The Icelandic Saga: Turco Spring 2016

Accompanied by a cast of characters that includes goddesses, giants, dwarfs, berserkers, woman-warriors, warrior-poets, poetic zombies, and a crotchety Celtic dog, we will begin this course with an introduction to the pagan mythology of northern Europe as represented in the Christian literary culture of medieval Iceland, followed by an investigation of the Icelandic sagas—a body of stories in prose prized for their “realism,” sometimes considered a precursor to the modern historical novel. This seminar will have a dual-scope. First, we will focus on the ongoing reinterpretation of the Viking Age (A.D. 793-1066) in the sagas themselves, written in the 13th and 14th centuries, as seen through the lenses of various scholarly dichotomies: sacred and secular, literate and oral, foreign and native, Latinate and vernacular. Second, we will mount a “Defense of a Useless Science” (to borrow a phrase from the Assyriologist J. Bottéro): an interrogation of old texts not (or not only) as voices of a remote and distant past, but also as works that address the interests of students of narratives of all places and periods. Hence this course will be relevant to students of History, Philosophy & Literature, and Religious Studies, as well as English, Comparative Literature, and Medieval Studies. Readings (in English translation) will include Snorri’s Edda and the Poetic Edda, the Saga of the Volsungs, Njal’s Saga, Egil’s Saga, Gisli’s Saga, Hrafnkell’s Saga, and shorter tales.