

Culture Work



Folklore for the Public Good

Edited by

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Translating Context with Digital Media in Medieval Icelandic Literature

Hrafnkels saga and the eSaga Project

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Medieval Icelandic literature is challenging to teach because it is challenging to read. Even in translation, medieval sagas of Viking Age heroes are dense and unforgiving. The number of characters one must keep track of boggles the mind, as does the foreign geography, which plays such a fundamental and meaningful part of the storytelling. All these names inevitably dissolve into a mental soup of characters and places named Thor-this and Thor-that.¹ Meanwhile, the story—a nuanced and poetic commentary on justice, who has access to it, and how the intersections of race, gender, class, religion, and privilege affect that access—goes by wholly unappreciated. New readers do not know who is who, where the characters are, and what the rules and social norms are of this society they have only just encountered, and why seemingly minor transgressions can spiral into cyclones of homicidal violence. However, those who spend a decade studying the sagas come to love them, to recognize each and every Thor by name, to track their travels over heath and moor, to comprehend the machinations of their complex feuds, and to cherish the sagas' deeper themes and insightful lessons. The question is: how does one teach Iceland's medieval literature to someone who hasn't got a decade to spare? What if, as is the case in many college classrooms, you have only one week? Or, as is often the case with the public, you have no time at all?

My first teaching job was as a graduate assistant for a large survey course on Scandinavian literature from 1200 to 1900. Each week, the lecturer led students through a half century of literary history while I taught a small section of students basic literary analysis. I became frustrated when I did not have enough class time to give my students all the tools necessary to critically engage with one of our first texts, *The Saga of Hrafnkell Freysgoði*. My students struggled at both the level of *text*—who's who and where's what—and the level of *context*—why the characters did what, and how the text wants the reader to feel about what was done. But there was no time to answer all their questions; at the end of the week, we moved onto the next unit and onto the next fifty years of literary history.

My students' frustrations were the same frustrations experienced by any member of the public who picks a medieval text off the "folklore and mythology" shelf of the local bookstore.

Part and parcel of the lack of textual and contextual understanding of any new reader is an unfamiliarity with the medieval experience of reading. Whereas today reading is generally a solitary and silent experience, reading in the Middle Ages was typically a communal and vocal one (Crosby 1936; Bäuml 1980, 245; Clover 1982, 188–204). An audience would have *listened* to someone else read a saga aloud. The experience was a performative event in which both the reader and the audience contributed to the meaning of the text through performance: the reader by interpreting the text and conveying that interpretation through pacing, volume, affect, and so on; and the audience by reacting to the text as performed by the reader.

One reason newcomers get so easily lost while reading the Icelandic sagas is that the sagas were written for an audience with an insider's knowledge. The sagas therefore lack the kind of contextual clues necessary to explain historical figures, geographies, social norms, and narrative conventions within the text. If only readers today could sit in on a medieval reading, they might not need the text to explain its every detail to them—they might instead glean all the context they needed from the audience beside them. When an audience laughs, cries, or cheers, their reactions signal something about how and why the words of the text are significant. For example, when an imagined medieval Icelandic audience hears that a character has put on *blá klæði* (dark clothes), it immediately falls silent. This happens because “dark clothes” create suspense. The audience, with its insider's knowledge, knows that dark clothes are a narrative device; these words foreshadow that the wearer is on their way to slay an enemy. Such insider knowledge is fundamental to understanding and appreciating the narrative art of the saga; without it, the modern reader may be more distracted than engaged by what otherwise appears to be an irrelevant and ambiguous detail of fashion. But without such an audience alive today to accompany a text and convey its context to first-time readers, how might one craft a text-based narrative experience that would mimic the medieval experience of performance? Surely such an experience would improve the public's ability to appreciate this specific genre of medieval folklore and possibly assist other folklorists in the public presentation of their work.

FOLKLORE AND SAGA STUDIES

Folklorists have long wrestled with how to translate performance to text without losing context and with how to translate one cultural context to another audience. In the case of medieval Icelandic literature, very little context is recorded. Most sagas were written by anonymous scribes who did not date their works, name their patrons, or record their locations. Many of these sagas survive today only as copies of copies of the originals, which are bound into collections of other works, where the context of their creation and use in the Middle Ages is further obscured. How a text was formed and what influences fed into its creation are important questions for the folklorist to ask and vital to answer when investigating historical texts. Most saga scholars now ascribe to what is called the New Traditionalist school, which claims that the sagas are both historiography and narrative art, based on a mix of oral and literary traditions. The challenge, as Carol Clover notes, is defining how that oral tradition operated and how it gave rise to the texts we have today (1986, 37).

Clover coined the term “immanent whole” to refer to an entire epic that is common knowledge to both performer and audience (1986). When oral epics were recorded by

folklorists, Clover notes, storytellers were asked to recite the entire epic from beginning to end, a task they were capable of doing but never actually did in performance. Applying this model to the Icelandic case, Clover revived the *þáttir* (episode) theory, which postulated that the sagas existed in the preliterate stage as short folktales that were later cobbled together into longer, written narratives. Clover modifies the theory by proposing that "a whole saga existed at the preliterate stage not as a performed but as an immanent or potential entity, a collectively envisaged 'whole' to which performed parts of *þáttir* of various sizes and shapes were understood to belong, no matter what the sequence or the frequency of the presentation" (1986, 34). The narrative events of a saga are only a fraction of what was known and expected to be known, orally or as background knowledge, by saga writers, readers, and audiences alike.

Audience participation and the immanent nature of storytelling in groups is evident in contemporary examples of oral culture as well. Susan Kalcik introduces the term "kernel story" in her analysis of personal narratives in women's support groups (1975). The kernel story might be referenced in conversation or, if invited, told in full. Listeners in the support groups were already familiar with the stories and, depending on their interest, would invite the storyteller to tell them anew. Kalcik's observations demonstrate that even in a variety of storytelling environments, storytellers shape the story by length and structure contingent on contextual needs, such as audience interest. The more intimately the storyteller knows their audience, the more freedom the storyteller has to draw on shared contextual "resources" (Watson and Potter 1962). In other words, the more knowledge of cultural references the storyteller and audience share, the greater the immanent tradition for the oral storyteller to draw upon and manipulate in performance.

Gísli Sigurðsson applied the concept of immanence to the sagas of eastern Iceland and has convincingly argued for an extensive immanent oral culture out of which came Iceland's sagas (2004, 2008). In one example, Gísli examines the character of Þorkell Geitisson, who appears briefly in multiple sagas, at different stages in his life. His character is portrayed consistently in all of these episodes as a wise, peace-loving chieftain who nevertheless often comes out on bottom in contests. Gísli demonstrates that these consistent episodes could not have been generated by one literary work influencing another and that the collection of them together could be told as a rather coherent saga of the man's life. Even though no such textual saga exists, it seems convincing from the available texts that each time a writer included Þorkell Geitisson in a narrative, they were tapping into an immanent saga of the man's life.

Þorkell Geitisson's written name, then, functions as one of Kalcik's kernels. Saga writers dropped Þorkell's name into various manuscripts without any contextualization because they were confident that his life story was well known to their cultural contemporaries. If a medieval reader knew the immanent whole of Þorkell's life—or at least the immanent gist—then who is to say that the medieval reader might not have gone off script while reading to tell Þorkell's story from his own memory, in short or in full, depending on the audience's invitation? Audience participation, or intervention, of course varies from culture to culture, but in many parts of medieval Europe, discussing a text while one read it aloud was a familiar form of education for the elite (Crosby 1936).² In the medieval con-

text, the text is not merely a product of the oral tradition but an object used in performance and therefore part of a process of continuing oral tradition. The text supports and is supported by a vast oral tradition whose immanence in performance lends meaning to each written kernel.

TRANSLATING CONTEXT WITH DIGITAL MEDIA

In our present context, however, the text is all that remains. To understand the text today in its medieval context, Gísli builds an immanent saga of Þorkell's life through comparative reconstruction—he reads every medieval text that mentions Þorkell, compares them, and reconstructs what might have been popular knowledge at the time. This is the same method scholars use to recognize other kernels and interpret the meaning behind a narrative device like “dark clothes” (Ranković 2013). Not only is the trope recognizable in other sagas, but the color itself is recognizable in myth and poetry as the color of carrion birds and the goddess of death, Hel (Wolf 2006). The weight of this symbolism and its effect on the saga narrative is, of course, dependent on the immanence of these myths and poems in the reader's mind. But their meaning is further expanded with the knowledge that dark clothes were expensive clothes, requiring vast amounts of expensive blue dyes to create. These associations not only add to the foreshadowing that the wearer intends to kill someone but also suggest that the wearer is proud of their homicidal mission, having donned their best clothes for the occasion. It is one of many potent images in any saga that should spring to mind in every reader or listener, but this great layering of hidden meanings is unlocked today only by reading the entire corpus of medieval Icelandic literature—every saga, every poem, every myth, every homily, and every chronicle. Only then can the modern reader begin to approach the text with anything resembling the medieval audiences' oral knowledge of the immanent context. This necessity to read everything is the *reader's imperative*, to paraphrase John Miles Foley (1991, 53ff.). This pursuit is what scholars dedicate their lives to, but either pedagogically or as an expectation to place upon the public, it is a disaster. The beginner has no hope of understanding even the first sentence until they have finished reading the entire corpus. Instead of the *reader's imperative*, I see it as the *scholar's imperative* to put their expertise to use and provide first-time readers with this context in saga translations. But with so much context and even different types of context to provide, the scholar is quickly confronted with the challenge of how best to provide it. The textual medium is limited both by the types of information it can communicate and by how it communicates them. Flipping back and forth between endless endnotes, for example, disrupts the reader's experience of a text.

Digital media offer more possibilities than print media to handle the fundamental problem of how to translate context. First, digital media are unbound by the cost of the printed page, allowing for more color, more images, and more design possibilities for presentation and layout. More color and more images mean more opportunities for context, and more design possibilities for presentation and layout mean more options for effective communication of that context. Second, digital media allow for the inclusion of contextual elements not possible in print. Audio, video, and interactive maps can combine to produce a multi-modal text capable of communicating context through different media. Third, digital media

allow for a level of interaction between texts through hyperlinks that simply is not possible with print media. In *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, Foley (2012) finds structural similarities between narrative experiences online and in person and contrasts them with narrative experiences of printed texts. Whereas a printed novel or saga has a definite beginning, middle, and end—and therefore an intended reading order—there is no right or wrong order to navigate a website or to have a conversation. Endnotes upset the reader of a printed text because they upset the hierarchy of the text. Hyperlinks, by contrast, do not upset the Web user because there is no hierarchy to subvert. Hyperlinks are not deviations from an intended path; they are the path itself, ever branching, emergent, nonlinear, and sometimes circular. Web 2.0 is built upon the shared authorship of user-generated content that is constantly being uploaded and therefore constantly changing. Unlike a static printed text, both the path one takes through websites like Wikipedia and YouTube and the content one finds there will never be the same twice. Just as every oral performance is unique, so too is every experience online. While the Internet is not the same as oral tradition, it can mimic it, and that potential can be used to modify a saga to make the digital experience mimic the medieval experience.

In order to better introduce *Hrafnkels saga* to nonspecialists, I decided that an ebook would be best suited to presenting a translation of a medieval saga. An ebook shares the familiar linear structure of a printed book, but it can also integrate some features of the amorphous, hyperlinked, networked structure of the Internet. Most e-readers support common interactive features of printed text, such as the ability to highlight, bookmark, and write on pages, but they also interface with online apps, allowing readers to look up words in the dictionary or on Wikipedia. EPUB 3.0, the industry standard adopted in 2011 and updated to 3.0.1 in 2014, when I started building my ebook, was based on XHTML, which meant that, in theory, anything possible on a website was also possible in an ebook. In practice, however, e-reader apps could read only limited features of XHTML code. No one e-reader could do it all. At the time, Apple's e-reader app, iBooks, supported the most features and was the obvious choice for my ebook—or my esaga, as I began to call it.

iBooks supported a fixed layout, which allowed me to arrange images and notes to the reader in the margins of the page, imitating the marginalia found in medieval manuscripts. Marginalia—including illustrations, captions, chapter summaries, and pull quotes—serve as visual bookmarks and tell stories of their own (Carruthers 2008, 309–24). They were a way of communicating context to the medieval reader, and my use of pull quotes, thumbnail images, and captions in the margins of the esaga continues this medieval tradition. While the small size of a thumbnail limits how much information the image can communicate, the digital platform allows each image to be enlarged to full screen with a tap. Readers may prefer to view photographs of the landscape, for example, in full screen to better contemplate the geographical context they impart to the story. Landscapes, of course, experience natural and cultural changes over time, and therefore photographs are captioned with the history of those changes. Photographs with pickup trucks and hydroelectric dams remind the reader that the photographed landscape is a modern one and that, by inserting these photographs into the text, we actively project an imagined past landscape upon them. This activity is perhaps not unlike the way the medieval audience projected an

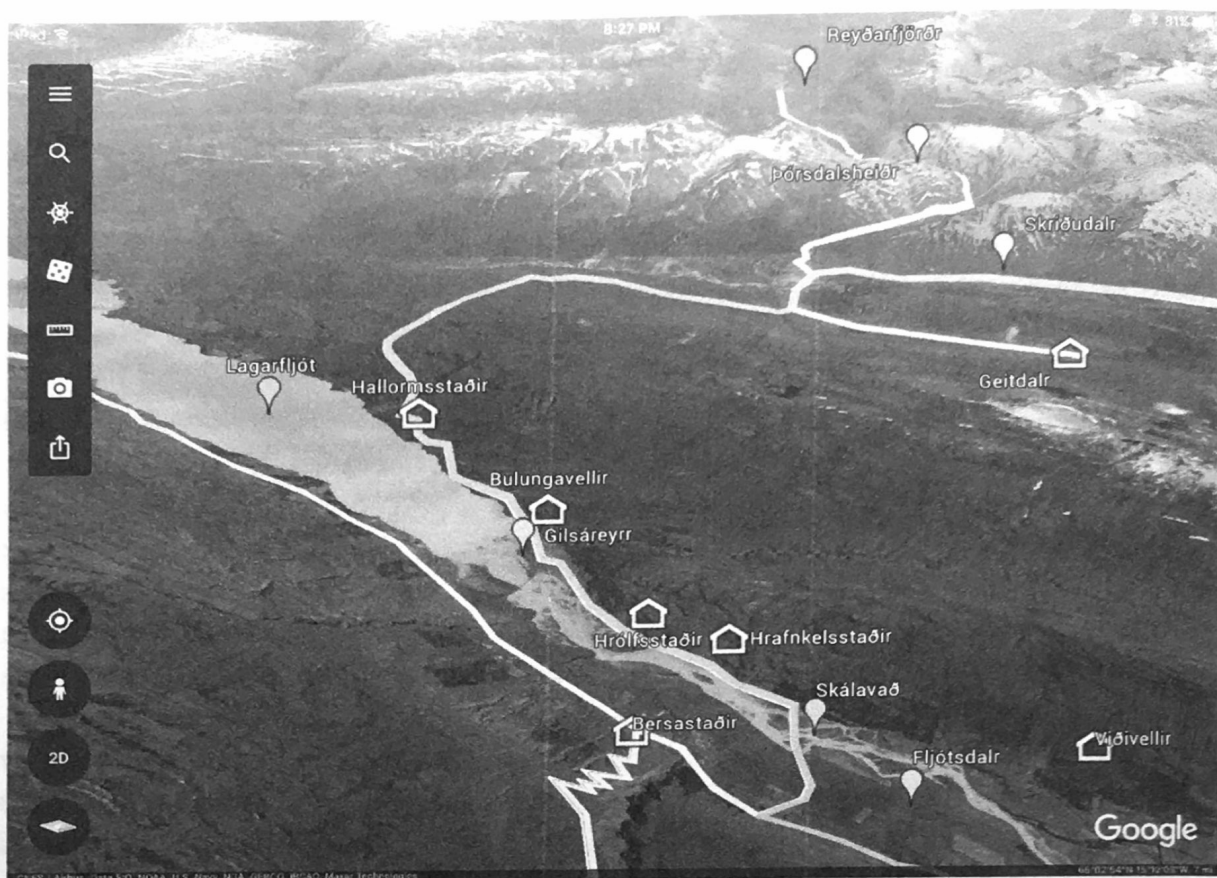


The esaga (left) mimics the design of medieval manuscripts (right: Flateyjarbók, GKS 1005 fol.) in both form and function. (Left: screenshot of author's ebook on iBooks; right: Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies.)

imagined past Viking Age landscape upon the contemporary landscape visible to their eyes.³

In the main text body, bolded and colored text mimics the aesthetics of a manuscript rubric and mimics the effect of input from the audience, such as silence or laughter, to call attention to passages that require contextual in-group knowledge for comprehension. Color signals categories of context: black for people, red for places, and yellow for culture. Tapping, for example, on the bolded yellow words "dark clothes" opens an explanatory pop-up, which links to a glossary that contains all terms, a list of all instances of the term in the text, and a curated list of related terms. Unlike EPUB 2.0, which could support only limited endnotes, EPUB 3.0 with iBooks supports an interactive glossary index that allows users to hyperlink from topic to topic and then to return easily to the main text. A reader might therefore jump ahead to the next use of "dark clothes" in the saga to see if the trope is reinforced or subverted in its next iteration, or the reader might jump to a related glossary entry for "colored clothing" to learn more about material culture. The ebook supports tangential learning within the text by allowing readers to choose their own path and craft a unique learning experience with each reading.

To explore another category of glossed terms, pop-ups for people summarize each character's significance within the saga and across medieval literature and summarize the uniformity or diversity of textual narrative traditions about said character in the Middle Ages. If the reader wants to learn more, the pop-up links to a character map that situates the character genealogically, socially, and geographically, and the glossary links to a curated list of related characters. Should the reader lose track of which Thor is which even after they are introduced in bold and black, every occurrence of every name is hyperlinked to the glossary. Character entries not only help readers remember who's who but also help readers decide which characters are worth remembering and what for. In the case of Hrafnkell's wife, Oddbjörg, the character entry reveals that she is *not* a significant character in this text or any other, insofar as can be determined through comparative reconstruction, because she is not known from any other medieval text. The esaga gives the reader permission to



An interactive map in Google Earth provides place lore and offers readers another path through the text. (Screenshot of author's own custom Google Map file in Google Earth.)

forget Oddbjörg, one name among many in a lengthy list of genealogical character introductions, and instead to focus attention on the names of characters that have greater significance to the story.

Place lore entries also provide important context; they translate place-names, provide photographs, add natural and cultural history, and link to an interactive digital map. Place-names communicate a wealth of immanent medieval lore that adds meaning to the saga narrative. Some qualities, such as the economic and social standing of a residence, might be clearly reflected in a place-name like Aðalból (Manor House), but other qualities, such as natural environment or local history, might not be communicated in any way. When characters travel, for example, the saga text merely lists the names of landmarks to outline their paths. The readers are expected to connect these points in their minds and to make a meaningful interpretation of the route based on their knowledge of the land. For example, one string of place-names reveals that Hrafnkell travels by the longer and safer coastal route, revealing Hrafnkell's complacency, whereas another string of place-names reveals that Sámr travels by the shorter and more dangerous highland route, revealing Sámr's desperation. Place lore entries communicate this context with photographs of the grassy, populated coastlands and the rocky, desert highlands and also by linking to an interactive map on Google Maps/Google Earth, which links these place-names into coherent paths.⁴

Unlike a printed map that is bounded by the scale of the page, the digital map allows one to interact with the map in two significant ways: first, the ability to zoom in and zoom out allows readers to control how they read the map, and second, place lore annotations for each location on the map allow readers to read the saga geographically. These annotations present readers with yet another path through the text; users can navigate through the environments of the narrative independent of the narrative order but inextricably linked to the narrative experiences of characters. Place lore annotations teach readers, for example, to recognize boggy ground by its telltale flora and thereby teach readers the concerns of medieval travelers who measured travel in terms of difficulty as opposed to units of distance. This context helps readers understand narrative events linked to these locations and to understand the landscape as a character unto itself, which can help or hinder human characters. The interactive digital map thus combines the functionality of modern maps with medieval maps—a navigational tool for accurately representing geographic space on the one hand and a teaching tool for learning relationships and narratives on the other.⁵ By presenting not only the place-names themselves but also the lore associated with the places, the interactive digital map can both communicate a phenomenological experience of the landscape in medieval terms and mimic the way in which oral traditions are often shared and experienced on location.

The goal, again, was to make the knowledge produced by Old Norse scholars accessible to the English-speaking public in a form that would enhance their reading of Old Norse translations. While iBooks helped me toward this goal, there are some notable shortcomings of this particular platform and of ebooks in general that are worth mentioning. First, iBooks' unique fixed layout, which allowed me to mimic the visual design of a medieval manuscript, means that the font size is unresponsive; it cannot be changed on the reading device. It is optimized for an iPad screen. On a computer screen, the font appears smaller and can be difficult to read for the visually impaired. On an iPhone screen, the font is nearly impossible to read. Second, iBooks is available only on Apple products. While some university libraries have iPads to loan to their students, this proprietary and costly restriction makes the esaga inaccessible to a large number of users. When I published the esaga, in 2015, iBooks was the only platform that could support an interactive glossary—a feature essential for my vision of the translation—but by late 2016, Amazon Kindle, which works on iOS, Android, Mac, and PC, had updated its platform to support an interactive glossary. Rebuilding the esaga for Kindle would solve this proprietary issue, and while I would like to, I have not yet done this. Why not? The third shortcoming: it takes a lot more time to create a hypertext than a text. While the iBooks Author app does not require any coding ability to operate—iBooks Author uses a WYSIWYG interface akin to most word processors—it still takes a lot of time to hyperlink all of the digital features, and this work cannot be easily passed off to an editor. The clerical task of hyperlinking elements cannot be extricated from the academic work of determining how hypertext elements function in relation to the text; this work requires expertise in folklore and Old Norse studies, and it takes time and research to curate an etext with knowledge and scholarly intent. Fourth, I had to translate the text, which also required a huge time investment. The only translations available to me free of copyright were so archaic as to be nearly useless. My only option was to translate the saga for myself, a task that required me to develop additional skills and a unique

translation style. A fifth shortcoming, which is endemic to all digital literature, is that of marketing and distribution. Without a physical product to put in bookstores, it can be difficult to get a digital book into the hands of the public.

Beyond these practical shortcomings, it is also worth briefly noting the systemic barriers within academia to the production of such public-serving scholarly works; namely that translations are not considered scholarly works. Despite the considerable amount of original research, interpretative work, and theoretical contributions that go into translation projects, tenure committees largely undervalue translations in relation to peer-reviewed journal articles. The same can be said for the publishing of ebooks and the development of pedagogical tools. Furthermore, these preferences of tenure committees trickle down to graduate students, who, in hopes of landing a tenure-track job one day, can be directly or indirectly dissuaded from submitting nontraditional dissertations. Thus, putting one's labor and expertise toward developments in the pedagogical and public presentation of medieval folklore is a losing bet for the individual academic.

Yet, for all these shortcomings, the question remains: did the esaga succeed? Since I published *The eSaga of Hrafnkell Freysgoði*, in 2015, I have assigned it to students in small seminars and large lectures, and their journal assignments and course evaluations suggest a positive answer. One student wrote in a free-response assignment for a sagas course I taught in 2015: "I find the map very helpful with the text. For example, when Sámur makes the trip through the highlands, the description in the text sounds rather arbitrary, but seeing the journey itself on Google Earth is awesome! Especially being able to see distance—Iceland itself seems pretty darn small, but when you look at the distance, and especially the fact that they travel by horse. . . . I mean, I seriously want to know how long it took to travel that far! And now I understand why Hrafnkell took the coastline to get to the Althing (you know, better weather, access to water, etc.)."

Here is a student who comprehends the saga on the levels of both text and context; the student understands who is doing what, where, and why and has internalized medieval travel concerns, applied this knowledge to the narrative, and become curious to learn more. And all this learning is attributable to the digital apparatus. The pop-ups, digital photography, and interactive maps do not distract or lead the reader astray from the text; they present the reader with unique paths through the text that may be chosen freely on the basis of interest or need, they foster the readers' understanding and appreciation, and they support their tangential learning. And by augmenting the text with the kinds of knowledge that the medieval audience shared orally, the esaga uses digital modes of learning to mimic a medieval performance of the text and makes public the expertise of folklorists. Just as the medieval audience was capable of asking the saga reader to expand upon the text with orally delivered context, the modern audience is capable of asking the esaga to expand upon the text with digitally delivered context. The esaga is the medieval reader, and you are its audience; the story lies somewhere in between.

NOTES

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1. Brad Leithauser enumerates this difficulty best: "In *Gisli Sursson's Saga* we meet a man named Thorkel who, on the way to the Thorsnes Assembly, accompanied by Thorbjorn's sons, meets up with Thorstein, the son of Thorolf, who was living at Thorsnes with Thora and their children, Thor-dis, Thorgrim, and Bork the Stout. But even better, in its hellbent determination to promote domestic confusion, is the man in *Njal's Saga* who 'had two sons, both named Thorhall'" (2001).

2. Clover notes the Land Dayak epic of *Kichagi*, which took W. R. Geddes only sixty-three pages to transcribe but which took nine whole nights to perform because of the audience's frequent questions (1986, 19).

3. The fact that the digital experience mimics the medieval experience does not mean that digital annotations somehow reflect the historical "truth" of the Middle Ages more objectively than textual annotations. Digital annotations do, however, for the reasons outlined, provide more opportunities than textual annotations to communicate the subjective limitations inherent to all translation projects to their readers.

4. For an overview of the retrogressive method used to reconstruct medieval horse trails, see Connors 2014.

5. Cf. Edson 1997, 2007; Foys 2007, 2009.