INTRODUCTION

THE ARTICLES published in this volume of *Gripla* are based on papers which were delivered at a conference held in Skálholt, 5th–9th September 2007; these articles are supplemented here by three additional contributions by other participants at the conference. The title of the conference was "Nordic Civilisation in the Medieval World". Twenty five participants, from eight countries, represented a range of scholarly disciplines—history, archaeology, anthropology, literary studies, philosophy, and runology. Nine papers were presented at the conference and individual participants responded to each one of them.

The impetus for the Skálholt conference came from Jóhann Páll Árnason's idea to bring together scholars from different fields to discuss the civilisation of the inhabitants of the Scandinavian countries (especially the Icelanders) in the Viking Age and in the Middle Ages. This was with a mind to investigating whether and how this civilisation was distinctive compared with medieval European civilisation. Since Jóhann was not in Iceland on a permanent basis, I approached the historian Gunnar Karlsson and the philosopher Vilhjálmur Árnason (both professors at Háskóli Íslands) in order to organise the conference under the auspices of the Stofnun Árna Magnússon and Háskóli Íslands. We were soon joined by Dr Salvör Nordal at the Siðfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands (Institute of Ethics at the University of Iceland). It was decided that the conference would be held at Skálholt and that a certain number of scholars working in different academic fields would be invited: some to give papers, and others to respond with prepared critiques or comments. In addition, a number of Icelandic participants were invited to join the discussions.

The relationship between the Scandinavian countries and other parts of Europe in the Middle Ages with regard to the subject of civilisation has been discussed widely in the last few decades, especially in the forum of

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academic publications. The Roman-Catholic Church exerted a powerful influence on civilisation in the northern and western parts of Europe during the Middle Ages. This civilisation was flanked by wild nature to the west and the north—the Atlantic Ocean and the Arctic Sea—and by the world of the Eastern Orthodox church to the east and Islam to the south. The parts of Europe dominated by the Roman-Catholic church were far from being homogenous regions, however: countries and districts had their own characteristics and cultural peculiarities as well as common features. The particular characteristics of different countries of course had both natural and historical explanations, rooted in social and geographical conditions or circumstances as well as past history. With this in mind, it is worth asking whether the extent to which we look at the Scandinavian countries as some kind of unified whole within Europe in the Middle Ages is an anachronistic illusion created by later history. For a long time, various differences have been evident between the groups of people who combed the Atlantic sea-ways, claimed settled and unsettled islands in the Atlantic and not least, who had fertile dealings with Celtic peoples, when compared to those people who sailed their ships to the Baltic Sea and along Russian rivers, and who established relations with the inhabitants of the continental European mainland. Those in the first group—Icelanders and Norwegians—were quick to accept Christianity and to learn to write in their mother tongue but those in the latter group—which included the Danes, who also had many dealings over the North Sea—wrote mainly in Latin for a long time. Nevertheless, medieval authors describe the Scandinavian region as a region divided in three main parts, as can be seen in volume four of Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiæ Pontificum*, and in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*.

Preserved sources, or lack of sources, set the limits for historical investigations. Emphases will differ in critical accounts based predominantly on written texts, and in those that direct their attention towards interpreting the material record that is evident or has been uncovered by archaeologists. There is great variation from one region to another across the Scandinavian countries in so far as the possibilities opened up by the sources are concerned. To a great degree, the wealth of written sources on parchment has its roots in Iceland; archaeological evidence (including runic inscriptions) is especially prominent in central and eastern Scandinavia. These differences

are brought out in the present volume, although the interpretation of written sources with a primary emphasis on Iceland prevails in most of the articles. Anyone attempting to interpret written sources of the past will be faced with the perennial difficulty that the written sources are frequently not recorded by direct witnesses to the events and circumstances they relate. The time which elapses between the date of an event and the written recording of it, and the circumstances of the moment of writing, are inherent parts of the text. This problem presents itself immediately to all those who wish to use Icelandic texts from the thirteenth century as sources of information about the Viking Age; academics' attitudes to this methodological difficulty and how it is approached by different disciplines, can vary. Archaeology differs from the study of texts in that precisely dated material phenomena bear unequivocal witness to specific times and places, but they are seldom easily interpreted or contextualized. When archaeologists have the opportunity, therefore, they frequently must rely on the testimony of written sources to make sense of the material picture; interpretative problems arise in all avenues of historical research.

It is virtually unavoidable that discussion about the civilisation of the Scandinavian countries taking place in Iceland, at the initiative of Icelanders, will be coloured by an Icelandic perspective: consciously and unconsciously, the literary culture of the Icelanders in the Middle Ages and history as recounted in Icelandic books—in sum, the picture of civilisation that they present—is taken as the norm. This is obvious in the greater part of the articles which are published here. In fact, the wealth of medieval Icelandic sources and scholarly tradition has led, and continues to lead, not only Icelanders but many others to rely on Icelandic texts as the foundations for research into investigating what was distinctive about the civilisation of the Scandinavian countries during the Viking Age and the Middle Ages. With one exception (the Rök stone), all of the texts which are analysed in this volume are Icelandic. Despite the considerable extent to which this perspective circumscribes the meaning of the phrase 'Nordic civilisation' in the conference-title, the selection of scholars that were invited to Skálholt may be seen as an attempt to prevent discussion on the subject being dominated by the Icelandic perspective. In the nineteenth century and on into the early decades of the twentieth century, most scholars believed that the Icelandic prose narratives and the old poetry about the

Scandinavian people and their lives were genuine sources for the civilisation of the Scandinavian countries, and furthermore, that these texts bore a general Germanic stamp. This view is now outdated and it is clear that the source value of the medieval writings of the Icelanders is greatly restricted. The texts were determined by the specific circumstances surrounding their production in Iceland and their presentation of the pre-Christian world was moulded by the fact that that they were conceived by Christians in an environment where the church and its ideology dominated textual production to a great extent. This does not mean, however, that these sources—the sagas and the poetry—have no value for research into the history of the Scandinavian countries other than Iceland in the Viking Age and the Middle Ages. Such research, however, calls for strict criticism of the sources.

For many years, Jóhann Páll Árnason, an Icelandic philosopher with an international academic career behind him, has dedicated himself to the academic field known as 'civilisation studies'. As noted earlier, the initiative behind the conference was Jóhann's and therefore his article is printed first here, also because the scope of his article is broad. Jóhann focuses on the origins and nature of the Icelandic 'Commonwealth' and reviews and analyses ideas about its basic characteristics, as formulated by twentieth-century scholars from Arnold Toynbee and Sigurður Nordal to Jesse Byock and Gunnar Karlsson. Jóhann's subject is the distinctive society that came about in Iceland and its development. An important element of Jóhann's interpretation is that even before the country's conversion to Christianity, Icelandic society was different to the Scandinavian monarchies. Jóhann follows Sigurður Nordal in believing that explanations for the Commonwealth cannot be based exclusively on the particular physical conditions in the extensive, very sparsely populated, and previously unsettled land; the establishment of a social organisation, which could not be called a state in the normal sense but rather a political community, was also the result of the ideas and desires of its leaders. However, both these scholars agree that these ideas could not be fully realised because of adverse circumstances. In explaining and defining the political community that evolved in Iceland, Jóhann looks to the ancient Greek polis for comparison, amongst other things. One determining factor in the origin and development of Icelandic society was the relation between politics and religion.

The chieftains' power rested on religion but it also had rational secular objectives which were put into practice with a varying degree of success. The social structure that was formed before the Conversion laid the foundation for the special character of Icelandic society which endured for three hundred years, until the Commonwealth came to an end. Although Iceland was itself without a king, it is important to appreciate the extent to which monarchy was a central concept in the world view of Icelandic society. This comes out very clearly in the literature.

In the next article, Sverre Bagge questions whether or not there are legitimate arguments for talking about a particular Nordic civilisation in the Middle Ages and he suggests that this can be justified on two possible counts: first, the literature of the Icelanders, and second, the 'Scandinavian model' with equality, democracy, welfare and freedom. Bagge believes that it is difficult to adduce sufficiently strong arguments to support the idea that later developments in Scandinavian society towards this model were rooted in medieval culture. After discussing the literature (especially the sagas) and comparing it with literature produced by other nations in the Middle Ages, Bagge concludes that "there is more to suggest a distinct cultural tradition, expressed in saga literature, which in turn is related to the character of Icelandic society, to some extent also to the other Scandinavian countries, notably Norway."

Gunnar Karlsson examines whether the Icelandic political community, prior to the country's submission to the Norwegian crown, was "of its own special kind, rather than just a variant of a medieval European political system." After a short but comprehensive description of various problems and arguments, Gunnar builds on his own extensive research in coming to some conclusions. His verdict is that Icelandic society probably was different but that this was not on account of "the inventiveness or the ideals of the people of Iceland". Rather, it was caused primarily by the country's physical remove from royal power: the Atlantic Ocean protected the society that formed after the settlement of the country. Gunnar thus makes less than Sigurður Nordal and Jóhann Páll Árnason of the likelihood that the social system was the result of the systematic intentions of those who created it.

In an article which brings together many of the subjects and themes of this collection of essays, Richard Gaskins takes his lead from Jóhann Páll

and Gunnar and also discusses the views of scholars who were not present at the conference, such as Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and certain anthropologists. Gaskins notes that it is not possible to assume that there was a single consistent system of values in the society depicted in the sagas. It is much more likely that conflict between different ideas and values impelled the development of Icelandic society. Sources for this position are, of course, found in the sagas, where the self-reflection of society itself is expressed: "It is often said that "heroic societies" are static places where reflection has no place ... Perhaps an early Iceland can be seen as an exceptional case study: a heroic society in the process of emerging from that static condition, spreading out over four centuries, and recorded in singular fashion by a contemporary literature of self-reflection."

Kirsten Hastrup also centres her discussion on Iceland but she considers how the outside world perceived Iceland, and how Icelanders perceived themselves, in the light of ideas about civilisation and concepts of centre and periphery. In this context, literature and texts are of primary importance. For both the ancient Greeks and for the Icelanders, literature—certain ur-texts, to use her terminology—defines what civilisation is, and the social status of groups within society. In this respect, Icelandic ideas about civilisation were profoundly European and logocentric although the Icelanders had very different ideas about themselves than the world beyond them.

Being an archaeologist with his roots east of the Baltic, Przemysław Urbańczyk comes to the subject with a different perspective to those of the other participants in this discussion. Urbańczyk is highly critical of the traditional view held by Scandinavians of their own history, and he emphasises how ideas about the unity and uniqueness of Nordic civilisation can obscure multifarious internal differences, as well as the effects of contacts with areas outside Scandinavia.

In the articles just summarised, a number of different approaches are employed and general questions asked about the uniqueness of Scandinavian, and especially Icelandic, civilisation in the Middle Ages. The papers which come next in this volume restrict their focus to texts and textual history to a greater degree than those that precede them, and with one exception (Joseph Harris's contribution), they direct their attention mainly towards medieval Icelandic texts. Margaret Clunies Ross signals

this clearly in her title “Medieval Icelandic Textual Culture”. Although medieval Icelandic texts are both many and varied and unique in one sense because of the dominance of the vernacular, they were not an isolated product in her view. Rather, they were connected both to other medieval literary traditions in Scandinavian countries and with European medieval literary culture, as is now generally recognised. Poetry in skaldic measures is, of course, one of the best examples of an unusual form but nonetheless it was utilised to communicate the general European world-view in religious poetry. Indigenous and foreign elements intertwine to such a degree in medieval Icelandic texts that attempts to determine their exact proportions are fruitless.

Rudolf Simek discusses the Icelandic world-view in the Middle Ages, responding to an idea that was espoused both by European and Icelandic scholars in the first part of the twentieth century, namely that the world-view of medieval Icelandic culture was of a dual nature. On the one hand, there was the western European and Christian dimension in which context men read, for the most part, the same books; on the other hand, the somewhat different world-view of the farmers was supposed to have been expressed in the writing of the country’s history. Simek rejects this and holds only the former world-view to have influenced those who produced texts in Iceland; we can know nothing with regard to the latter, neither in Iceland nor in any other country. Simek does argue, however, that the Icelanders stood somewhat apart because of the unusual knowledge they had pertaining to two areas: firstly, pre-Christian mythology as preserved in skaldic poetry, and secondly, geographical knowledge about the north and the coasts beyond the Atlantic Ocean.

Torfi H. Tulinius places a particular emphasis on the notion that Icelandic texts were founded on European Christian culture, which is woven into narrative accounts and poetry about the world of the past to a greater extent than is visible on the surface; he accordingly presents some examples illustrating this. Torfi believes that ideas about purity and influence are not useful when explanations for medieval Icelandic civilisation are sought; it is more productive to apply a dynamic concept or model that can reveal how Icelandic culture constantly redefined itself and integrated the foreignness of the past with its contemporary secular Christian culture.

The next two authors are Icelandic philosophers, and both wrestle with the problem of defining the moral attitudes of the Icelandic sagas, thereby relating medieval Icelandic literary culture to more general philosophical debate. They each choose a narrow perspective from which to approach the study of Icelandic civilisation—texts which, as a matter of fact, are often regarded as kinds of cultural signifiers or symbols. They then analyse these texts with reference to debates on general philosophical problems or issues. First, Vilhjálmur Árnason deals with the concept of honour in the Icelandic sagas and critiques the different ways in which scholars have gone about approaching this concept. Vilhjálmur comes to the conclusion that two perspectives or viewpoints are at odds with each other in the sagas: an unconditional requirement for vengeance, and the community's need for peace. His article draws on *Njáls saga*, which shows how social order is doomed to failure because no means of release from this conflict exists. Svavar Hrafn Svavarsson compares ideas about honour and shame in medieval Icelandic texts with ancient Greek ideas. He sides with the philosophy that has criticised "the well known formulation of the distinction made by the anthropologist Ruth Benedict in 1947: "True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin. Shame is a reaction to other people's criticism""; it has frequently been claimed that the ethics of the Icelandic sagas are characterised by the attitudes of a shame culture. Svavar argues that the concepts of 'moral thickness' and 'thinness' are useful in shedding light on the relation between society and ethics in the world of the *Íslendingasögur*, and on how conceptual values therein became established as facts.

Joseph Harris's article, which is last in the volume, expands the focus of the area under discussion since the text on which he concentrates is the runic inscription on the Swedish Rök stone, dated to the first part of the ninth century. This lengthy (for a runic inscription) and complex text is an example of an early attempt to conjoin ancient skills or knowledge of texts with a newer technology, "an early stage in the battle of literacy with orality where, clearly, orality won out". The form and medium of expression of the Rök stone are certainly distinct from the Icelandic texts most frequently referred to in the preceding articles in this collection. Yet both in the text's content and in its form of expression, unequivocal signs of kin-

ship may be discerned which suggest that the concept of a 'Nordic civilisation' is not exclusively the invention of scholars. This is corroborated in the article with frequent references to Egill Skallagrímsson's poem *Sonatorrek*.

When this volume is seen as a whole, certain distinctive features emerge from the cross-disciplinary dialogues. The authors seem to feel that there is a greater need to explain general premises and established research-positions than is normal in scholarly articles. This is quite natural in such a compilation, some going over the foundations laid by prior scholarship will be inevitable, precisely because of the nature of the inter-disciplinary discussion. Someone who comes to one research area from another area can see the shortcomings of the unfamiliar research area more clearly, and can also overlook the multiple nuances that reduce these shortcomings. In this volume, a variety of wide-reaching themes are touched on in order that discussion may continue to move forward, although conclusive answers to the problems may not be found.

The participants at the conference agreed that it would be desirable to publish written papers based on the lectures and discussion in Skálholt. In addition to those who gave papers, the respondents and other participants were invited to contribute material. The Stofnun Árna Magnússonar and the regular editors of *Gripla* approved the idea of publishing the collection of articles as the twentieth volume of *Gripla* and asked me to edit it. In carrying out this work I have benefitted from, and enjoyed, the cooperation of the authors, anonymous reviewers and the *Gripla* editors. Dr Emily Lethbridge worked on language and style in the papers where necessary, and translated some summaries and this introduction.

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Vésteinn Ólason