

a short account of the settlement of Iceland with notices of the more important events, and accounts of the succession of lawmen and bishops, was written a few years later, though the form in which it has come down to us is that of an abbreviated text written about the year 1130. This work, the foundation of all subsequent historical writing in Iceland, contains some short notices, which apparently had been handed down by tradition, but these stories, usually known as sagas, would seem to have been written down somewhat later. Indeed until the close of the twelfth century the language employed for historical writings in Iceland, as elsewhere, was for the most part Latin.

Though the writing of the sagas did not begin until the latter part of the twelfth century, sagas in some form or other must have been in existence much earlier, carried on from generation to generation by oral tradition. This faculty of reciting sagas was a special characteristic of the Icelanders, by whom it was carefully cultivated. In the preface to his *Historia Danica* Saxo acknowledges his indebtedness to the "men of Thule," who "account it a delight to learn and to consign to remembrance the history of all nations, deeming it as great a glory to set forth the excellence of others as to display their own. Their stores, which are stocked with attestations of historical events, I have examined somewhat closely and have woven together no small portion of the present work by following their narrative."<sup>1</sup>

That the art of storytelling did not decline in Iceland even after the majority of the sagas were written down is

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<sup>1</sup>*The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus.* Translated by Oliver Elton (ed. by F. York Powell, p. 5). It is not clear whether Saxo had Icelandic manuscripts before him, but his words leave no doubt that he was aware of the fact that stories had been carried on by oral tradition.