The Twilight of the Family Saga

Of the entire corpus of Medieval European Literature, there is nothing quite like the ‘Sagas of the Icelanders’ or ‘Family Sagas.’ Falling somewhere between historical novel and prose epic, these fusions of history, genealogy, vita, and legend are composed against the grain of European aesthetics. The products of an experimental commonwealth that flourished in letters, they are long, prose narratives written in a vernacular tongue, saturated with an inexhaustible violence, recounting the exploits and affairs of Iceland’s greatest families. In this course, we will explore the notion that by the time we get the heyday of saga production in the middle of the 13th century, the art form is already in decay. The pressure brought on by the decline of the commonwealth, the subsequent subjection to the Norwegian crown, and the popularity of continental Romance see the end to this native art form; but, not before it gives us some of medieval literature’s brightest stars and roughest outlaws: Egill Skallagrimsson, Thorstein the Staffstruck, Gisli Sursson, Gunnar of Hlidarend, and Burnt-Njal. The primary texts will be supplemented with secondary readings, including selections from the Book of Settlements and the great Icelandic law code, The Gray Goose. Conducted in English.

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