Jonathan Francis

Fitchburg State University

160 Pearl Street

Fitchburg, MA, USA 01420

978-665-3000

[jfranc16@student.fitchburgstate.edu](mailto:jfranc16@student.fitchburgstate.edu)

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Dear Editorian,

I am pleased to submit an original research article entitled “*Eric the Red’s Saga* and its Significance to History”. This article is a critical analysis into the historical effect of *Eric the Red’s Saga*, and a defense against critics who attempt to denounce its value in relevance to history. In researching this paper, my aim was to seek scholarly articles that either favor or denounce the Saga’s historical accuracy and influence, keeping in mind the authors credibility and date in which the article was written.

Prior to my initial research, Katherine (Coco) O'Toole Zephir of Fitchburg State Library guided me into which direction I should begin my research. From there, I began researching JSTOR, a digital library of academic journals. This resulted in a vast amount of information, and I was pleased to find articles that harmonized with my inclination. Some cornerstone research papers that I analyzed thoroughly are Fridtjof Nansen’s *In Northern Mists* and William Hovgaard’s *‍The Voyages of the Norsemen to America.* I find these two articles significant in shaping the argument of my paper, and paired with my own analysis of the text among other influential research papers, I have created a convincing argument.

Some other topics I found to be beneficial to my paper focus more on specific aspects of the Saga, such as the presence of “Pigmies” and how present day New England appreciated the Saga. I feel these topics, although focused, contribute to my somewhat broad analysis of *Eric the Red’s Saga* and offer more substance to my argument.

Finally, it is worth noting the insight I received from my fellow scholars researching *Eric The Red’s Saga*. MaryAnn Adams, Seth Douglas, Ehrick Fairbrother, and Kevin Crabtree assisted me with research suggestions, feedback, and their own analysis of the Saga, which lead me to form the arguments and research in my article. Their insights were truly diverse and influential, and constructive, all characteristics of which I hope this research article captures.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Francis

Fitchburg State University

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Jon Francis

Dr. Kisha Tracy

ENGL 3030

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Throughout history, a reoccurring question presents itself to humans. That is, where do we come from? Written history has accomplished a great deal in relation to this question, as the answers that we seek need have a good sense of truthfulness in order to be widely accepted. When looking at The Icelandic Sagas, fact and fiction become blurred with the inclusion of folkloric elements and lack of proof. More specifically, *‍**Erik the Red’s Saga* has been criticized for these reasons, and thus its importance in history has been put in question. The aim of this paper is to solidify the importance of *Erik the Red’s Saga* with respect to history, in analyzing both its factual and fantastical elements, while explaining why those criticisms fall short in clouding the saga’s historic value. Outlined in this paper are the historical facts of the saga, which influence the lives of many people today who live in the areas discovered by Erik the Red, his son Leif Ericsson, and their men. Recent research supports the voyages of the Icelanders, making the sagas essential in Greenland and North America’s past. Also acknowledged are the folkloric aspects, many of which are based on translation and interpretation, and can be found in other more historically accepted ‍stories. One such example is the presence of “pigmies”, which were believed to have existed in India, Africa, Asia, as well as North America. *Erik the Red’s Saga* offers a great deal of information on the discovery of

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First, in order to analyze *Erik the Red’s Saga’s* importance to history, it is necessary to understand just what the Saga is about. *Erik the Red’s Saga* is part of The Sagas of Icelanders, a “large body of medieval literature, which forms the foundation of the Icelandic literary tradition.” More specifically, “The Icelandic Sagas are prose histories describing events that took place amongst the Norse and Celtic inhabitants of Iceland during the period of the Icelandic Commonwealth in the 10th and 11th centuries AD. They were most likely written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries AD, perhaps originating in an oral tradition of storytelling” (Icelandic Saga Database). Some key events that take place in *Erik The Red’s Saga* include Erik the Red’s discovery, settling and naming of Greenland, his son Leif Erikson’s discovery of parts of North America, followed by a more detailed description of Thorfinn Karlsefni’s adventures along the North American coast. It is mainly during Karlsefni’s adventures where perhaps the oral tradition of storytelling is most evident, with mythical creatures such as a race of men that only have one foot. Certainly the three events listed above could be considered significant historical items, and that is not even to mention what is learned regarding

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family trees, most notably Erik the Red’s. Yet unfortunately, the mythological aspects seem to place fog over these historical aspects.

One author who places a magnifying glass over these mythological aspects is Fridtjof Nansen, author of *In Northern Mists; Artic Exploration in Early Times.* Nansen offers a great deal of information in this book, however more potent are his thoughts and perceptions on *The Icelandic Sagas*, notably *Erik the Red’s Saga*. Quickly it can be deciphered that Nansen believes the sagas are closer to lore than historical fact. Commenting on the appearance of Skrælingar in the Saga, Nansen writes “These encounters are, of course, three in number: first they come to see, then to trade, and then to fight; this again recalls the fairy tale. The narrative itself of the battle with the Skraelings has borrowed features. The Skraelings' catapults make one think of the civilized countries of Europe, where catapults (i.e. engines for throwing stones, mangonels) and Greek fire were in use.” (Nansen. Pg. 5 Vol. 2) Nansen makes two bold statements here concerning *Erik the Red’s Saga*, that it is essentially fairy tale and that it contains borrowed features. If proven true, should these two aspects make the Saga historically unimportant?

First, Nansen’s claims should be dissected. William Hovgaard, writer of “The Voyages of the Norsemen to America” argues at length against Nansen’s mythological claims, and his views are insightful. Hovgaard asserts “it is far more difficult to follow Nansen in his assertion that the saga accounts in their entirety were built up of mythical material round such a nucleus, in itself largely mythical and vague.” (Hovgaard 121) Here I can’t help but agree with Hovgaard. While it is important to recognize and analyze

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the mythological aspects of *Erik the Red’s Saga* for historical reasons, their inclusion plays a small role, and does not cloud the description of travel and discovery. Furthermore, a large part of history is evaluating the narrator, and the audience is quickly made fully aware that The Icelandic Sagas come from an oral tradition of story telling, hundreds and hundreds of years ago. Some storytelling aspects are expected.

Furthermore, regarding the Skraelings' use of catapults, implying the idea was borrowed from civilized countries in Europe. First, to say a literary aspect makes on think of another more civilized place does not mean the idea is borrowed. Nansen’s assertion here is very far-reaching and opinionated. More importantly, the interpretation of the original text very likely does not translate to the word catapult directly, and could actually mean a different weapon altogether. The same fate is found upon the term “skraelings”, the name given by the Norse to the native beings confronted in Vinland. A very insightful article by Kirsten A. Seaver sheds some light upon the confusion with the term. “Even during heathen times the well-traveled Norse would have picked up both Christian and pre-Christian lore about dwarves as well as about diminutive monster races. Significantly, they did not refer to short North American and Greenlandic natives as dvergar or dwarves, but coined the new word (Skraelings).” (Seaver 75) This assertion clears any confusion about the Skraelings being a mythical creature, like the “Pygmie” (A very popular character in more accepted historical accounts of discovery to India and North America). Instead, as far as researchers can tell the Norse adventurers simply labeled the native people of North America as Skraelings, which does likely have to do with the native’s physical appearance, although nothing mythical.

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There is yet more opposition to Nansen’s assertion that *Erik the Red’s Saga* is closer to lore than to fiction. Julius E. Olson writes in his article “Realism And The Fantastic In The Old Icelandic Sagas” … “if there isn't a substantial background of history to the Saga of Erik the Red, it is the most clever piece of literary deception ever practiced in the name of history” (Olson 156). Prior to this blunt declaration, Olson dissects some of the assertion Nansen makes, and explains why they hold no weight. In one example, Olson explains how Nansen’s disbelief on the wildlife in the Saga’s expedition to North America is completely misguided. More specifically, Nansen claims, “If Straumfjord was in Nova Scotia, there could not be eiderducks nor gulls either in sufficient number to form breeding grounds of importance." (Nansen 335 Vol. 1). Olson then supplies the reader with an alternative recollection of a French explorer, Champlain, and his findings along the coast of Nova Scotia. Champlain describes “an abundance of different sorts of birds”, which Olson highlights matches perfectly with the Saga’s observation. Olson even goes as far as to demand some of Nansen’s statements be refuted because of their outlandishness and lack of information.

So how might present day New England respond to the Norse discoveries of North America and their disputed background? With further dispute, of course. Patricia Roylance outlines this dispute in an informational article titled “Northmen and Native Americans: The Politics of Landscape in the Age of Longfellow”. Roylance explains just how enthusiast of America’s Nordic origins might pay homage to their history. “From the center of Cambridge, one could stroll to the site where Leif Eriksson's house had stood in A.D. 1000, take a buggy ride to the heart of the Viking city of Norumbega-located in

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what had become Watertown, Massachusetts-or visit Fall River to see the runes that Norsemen had inscribed on Dighton Rock and to view the site where the Viking warrior's skeleton had been unearthed.” (Roylance 438) This all sounds very appealing, however Roylance also explains why perhaps this is not an attractive idea to the people of New England. “Levating Leif Eriksson had the effect of demoting Christopher Columbus…. Thus European discovery could be claimed as a national, not simply a continental, legacy, one conferring special prestige on New England.” (Roylance 441) While perhaps Boston may never have a giant monument where Leif Eriksson’s house once stood, acknowledging the role he played in discovering North America is paramount.

Withstanding the arguments presented above, a question still remains. With the presence of mythological and folkloric aspects in *Erik the Red’s Saga,* should it still be considered history? Or should any text including mythological aspects be kept from the history books. A nice parallel to *Erik The Red’s Saga* that is a bit closer to today’s society could be the Salem witch trials. It is widely understood today that witches do not exist, and the Salam witch trials were partially a hoax to rid of loathed members of society. That is not to say that people did not truly believe in witches in the 19th Century, because history shows that the fear of witches living among us was very real. “Realisms and the Fantastic in Old Icelandic Sagas” by Margaret Ross is a thought-provoking scholarly article on a similar subject. “In recent scholarship on Icelandic Sagas, the emphasis has shifted from an older attitude that sought to classify sagas as either history or fiction, not both, to an approach that allows two creative impulses, history and fictional, to coexist in any text in any variable relationship, both within a single text and between texts.

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Increasingly, what can be learned of the relationship between society and literature in medieval Iceland is considered a productive nexus for our understanding of the genesis of character saga writing.” (Ross. 444) We cannot blame the writers of these sagas for including mythological aspects that they may believe in, and also for perhaps staying true to the oral tradition of the sagas, just as we would not exclude the Salem witch trials for the same aspects. As Ross so eloquently stated, what is learned about the relationship between society and literature should not be rejected, but instead welcomed and analyzed.

Charles Sprague Smith also offers insight into the dispute of folkloric aspects in historical texts. Smith writes, “The presence of these unhistorical elements, where they form only a background or an appendage, and are readily eliminated, does not necessarily lessen the worth of the intrinsic record. Indeed it often gives added value thereto, strengthening our confidence in the integrity of the tradition.” (Smith 512) In other words, it is because of these story-telling aspects within the Saga that we respect the oral tradition, and its inclusion should not take away from the overall historic value. Smith goes on to write regarding the Icelandic Sagas, “The sagas that recount the lives of the patriarchs and the events of the heroic age, although colored by the imagination, are not romances, but essentially biographies and chronicles. If we compare in different records the characters given to the same individuals, there is fundamental agreement. The difference only proves the genuineness of the tradition, for the divergence is due rather to the personal equation, the point of view, than to a deliberate purpose to undervalue or overestimate.” (Smith 518) One consistently questioned event in *Erik the Red’s Saga* is when Freydis, Erik the Red’s Daughter, is attacked by Skrælingar and defiantly stands up

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to her attackers. “Then came the Skrælingar upon her. She let down her sark and struck her breast with the naked sword. At this they were frightened, rushed off to their boats, and fled away. Karlsefni and the rest came up to her and praised her zeal.” (*Erik the Red’s Saga)* Did this event actually take place? It can never truly be proven. While it sounds a bit grandiose, it certainly does not take away from the historical importance, however it might instead strengthen our confidence in the oral tradition of story-telling the Norse had.

In conclusion, *Erik the Red’s Saga* accomplishes a great number of things. It gives insight into geological discoveries including the naming of Greenland by Erik the Red, and interactions with natives in North America. The saga gives acumen to the tradition of Norse culture, including extensive family trees, religious and political views, and characteristics of the main ‘characters’. And finally, the folkloric aspects give insight into how Norse discoverers reacted to stress, discovery, change and the unknown. These reasons alone give the saga great value to the annals of history, as much can be learned both about Norse adventures and the history of New England. Doubters may assert that mythical aspects cloud historical facts, however this article proves many important ideas and details can be deciphered from mythological concepts. Furthermore, It is not fair to compare the Icelandic Sagas to texts written after the advent of recorded history. When reading the sagas, it is important to keep in mind that these stories are oral history, recorded hundreds of years after the fact. As long as this important aspect is kept in mind while reading the sagas, the knowledge gained on Norse culture becomes extremely meaningful.

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