Peter Jorgensen, an authority on heroes in Icelandic sagas, is something of a hero himself.

The coterie of Jorgensen buffs is small because his feat is known only to fellow academicians whose research and teachings are focused in medieval Germanic languages or other philological endeavours. Like his fictional heroes, Jorgensen, an associate professor of Germanic and Slavic languages, set out to right a wrong. He succeeded—albeit 200 years too late to bring the evildoer to his just deserts.

"He (Jorgensen) 'blew the lid' off a case of saga forgery, or plagiarism, which had heretofore gone undetected. And he did it with wit and polish," noted Foster W. Blaisdell, professor of Germanic languages at Indiana University.

"This type of work is easy to underestimate for those not in the field. But it requires a great deal of patience, a very sharp eye, considerable experience in Old Norse paleography, and above all a sense of creativity," he continued.

Traditional Old Norse paleography is one of Jorgensen's research specialties. It is the study and interpretation of ancient texts in the language spoken in Iceland and Norway between 1100 and 1500 A.D. Equally appropriate to the task was Jorgensen's second area of research—folk tales in Icelandic literature, which he says are probably nowhere better preserved than in the mythical-heroic sagas.

This detective story began, Jorgensen recalls, when he was "literally rummaging around through the bowels of the Royal Library in Copenhagen." He found an Icelandic saga called "Hafgeirs Saga Flateyings" which had a little flyleaf on the front stating that the paper manuscript was an eighteenth-century copy of a twelfth-century vellum manuscript.
"This would have been a real find, considering the oldest vellum—or parchment—manuscript in Iceland is dated 1150," he said. "So I read it. It had the character, I thought, of a mythical heroic saga—fourteenth or fifteenth century. The more I thought about it, the more I was certain I had read a tale like that before."

**Suspected Plagiarism**

"It turned out that I had, indeed, read the tale. It is called Hálfdanar saga Brónufóstra." I compared motifs and found these two manuscripts were very similar, and I suspected plagiarism," he said.

Jorgensen explained that plagiarism is almost impossible to prove in the world of Icelandic literature since "from medieval times, the copying of a source without naming the original author was considered de rigueur. In Iceland, sagas in the old style were being written right up through the nineteenth century."

But Jorgensen knew this was not just a case of continuing tradition. The flyleaf stating that it was from a twelfth-century vellum was undoubtedly part of a forgery attempt. "The author obviously wanted to bilk somebody or to get some money," he reasoned. "He wouldn't have written that flyleaf if he had been just writing a saga for himself or for the public."

Jorgensen set to work, diligently studying handwriting of the eighteenth-century scribes who copied old manuscripts. "At that time wealthy Danes hired Icelanders to copy old manuscripts for their personal libraries. Icelanders were felt to be the only ones who could master the Icelandic language, which is considered the most difficult Germanic language to learn," Jorgensen pointed out.

He said all the scribal hands (handwriting) began to look the same after a few days. But he finally found one which was like that on the unsigned manuscript. The scribe turned out to be a young Icelander who was a student at the University of Copenhagen in the 1770s. Jorgensen believes this young man had become persona non grata at the Trinitatis Kirke where he had been copying from the Arnaminnaean Collection. "He might have lost several pages from other manuscripts and was not allowed to copy anymore," Jorgensen conjectured. "I think he just made up the saga since he was no longer granted admittance to the collection. He gave it an early date and sold it. But to whom?"

More detective work for Jorgensen. He found the saga listed in the library holdings of a wealthy Dane who had been the Royal Danish historiographer and head librarian at the Royal Library in Copenhagen at the time. The title appeared in an auction catalogue of the scholarly Dane's collection after his death.

"He was very old at the time. I learned from his biography that he was half blind in his last years and that he had a soft spot in his heart for indigent students. I suspect this combination and his desire to build a library—he had a fantastic collection—made him an easy person to bilk."

Jorgensen's sleuthing continued. He sought extra evidence to support the forgery theory. "In order to learn whether or not the young scribe was familiar with the old saga, I checked to see if he had ever copied it," Jorgensen said. "Indeed, he had copied it for a different Danish collector. Furthermore, he had even collated several variants. This proved that the scribe was intimately familiar with this saga."

"That was a nice little find, but to prove it wasn't luck, I decided to find another one. And I did," he said. "I went through the same Dane's catalogue of holdings and saw a saga with a funny title. This particular one was included in an often cited edition of Icelandic sagas, but something just didn't ring true about it. I had to find out who wrote it," he recalled.

Jorgensen spent six weeks trying to find handwriting that matched that of the copied manuscript. The search revealed another forgery. It turned out that both forgers were students in Copenhagen at the same time. They had enrolled at the University of Copenhagen on the same day, had had the same major professor and adviser, and had both worked as scribes.

As a footnote to the story Jorgensen said, "Icelandic students' reputations were not very high in Denmark. They were considered a hard drinking, irresponsible lot."

**200-Year-Old Mystery**

In commending Jorgensen for his scholarly probe, Dr. Frank Hugus of the University of Massachusetts lauds him for "successfully combining the time-honored methods of serious research scholarship with healthy doses of well-placed skepticism and imagination. It is undoubtedly this last aspect, however, which contributed most heavily to the unravelling of this two-century-old mystery."

Hugus said it is unlikely that these saga forgeries are unique, and he predicts that "if similar forgeries do exist, Professor Jorgensen's continued creative research will uncover a number of them."

But Jorgensen points out that this investigation deals with post medieval literature, and he is a
medievalist. "I just went out of my field because it was so interesting I couldn't resist. Basically, this kind of inquiry is to satisfy my own curiosity."

He says there are so many areas of research that interest him that he cannot decide what to do next. He may return to the mythical-heroic sagas, which he defines as "the uneven marriage of history and folklore, oftentimes adulterated by romance." Some of the folktales these sagas have incorporated are known to exist in hundreds of variants throughout the world. Jorgensen has been especially fascinated by those motifs which also turn up in Beowulf, the epic poem written in Old English.

If his future research does not take that direction, it might be back to vellum manuscripts again. Working with these parchment manuscripts most certainly demands the qualities Dr. Blaisdell emphasized—patience, a sharp eye, experience in Old Norse paleography, and creativity. Plus an enthusiasm for jigsaw puzzles and an uncanny talent for reading the unreadable! Probably even the most tattered of the Dead Sea scrolls was in better shape than some of the Icelandicvellums Jorgensen has worked with. He explained that with the increased use of printing and paper in Iceland after the middle of the sixteenth century, manuscripts of vellum—specially treated animal skin—were ripped apart and used to bind books. Fortunately the value of these old works was realized later, and Scandinavian collectors would take the bindings off and keep them. Not only were the parchments badly worn on the outside, making it impossible to read the text on many, but they had been tailored to fit books. Large chunks were cut out and margins trimmed or torn off; perforations from stitching obliterated the writing.

"At least we can be glad that these fragments were preserved," said Jorgensen, whose finds among the damaged parchments turned out "to double the number of known vellum translations of moralistic tales from Middle English into Icelandic. So now the total is four!"

He considers himself fortunate to have identified "seven 13th-16th-century manuscripts which have added over a dozen hitherto unknown tales to the body of Old Icelandic literature."

Jorgensen views himself as an "old fashioned soup-to-nuts philologist who goes and finds a manuscript, studies it, dates it, and tries to find who wrote it and the source of the contents. That's what philologists were doing 150 years ago."

"It is one of the most time-consuming areas of inquiry that I can imagine. It takes so many years to learn. You really don't hit your stride until you are 50 years old and start getting a broader picture," said 39-year-old Jorgensen. "It is really scholarly endeavor which you have to love. You don't get fame or fortune from this work, just a lot of satisfaction." ★

In this portion of an etching done in 1611 by Jan Dircksen can be seen the place where the Old Icelandic manuscripts which Jorgensen used in his research were housed until recently. The manuscripts were kept behind the two doors of the long building on the right side of the enclosed harbor in the picturesque complex, now more than 350 years old. The little harbor has since been turned into a garden and the Royal Library built on what was originally the front entrance.