
Network analysis of the manuscript context of Old Icelandic literature

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Aim

This paper explores the possibilities of applying computer-assisted methods to the field of Nordic manuscript studies, with a special emphasis on a network analysis—in a broad sense—of manuscript context. A case study of one Icelandic legendary saga's manuscript tradition is used to test the hypothesis that the manuscript context can carry information about ethnic genre associations of the text (on ethnic genre in Old Norse literature see: Harris, 1975; on legendary sagas as a genre see: Quinn, 2006).

Research Questions

Hrómundar saga Gripssonar traditionally belongs in the corpus of legendary sagas (fornaldarsögur); it was included in the second volume of Rafn's (1829) *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*, and in Björner's (1737) *Nordiska kampa dater*. The saga as it is known today, however, is a post-medieval re-working of a metrical version of the story known as *rímur* (Brown, 1946), and is probably not much older than seventeenth century. Therefore it does not necessarily fit well with the other texts included in the corpus of legendary sagas, as they usually date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Driscoll, 2005:207). This makes *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* an interesting case study for investigations of the text's genre affiliation in the extant manuscripts preserving the saga. Does it appear frequently in manuscripts with the older legendary sagas or with younger *rímur*-based narratives? To answer this question, I first examine the manuscript context of legendary sagas as a corpus, based on collaborative research with Rowbotham and Wills (Kapitan et al., 2017); second, I examine the position of *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* within the corpus and its relationships with other texts.

State of the Art

Much discussion in the field of Old Norse studies centers on whether the legendary sagas deserve to be considered a separate literary genre, or should instead be analyzed as chivalric literature (Quinn, 2006). One of the main reasons for these considerations seems to be the fact that the term *fornaldarsögur* is not attested in the medieval texts; it was introduced in the early nineteenth century by C.C. Rafn, who published a collection of texts under the title *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda* (Rafn, 1829). Rafn's selection of texts and the definition of *fornaldarsögur* as a corpus of texts dealing with events taking place in Scandinavia before the settlement of Iceland, however, was not detached from previous scholarship of early eighteenth century (Lavender, 2015). The current discussion on the legendary sagas as a corpus (or a genre) is polarized around contradicting opinions. Some scholars suggest that the legendary sagas had to be considered a separate category in pre-modern period, because they are frequently bound together in the manuscripts (Guðmundsdóttir, 2001:cxlvii; Mitchell, 1991:21) while others, using the same argument, emphasize strong connections between the legendary sagas and the chivalric sagas (Driscoll, 2005:193). Additional problems arise when classifying the generic hybrids (Rowe 1993; 2004) appearing within the corpus, or distinguishing between the legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) and the late legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur síðari tíma*; Driscoll 2005). Even though scholars eagerly turn towards the manuscript context to support their claims regarding the genre classification, no comprehensive overview of the legendary sagas' codicological context has yet been presented. This gave rise to the project *Stories for all times* conducted at the University of Copenhagen, which created a complete catalogue of manuscripts preserving legendary sagas. The catalogue contains 818 TEI-conformant XML-based manuscript descriptions with over 8000 items, 1764 of which are classified as legendary sagas and 920 as chivalric sagas. This amount of data is much too large to be analyzed manually, therefore it is necessary to apply computer-assisted analysis in order to draw some general conclusions regarding this corpus and the relationships between these texts.

Methods

The first part of my paper, which aims to establish the position of *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* within the wider context of the manuscript, draws on the network analysis of the corpus, conducted in

collaboration with Rowbotham and Wills (Kapitan et al., 2017). There, the codicological context of a text was considered as a system of relationships between texts, and following Hall's (2013) approach in his network of chivalric sagas, texts were represented as nodes, manuscripts as edges, both visualized with the free visualization software Gephi. The second part is based on database queries aimed at obtaining detailed information about particular manuscripts and their contents. The main focus of the analysis was to examine the manuscripts preserving the complete texts of *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* in Icelandic, therefore the manuscripts containing excerpts and translations were ignored. The distribution of texts appearing frequently alongside *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* by century has been obtained using XPath queries of the online catalogue *Stories for all times*.

Main Findings

As a result of this research, the hypothesis can be confirmed: generally, texts belonging to one genre appear most frequently in manuscripts with other texts belonging to the same genre. However, an interesting transmission history of *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* suggests a close association of this saga with the late legendary sagas, and in particular *Bragða-Ölvis saga*. Both *Bragða-Ölvis saga* and *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* are post-medieval re-workings of older metric versions of the stories (rímur), and for both texts the manuscript AM 601 b 4to (Árni Magnússon Institute, Reykjavík) was suggested as the witness carrying the best text of the saga (Andrews, 1911; Brown, 1946; Hooper, 1934; Hooper, 1932). Even though *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* appears most frequently with texts classified as late legendary sagas in pre-1800 manuscripts, after 1800 the texts classified as (traditional) fornaldarsögur start to dominate. The late *Bragða-Ölvis saga* dominates the pre-1800 setting, but the distribution changes in the nineteenth century when *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, *Starkaðar saga gamla*, *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna*, and *Hálfs saga Hálfsreka* appear more frequently (as presented on figure below). *Starkaðar saga gamla* is a late-eighteenth century saga written by Snorri Björnson (1710-1803), utilizing traditional legendary motifs of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* and legendary sagas (Driscoll, 2009:209; Simek and Hermann Pálsson, 1987:331), so its co-occurrence with other legendary sagas starting from the eighteenth century onwards is not surprising. The three remaining texts that started to appear more frequently alongside *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* in

nineteenth-century manuscripts were all published in the same volume of Rafn's *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, in which *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* was published (volume II); likewise *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna*, and *Hálfs saga Hálfsreka* appeared in Björner's edition from 1737 together with *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*. This shows how printed editions influenced the saga's transmission in the manuscript form. A text, which once showed strong connections to another rímur-based narrative, became detached from its previous setting and gained new, print-influenced context after becoming part of printed editions.

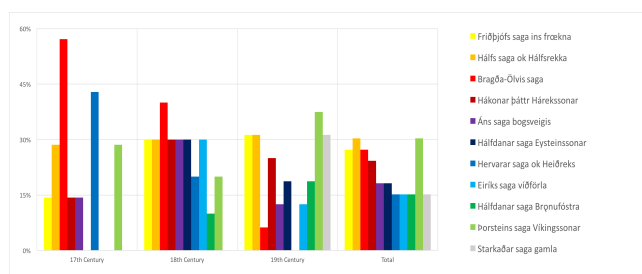


Figure 1. Texts appearing frequently with *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar* in manuscripts by century

Relevance

The topic of this paper fits in the advertised panel "Quantitative stylistics and philology, including big data and text mining studies," as it employs database quarrying and network analysis of significant amount of data.

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