagt sem nú var frá sagt um hrið	*er fyrr var frá sagt sem nú var frá sagt um hrið	*[no intervention] sem nú hefir verit frá sagt um stund *[no intervention]	NA	*sem áðr er getit sem nú var frá sagt um hrið *sem nú hefir frá sagt (?) <sup>5</sup> um hrið
Ch. 79: 5o	nú var áðr frá sagt	nú var áðr frá sagt	nú var áðr frá sagt *[no intervention]	NA	NA [Bolla þátrr not in- cluded in Z]

#### Notes

1. Stockholm Kungliga Biblioteket, Manuscript Isl. perg. 8:o nr 10, IX.
2. The condition of this leaf of the manuscript is particularly bad, and the word that follows *var* (bottom of 1r) has unfortunately become obliterated.
3. One would expect to find this instance in S, since it normally appears in the same paragraph as 3w, which can be made out on 1r. However, strips from the two leaves that this manuscript consists of had been cut off, and it is generally in such a poor condition that it is illegible in many places. Therefore I cannot tell whether 2w was in the strip that had been cut off, was omitted as is characteristic for the Z-Class, or is so smudged that I cannot make it out.
4. Damaged spine, a word is missing here.
5. An illegible word, possibly *verit*. See 82r.

Appendix II: *Eyrbýggja saga*

Íf Ch; instance type & number	*C-Class V (ca. 1391-95)/ AM 448 4to (1686-88) & *Mel. (1380-1420)	*C-Class AM 447 4to (1655-1700) & *P.J.'s Mel. Readings <sup>1</sup>	*C-+B-Class? AM 112 8vo (1660-80) & *IBR 2 4 to (1819-20)	*B-Class W (ca. 1350) & *AM 158 fol. (1630-75) (ca. 1300)	*B-Class G (1498) & *E
Ch. 5: 1o	sem fyrr segir *sem fyrr var ritat sem fyrr var sagt *NA	sem fyrr segir *X sem fyrr var sagt *? <sup>2</sup>	sem fyrr segir *sem fyrr er ritat sem fyrr er ritat *X	NA *sem fyrr var ritat NA *X	sem fyrr var ritat *NA NA
Ch. 23: 3o	sem fyrr segir *NA	sem fyrr var sagt *?	um (?) fyrr er ritat *sem fyrr segir	sem fyrr var skrifat *NA	sem fyrr er ritat *NA
Ch. 25: 1w	sem fyrr er ritat	sem fyrr segir	um (?) fyrr segir	sem fyrr var ritat	fyrr er ritat *NA
Ch. 28: 2w	*[s]em fyrr var ritat sem fyrr er ritat	sem fyrr var ritat sem áðr er ritat	*sem fyrr var ritat sem áðr er ritat	er fyrr var ritat	sem fyrr var ritat *NA
Ch. 45: 4o	sem fyrr var frá horfit sem fyrr var sagt *NA	*sem fyrr var frá horfit sem fyrr var sagt *?	*sem fyrr er ritat er (?) fyrr var sagt *sem fyrr er sagt	sem fyrr var ritat sem nú var sagt	NA NA
Ch. 45: 5o	sem nú váru talðir	X	X	sem nú var sagt	NA
Ch. 60: 3w	sem fyrr var ritat *sem sagt var	*sem nú váru talðir sem fyrr var getit *X	sem fyrr var getit *X	sem fyrr var ritat	NA *sem sagt var
Ch. 64: 6o	sem nú váru sögð	sem nú váru sögð	sem nú váru sögð *enn þau nú varu <sup>3</sup>	sem nú váru sögð	NA

Notes

1. AM 447 4to was copied from ÍB 180 8vo by the young Þorsteinn Þórðarson. His father, séra Þórður Jónsson of Hitardalur, subsequently amended this copy so as to accord with Melabók. See Scott, "Introduction," in *Eyrbýggja Saga*, pp. 123\*-130\*.
2. Here, as well as in the rows relating to instances 3o and 4o, respectively, I entered a question mark to indicate that the reason why Þórður Jónsson had not intervened in these places cannot be determined. As he relied on the Melabók version of the saga that was more complete than what remains of it today (see Scott, "Introduction," in *Eyrbýggja Saga*, p. 3\*), neither "X" (indicating an omission either on the part of the Melabók scribe or Þórður himself), nor "NA" (indicating a lacuna) seemed appropriate.
3. An illegible word.

Appendix III: *Egils saga*

Íf Ch; instance type & number	A-Red. M (ca. 1350) & *AM 162 fol., frag. H (ca. 1450)	A+B-Red. Eyf 3 (1777, 1782, 1830) & *AM 560 d 4to (1707)	B-Red. W (c. 1350) & *AM 158 fol. (ca. 1650)	C-Red. K' (c. 1630) & *ÍB 165 4to (1778)
Ch. 21: 1o	sem fyrir sagt *NA	X	X	X
Ch. 23: 1w	svá sem fyrir var ritat *NA	svá sem fyrir var ritat *NA	X	X
Ch. 25: 2o	er fyrir var frá sagt *NA	er fyrir var frá sagt *NA	X	X
Ch. 30: 3o	er nú var frá sagt *NA	er nú var frá sagt *er fyrir var frá sagt	X	X
Ch. 36: 4o	er nú var frá sagt *NA	er fyrir var frá sagt *NA	er nú var um rétt!	er nú var frá sagt *er nú er frá sagt
Ch. 40: 5o	sem fyrir var sagt *NA	sem fyrir var sagt *NA	er fyrir var frá sagt <sup>2</sup>	sem nú er frá sagt *X
Ch. 54: 6o	er fyrir var frá sagt *X	er fyrir var frá sagt *X	X	X
Ch. 55: 2w	sem fyrir var ritat *svá sem áðr var sagt	sem fyrir er ritat *sem áðr var sagt	sem áðr var frá sagt	svá sem áðr er frá sagt *X
Ch. 57: 7o	er nú var sagt *er nú var frá sagt	X	X	X
Ch. 57: 3w	sem fyrir var ritat *sem sagt var	sem sagt er *sem sagt var	sem sagt var	X
Ch. 62: 8o	er fyrir var getit *NA	X	er fyrir var getit *sem fyrir var nefndit <sup>3</sup>	er fyrir var getit
Ch. 63: 9o	sem fyrir var sagt *NA	X	NA (blank space) <sup>4</sup> *X	sem fyrir var sagt *sem fyrir er sagt

(continued)

Appendix III: *Egils saga* (continued)

ÍF Ch; instance type & number	A-Red. M (ca. 1350) & *AM 162 fol., frag. H (ca. 1450)	A+B-Red. Eyf 3 (1777, 1782, 1830) & *AM 560 d 4to (1707)	B-Red. W (c. 1350) & *AM 158 fol. (ca. 1650)	C-Red. K' (c. 1630) & *ÍB 165 4to (1778)
Ch. 78: 10o	er nú var áðr frá sagt *NA	X	NA *X	er nú var frá sagt
Ch. 78: 11o	sem fyrr var frá sagt *NA	X	NA *X	sem áðr var frá sagt *áðr er frá sagt
Ch. 78: 12o	er fyrr var frá sagt *NA	X	NA *X	er fyrr var frá sagt *er fyrr [han við?] frá sagt [til góðs?]

Notes

1. So far as I am aware, this particular formulation is not to be found anywhere else and seems peculiar to W and the manuscripts that derive from it (e.g. AM 158 fol. [75v] and AM 459 4to [23r] both accord with W in this place, while AM 128 fol. has a lacuna in the part of the saga where oral-mode instances 4 and 5 occur). Unfortunately, I was unable to check AM 458 4to and AM 461 4to, which are direct copies of W. However, since AM 158 fol. and AM 459 4to are both copies of AM 458 4to, it is likely that the latter (and possibly AM 461 4to, too) also features the verb *veða* where all other redactions have the more common *segja*.
2. AM 459 4to (25v) here has instead *sem áðr var/er sagt*. This manuscript is not complete (it ends around ÍF edition's chap. 46), and thus the remaining instances of the formula cannot be checked.
3. This formulation is relatively rare although not unusual, and in the ÍF editions of the sagas of Icelanders, I have found another thirteen instances (in eight sagas), which is the number comparable to the instances featuring the verb *gíta* (seventeen in twelve sagas). However, in this precise context, this instance seems quite unique, since the redactions A and C, as well as another of W's descendants, AM 128 fol. (42v), all have *gíta* here. This may have been the scribe's own choice. It is also of interest to note that the conflated (A+B) manuscripts, which at least from the next formula instance on seem to follow B redaction, do not feature the formula at all. There seems to have been another group of B-redaction manuscripts (i.e., different from W's exemplar). It is possible that the "other sources" (see Jón Helgason, "Introduction," in *Saga Manuscript 9.10. Aug. 4to* . . . *Wolfenbüttel*, p. xi), which were used to make good the part of the story where the second lacuna in W's *Egils saga* occurs, are in fact from the same branch of the B redaction manuscripts as those used in the two conflations, given that from this point on, the conflations and W's descendants, AM 128 fol. and AM 158 fol., feature no instances of the formula. By contrast, both A and C redactions do.
4. The space is left precisely in the place where the formula should appear (see W 50v), although this may be a pure coincidence since the text that immediately follows is not to be found in either AM 158 fol. (86r) and AM 128 fol. (42v), which feature an abbreviated text here, nor indeed in the manuscripts of the A- and C-redactions examined here.