Research article

A source within a source?

Using personal names as source material in the sagas of Icelanders

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The sagas of Icelanders contain a great wealth of personal names both of historical and fictional nature. Personal names function both as identifiers for individuals but also evoke associations that supersede the name's lexical or identifying meaning, for example, cultural or social associations such as age, ethnicity, and ideology. This article examines personal names as a source within a source and appraises the use of literary and socio-onomastics in the context of the Íslendingasögur using the example of the elusive difference between "Icelanders" and "Norwegians" in the sagas. The onomastic analysis is based on seven shorter tales and explores the differences in personal names in Icelandic and Norwegian individuals. Based on the onomastic data gathered, this article concludes that there are certain regional differences in name-giving visible in the sagas and that saga authors either had authentic onomastic material at hand or tried to emulate realistic personal names.

Islänningasagorna innehåller en stor mängd personnamn av både historisk och fiktiv karaktär. Personnamn fungerar både som identifierare för individer men väcker också associationer som överskuggar namnets lexikala eller identifierande betydelse, såsom kulturella eller sociala associationer som ålder, etnicitet och ideologi. I den här artikeln behandlas personnamn som en källa inom en källa. Även användningen av litterär onomastik och socioonomastik på Islänningasagorna evalueras genom att analysera den svårfångade skillnaden mellan "islänningar" och "norrmän" i sagorna. Den onomastiska analysen baseras på sju tåtar och utforskar skillnaderna i personnamn hos isländska och norska individer. Utifrån den onomastiska datan som samlats in drar artikeln slutsatsen att det finns vissa regionala skillnader i namngivning som är synliga i Islänningasagorna och att sagaförfattarna antingen hade autentiskt onomastiskt material till hands eller att de försökte efterlikna autentiska personnamn.

One of the first things a reader notices in the sagas of Icelanders is the recitals of genealogies. The sagas contain hundreds upon hundreds of personal names, and they are indicated as important to the saga authors. Both the narrators and characters of the sagas of Icelanders regularly allude to a distinction between "Icelanders" and "Norwegians". This article aims to study the personal names mentioned in a selection of shorter saga vignettes – *þættir* – in relation to the name-bearers' geographical origin. The working hypothesis for this article is that personal names bear collective cultural associations; therefore, it may be possible to detect differences in the personal names given to "Icelandic" and "Norwegian" individuals in the *Íslendingasögur*. In the following article, I try to answer these questions: Do the personal names given or used in the *Íslendingasögur* show differences in relation to the name-bearers' geographical origin and can those differences be corroborated from other sources? The corpus used in this study provides a representative sample through which I examine the personal names present in the *Íslendingasögur*. Thus, though I do not claim completeness regarding personal names used in the sagas, I aim to contribute to the larger discussion of

the use of socio-onomastics in the field of Old Norse studies.

Nomen est omen?

Personal names are a rich linguistic and cultural source and are significant in everyday life. Primarily used to *uniquely* identify an individual, personal names are monoreferential, which makes them different from other word classes in language (Aldrin 2011: 26). Personal names do not only have a specific linguistic function; they also carry implications for the social and cultural sphere, as well as for the individual and collective identity of bearer and users of names (Bertills 2003: 18–19; Aldrin 2011: 27). While earlier scholars presumed that names bore no meaning beyond their grammatical function, most scholars today acknowledge the semantic, associative and identity-building and identity-confirming content of personal names (Bertills 2003: 27; Gustafsson 2016: 35). As a part of sociolinguistics, socio-onomastics focuses on the social aspects of name-giving and name-using (Aldrin 2011: 22), since "names are always born in the interaction between people, the linguistic community, and the environment" (Ainiala 2016: 371). Apart from the personal name's appellative function, it informs the community about the name-bearers as an individual and as part of a community (Ainiala & Östman 2017: 3–4). While most names certainly were selected or formed due to their semantic and lexical meaning, the information that can be gained from names is not limited to this (Ainiala & Östman 2017: 5). Onomasticians have argued that the focus on the semantic content or the appellative function of a name is not sufficient, as names "function as a kind of 'magnet' for other meanings" (Bertills 2003: 28). Names evoke associations in the name-users that are neither dependant on the semantic content nor the appellative function of the name. These associations could, for example, be the gender, age, or cultural belonging of the name-bearer, as well as ideological associations (Bertills 2003: 29; Aldrin 2011: 27). Names can therefore be significant for the feeling of shared identity within groups as they function as group markers and often contain a symbolic value for the group that extends beyond the appellative function or semantic content of the personal name.

Most onomastic research concerning saga literature has been dedicated to the study of nicknames due to their obvious appellative function, their undeniably strong role in Norse society and the fact that the sagas often feature explanatory sequences on the nicknames.[1] Some researchers have examined the personal names of smaller groups within Norse society, though this investigation often extends beyond the saga material. This research includes Hermann Pálsson's work on Celtic individuals and their names in Iceland (Pálsson 1996) or Stefan Brink's chapter

on slave names in his recent book (Brink 2021). Since the sagas clearly make a distinction between "Icelanders" and "Norwegians", my study focuses on the regional associations that the personal names of individuals of either group may evoke in their linguistic community.

Apart from social or cultural associations, names also evoke more subjective associations based on personal experience and knowledge (Bertills 2003: 32). These subjective connotations (sometimes evoked by phonetic, semantic or orthographic aspects, sometimes by subjective social experiences) are especially significant in the context of literary onomastics or the study of otherwise fictive characters and names (Bertills 2003: 33). In literature, characters and their names become a part of a pre-conceived narrative. Therefore, both characters and their names gain an additional dimension as they are not only a reflection of a social and cultural group but are subjected to more or less conscious world-, narrative-, and character-building. According to Bertills, many names in literature are either selected or created with the specific characteristics and literary function of the name-bearer in mind (Bertills 2003: 27). In this process, the author relies on both societal and cultural conventions, as well as their own knowledge of and association with specific names. The naming of a fictive character is therefore formative in a way that the naming of real individuals cannot be. Authors of realistic imaginative literature will typically choose conventional names from a known *onomasticon*, a mental name repository, to emulate life-like characters, while authors of fantasy literature might choose to invent names to set their characters distinctly apart from realistic ones (Bertills 2003: 41). Names that have a common association within a community or an obvious lexical meaning may be used to "shape" the character for the readers.

Saga literature is situated on the border between historical writing and fictional literature, featuring authentic historical characters next to fictional characters. Further research is needed to explore literary name-giving in the sagas, which unfortunately goes beyond the scope of this article. This study assumes that, while this amalgamation of historical and fictional in the sagas can mean that the verifiably correct personal names of historical figures stand side by side with potentially fictional individuals, saga writers either used correct personal names that were known to them or tried to emulate realistic personal names befitting the characters bearing them.

Material

The *Íslendingasögur* are Old West Norse literary works with plots mostly set in Iceland during or shortly after the period of settlement in Iceland, approximately between 900 and 1050 (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 206). Most characters in the sagas came to Iceland or were born in Iceland, hence the term *Íslendingasögur* – sagas of Icelanders. While the greater part of most *Íslendingasögurs* plots takes place in Iceland, shorter passages accompanying wayfarers' travels to Europe,

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[1] Here, Paul Peterson (2015), Kendra Willson (2007), Agneta Ney (2008) and Diana Whaley (1993) must be named, amongst others.

mostly Norway, are not uncommon (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 206). The accepted corpus of *Íslendingasögur* consists of 40 sagas and an equal number of shorter tales called *þættir*, which function either as vignettes to longer sagas or as shorter independent narratives (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 374).

While dating the *Íslendingasögur* is a highly disputed topic and academic opinion has undergone drastic changes, most sagas were written down or composed in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 207). While some saga narratives were surely transmitted orally or written down earlier, the corresponding manuscripts were lost, and this discrepancy between narrated time and the time of the writing of the sagas constitutes a gap of at least 150 years. Feuds and scheming by Icelandic power brokers, in combination with changing Norwegian political influence in Iceland, led to the decline of the Icelandic Commonwealth. During the time of the composition of the sagas, Iceland stood on the brink of or had already been politically incorporated into Norway.[2] This makes the *Íslendingasögur* a compelling source for the perceived relationship between "Icelanders" and "Norwegians" from the perspective of the Icelandic saga authors. While this relationship cannot be explored in greater detail here, this article aims to explore possible visible differences between the two groups in the saga literature. The sagas often allude to a distinction between "Icelanders" and "Norwegians", for example, by stating that on a ship's crew "váru þar á fáir menn aðrir en íslenzkir" ("there were few other men than Icelanders[3]" ["*Ǫgmundar þáttr dytts*"]) (Kristjánsson 1956: 102) or referring to "norrœnir men" ("Nordic/Norwegian men" ["*Ǫgmundar þáttr dytts*"]) (Kristjánsson 1956: 102). It can, therefore, be established that the saga writers stressed the distinction of the groups. The following onomastic analysis explores whether this distinction also extends to personal names.

Data and method

The onomastic dataset in this study was collected from seven *þættir*, which were selected because their narrative partly or completely takes place in what today is Norway. This selection encompasses narratives with more fantastical features, as well as narratives that seem more historically accurate. The *þættir* chosen range in age and are penned by several authors who are mostly anonymous. In detail, the selection consists of:

1. *Ögmundar þáttr dytts (Ög.)*, which was most likely composed before the middle of the thirteenth century (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 286),

2. *Odds þáttr Ófeigssonar (Odd.)*, which is dated to the early thirteenth century,
3. *Þorgríms þáttr Hallasonar (Hall.)*, which is also, though more vaguely, dated to the thirteenth century (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 385),
4. *Þorvalds þáttr tasalda (Tas.)* from the end of the thirteenth century (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 397),
5. *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr (Gull.)*, which exists as an earlier independent version on paper as well as in the parchment manuscripts *Morkinskinna, Hulda* and *Hrokkinskinna* that do not differ in the personal names mentioned (Jóhannesson 1950: CXIV),
6. *Gísl þáttr Illugasonar (GIll.)*, which exists in an older version in Latin by Gunnlaugr Leifsson shortly after 1201 and a younger Icelandic version from the manuscript *Hrokkinskinna* which was used here (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 116),
7. *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts (Uxa.)*, which is the youngest *þáttr* considered for this onomastic study, dating to the fourteenth century, though it follows in part the older Landnámabók (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 396).

The onomastic data was compiled manually, verifying that the named characters were either Icelandic or "Norwegian", for example, by usage of expressions such as "íslenzkir" or "norrœnir", or by implicit identification based on the context. This context could, for example, consist of the denotation of the individual's family as "Icelandic" or "Norwegian", or the mention of the individual's family holding land in either Norway or Iceland. Personal names of individuals that could not reliably be identified as either "Icelandic" or "Norwegian" from the context, such as *Ásbjörn kastanrazi*[4] or *Kolbjörn sneypir*, both in *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, were disregarded in the compilation. *Þorvalds þáttr tasalda* included individuals from *Opplǫnd*, in what now is Sweden. The names of these characters were consequently disregarded. Individuals that cannot be fully considered human, such as *trǫll,* constitute a special case. The term *trǫll*'s precise meaning and potentially paranormal implications is debated[5]. However, the description of the individuals in question in *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* seems to allude to paranormal qualities, which led to the decision to disregard the personal names of these characters in this case study.

The personal names of kings mentioned in the *þættir* were also excluded, as royal dynastic naming traditions differed from the personal names given to individuals of other social standings. In particular, this concerns personal names that may be derived from titles attributed to individuals of royal descent or significant social standing, such as *Magnus* or *Haraldr*; the latter is usually

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[2] Sverrir Jakobsson (2021) has argued against the common assumption that Iceland only became a part of Norway following the adoption of The Old Covenant in 1262 and demonstrates instead that the incorporation of Iceland into the Norwegian Realm was an ongoing process with formative developments taking place between 1220 and 1281.

[3] All translations are my own if not stated otherwise.

[4] All personal names are italicized and follow the form FORENAME + BYNAME if a byname is given.

[5] Old Norse scholars, with Ármann Jakobsson leading the way have attempted to outline the meaning of the term *trǫll* and found distinct categories of human and paranormal beings denoted with this term. (Jakobsson 2008), (Jakobsson 2011).

assumed to stem from the title for a leading military position (Janzén 1947: 78, 127; Kvaran 2011: 273).

The dataset also only includes those names of individuals, who, according to the *þættir*, were born in Iceland, since it could not reasonably be assumed that the personal names attributed to the time of Iceland's Norse settlement should be different for "Icelandic" or "Norwegian" individuals. This mostly applies to the first part of *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts* which closely follows the *Landnámabók,* which details the first Nordic settlers' travels to Iceland and the establishment of settlements there (Simek & Pálsson 2007: 396). The dataset therefore only includes individuals who, according to the *þættir*, were born in Iceland. These genealogies are occasionally delivered in the form of patronyms. To enlarge the onomastic data, these patronyms were resolved into the original personal names and patronymical markers and the fathers' names are included in the data if it was possible to ensure that the name in question belonged to an individual who could be identified as "Icelandic" or "Norwegian". Some characters appear in more than one *þáttr* but since they referred to one individual, the names were only counted once for every individual as to not distort the dataset.

The onomastic material at hand only discloses the names of six female characters, of which one is mentioned to originate from *Opplǫnd*, which left five usable female names. In light of the limited amount of data pertaining to females, this study focuses only on the male names.

In summary, the onomastic dataset is comprised of the personal names of identifiably human male characters who are described as either "Icelandic" or "Norwegian" and who, according to the *Íslendingasögur*, lived after the first settlement of Iceland. These parameters left the onomastic data at 66 different names, 30 of which were identified as "Icelandic" and 36 as "Norwegian".

Analysis and discussion

Table 1 shows the 66 individual male personal names listed alphabetically; numbers in parentheses indicate the number of different name-bearers; nicknames – if given – are added in italics. The *þættir* that contain the individual names are given with their shortened titles as introduced previously. In case the bearers of the same personal name were introduced in combination with a nickname, these nicknames are listed in brackets. Two personal names that are marked with an asterisk, *Ófeigr* and *Vigfuss* were included in the dataset as they are exceptional in their narratological use within *Gísls þáttr Illugasonar*; they were used according to their lexical meaning. In this instance, the saga's main character Gísl exclaims while evading his enemies: "Hét ek Vígfúss í morgin, en í kveld væni ek, at ek heita Ófeigr." (Jónsson & Nordal 1938: 333) ("This morning I was called Vígfúss but tonight I wish to be called Ófeigr"). Gísl not only gives himself new names in this episode but also clearly alludes to the lexical meaning of these

Table 1: ADD CAPTION

Icelander	Norwegian
Bjarni (Hall.)	Árni (Hall.)
Eyjólfr *hrúga* (Ög., Tas.)	Björn (Uxa.)
Galti *inn sterki* (Hall.)	Brunnólfr (Uxa.)
Geitir (Uxa.)	Brynjúlfr (Uxa.)
Gísl (GIll.)	Einarr (2) [*þambarskelfir*] [*fluga*] (Uxa., Odd.)
Gizurr (GIll.)	Eindriði (2) [*ilbreiðr*] (Uxa.)
Víga- Glúmr (Ög., Tas.,)	Erling *hersir* (Uxa.)
Hallbjörn *skefill* (Hall.)	Freysteinn *inn fagri* (Uxa.)
Halli (Hall.)	Gjafvaldr (GIll.)
Hrafn (Ög.)	Grímkell (Uxa.)
Illugi (3) [*svarti*] (GIll., Hall.)	Gunnarr *helmingr* (Ög.)
Jón (GIll.)	Hallvarðr *háls* (Ög.)
Kolgrímr *inn litli* (Hall.)	Helgi (Tas.)
Krummr (Uxa.)	Hreiðar (Uxa.)
Oddr (Odd.)	Hrani (Gull.)
Ófeigr* (GIll.)	Hákon (GIll.)
Skíða (Odd.)	Hárekr (2) (Uxa., Odd.)
Steingrimr *i Sigluvik* (Ög.)	Ingimarr *af Aski* (Gull.)
Teitr (GIll.)	Ívarr *ljómi* (Uxa.)
Tindr (GIll.)	Jón (Gull.)
Vémundr (Uxa.)	Kolli (GIll.)
Veturliði (Uxa.)	Klyppr *hersir* (Uxa.)
Vígfuss*1 (2) [*Hersir*] (Ög., GIll.)	Kálfr (Hall.)
Ásbjörn (2) (Uxa., Hall.)	*Járn*-Skeggja *af Yrjum* (Uxa.)
Ögmundr (2) [*dytts*] (Ög., GIll.)	Sigurðr (4) [*ullstrengr*] (Ög., Tas., GIll., Gull.)
Þórðr (2) (Hall., Gull.)	Sokki *víkingr* (Uxa.)
Þorgrímr (Hall.)	Sóni (GIll.)
Þorkell (Uxa.)	Styrkárr (Uxa.)
Þorsteinn (3) [*uxafót*] (GIll., Uxa.)	Vestar (Uxa.)
Þorvaldr (3) [*tasaldi*] (Ög., Tas., GIll.)	Viðkunnr (Gull.)
	Ásbjörn (2) (Uxa.)
	Þorgeirr (Uxa.)
	Þorkell (Uxa.)
	Þórir *hundr* (Odd.)
	Þormodr (GIll.)
	Þorsteinn (Odd.)

assuredly fictitious names. Jesch translates these names as "Eager-to kill" and "Not-doomed-to-die" respectively (Jesch 1997: 438), names which are undoubtedly used as a narratological device in this *þáttr*. While this *þáttr*-episode does not shed any light on differences in naming traditions in Iceland and Norway, this utterance shows that the saga authors were aware of the lexical meaning of certain names and utilised the meanings as a device to further the narrative.

The data show a clear dominance of personal names with the component *Þór*-, as 15 of the 66 names contain this element. The frequency of this name component is not surprising, as it was extraordinarily popular both during the Viking age and post-Christianisation period, which begins in the year 1000 in Iceland (Janzén 1947: 94). The frequency of the *Þór*-component is

noticeably higher in Icelandic individuals, with 10 of the 15 names containing the component. Here, the names *Þorsteinn* and *Þorvaldr* stand out clearly, with three bearers each. That names with a *Þór*-component might have been less frequently used in Norway than in Iceland – at least during the fourteenth century – is also corroborated by the name statistics compiled from Norwegian records from 1337-50, where only five names containing this element are to be found among the 40 most frequently used names (Kruken & Stemshaug 2013: 620).

With four name-bearers, *Sigurðr* is the most frequently used name for "Norwegian" individuals, without any Icelandic bearers in the dataset. According to Kruken and Stemshaug (2013: 505), *Sigurðr* was the most common name in Norway until the middle of the fourteenth century, which is also reflected in the usage of the name in the *þættir* analysed. Hermann Pálsson (1960: 141) states that *Sigurðr* was a common name in Iceland since the first settlement of Iceland, though this is not reflected in the dataset at hand.

Several names of "Icelanders" seem to have been commonly used, as *Illugi*, *Þorsteinn* and *Þorvaldr* were found to have three name-bearers each. Initially used as a nickname rather than a first name, *Illugi* became a first name, probably as a result of repeated naming after relatives (Janzén 1947: 49). As nicknames seem to – at least initially – have been used within families, this might explain regional differences in the usage of the name following the development of the nickname into a first name.

A regional difference in usage is also evident in the name *Vígfúss*. As already mentioned, this name is used lexically in one instance, but notably is also recorded with two additional non-lexical usages for "Icelandic" individuals. Assar Janzén (1947: 126) states that *Vígfúss* was commonly used in Iceland from the early tenth century onwards, while it was rarely found in Norway with the earliest record from 1297. This is reflected in the names found in the *þættir*, as all name-bearers are "Icelandic" individuals.

No difference in usage is detectable in the case of the name *Ásbjörn*. With two "Norwegian" bearers, it is one of the more commonly used names, which does not differ from the usage for "Icelandic" individuals, also with two bearers. Therefore, it is one of the most common names in this dataset and seems to hold no indication of a regional difference in usage.

The name *Einarr*, which has only two "Norwegian" name-bearers, was relatively common in Norway between 1337 and 1350 and is also mentioned as the name of several individuals in Landnámabók, hence it appears to have been a common name in both Norway and Iceland during different periods (Janzén 1947: 28; Kruken & Stemshaug 2013: 620).

Two "Norwegian" name-bearers each are found for the names *Eindriði* and *Hárekr*. Herman Pálsson states that while the name *Hárekr* was known in Iceland from the times of the settlement, it was rarely used in Iceland, which corresponds with finding only two "Norwegian"

individuals in my data (Hermann Pálsson 1960: 96). According to Kruken and Stemshaug, *Eindriði* was one of the more common names between 1337 and 1350, which is reflected in the *þættir* (Kruken & Stemshaug 2013: 620).

While these names are the most frequently used in the dataset, other names with only one bearer also seem to be in line with previous research on regional differences in naming. Here, the "Norwegian" names *Hákon* and *Hallvarðr* serve as examples. According to Janzén (1947: 28), *Hákon* was rarely used in Iceland but frequently used in Norway where it was also used as a royal dynastic name, which Kruken and Stemshaug (2013: 257/620) confirm. Similarly, *Hallvarðr* was a popular name during the Middle Ages in Norway, specifically in Austlandet, as Hallvarðr Vebjørnsson (died ca. 1050) was and is Oslo's patron saint (Kruken & Stemshaug 2013: 220).

Conclusion

Certain names appear to have been tied to specific regions or locally important individuals or families and may therefore offer insights into the regional name-giving practices in Norway and Iceland. The dataset used in this case study is certainly not large enough and would have to be expanded upon to draw more definitive conclusions about the naming practices in Iceland and Norway between the time of the sagas' storylines and the saga writing age. However, most names found in the analysed *þættir* seem to correspond with the findings of previous research on naming differences across Scandinavia. Some names appear to have held some associations linked to regional differences that contemporaries certainly would have been aware of. Thus, personal names with a *Þór*-component appear to have been more prevalent in Iceland, as well as the names *Vígfúss* and *Illugi*, while other names, such as *Sigurðr*, *Hárekr*, *Hákon* and *Hallvarðr*, seem to have been more strongly connected to Norwegian name-giving traditions. It can therefore be concluded that there indeed seem to have been differences in regional associations of personal names that translate into differences in names given in Norway and Iceland. Since these name differences can be corroborated by other sources and previous research, it appears most likely that the personal names in the *þættir* used by the saga authors were indeed either correct or fashioned to emulate realistic personal names. This study leaves several avenues to explore in future research with preferably expanded datasets: Are these differences in personal names more or less visible in a dataset containing more or indeed all *Íslendingasögur*? Is it then possible to identify individuals as belonging to a certain regional group based on their personal names? Is it possible to further explore the question of the historicity of the *Íslendingasögur* by examining the historical name-giving practices and the literary

onomastic choices made by the saga authors? While this article ends with more questions than it started, I hope that it can broaden the discussion of onomastic research in the field of Old Norse studies.

Author Bio

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