

KIRSTEN HASTRUP

## NORTHERN BARBARIANS: ICELANDIC CANONS OF CIVILISATION

THE NOTION of civilisation implies its own negation – that which is not civilised. For civilisation to register, a negative mirror image must be invoked, located either in another time or in another place. Whether the opposition is constructed temporally or spatially, and whether it is symbolic or real, images of otherness may provide fresh insights into the constitution of the declared civilisation.

In the case of Iceland, literary and other written sources provide rich material for reflecting on the Icelanders' perceived position in the world; by defining and redefining 'the others' they constantly sought to distinguish themselves and redraw the relevant boundaries of their own civilisation. This paper starts by exposing some of the classical ideas of civilisation and otherness, by which the Icelandic singularities may be measured. Having themselves once been perceived as Barbarians of the North, the Icelanders were particularly explicit in redrawing the boundaries of proper culture. Through their literary efforts they provided canons of a civilisation that is recognisably 'European', yet also quite distinct.

In my reassessment of the Icelandic canons of civilisation, I shall not waste much time on problems of definition. I shall simply say that my starting point is a view of civilisation as a comprehensive whole, which stands out from a general and more amorphous backdrop of an un-civilised world in the mind of the civilised people themselves. Civilisation is thus a matter of self-perception, and – of course – of some degree of self-objectification. This will be substantiated in more detail in the course of my article. The implicit argument is that while a culture or a society is simply one of a kind, civilisation is unique and absolute. There can only be one. My aim here is to focus on the implicit contrast between the self-declared civilisation and its Other, a non-discrete category of barbarians. Neither civili-

sation nor barbarians were native terms in medieval Iceland, but I shall use them to sum up the perceived contrast between self and others at the time.

## Antique civilisation: The prototype effect

In starting my discussion with a brief look on the antique origins of perceived civilisation as against perceived barbarism, I do not pretend to cover the ground so well researched by classical scholars. My aim is solely to establish a few salient points that have a bearing on the Icelandic case, on the general principle that the classical world came to be seen as the cradle of European civilisation itself and the beginnings of a distinctly European way of thinking. While it is hard to tell what the Icelanders thought about the yet indistinct ‘Europe’, we do know that learned Icelanders were versed in classical readings. To give just one example at this stage, the author of the remarkable *First Grammatical Treatise* wrote (c. 1140): “Because languages differ from each other – which previously parted or branched off from one and the same tongue – different letters are needed in each, and not the same in all, just as the Greeks do not write Greek with Latin letters, and Latinists (do) not (write) Latin with Greek letters, nor (do) the Hebrews (write) Hebrew with Greek or Latin letters, but each nation writes its language with letters of its own” (*The First Grammatical Treatise* 1972, 206–207).<sup>1</sup> The distinction between languages here is made on the basis of a sense of original (linguistic) unity. Already at this stage, learned Icelanders saw themselves in the mirror of a larger and *literate* world. There were many known languages – and cultures – but they were united in civilisation through writing. In the vernacular, writing implicitly reflected an extensive Norse and pre-Christian tradition, while Latin carried the load of a long European tradition, a tradition that was not simply borne by Christendom and the Latin alphabet but went beyond it to Greek legend and myth (Bagge 2004; Eldevik 2004). This is where the barbarians first appeared.

<sup>1</sup> “En af því at tungurnar eru ólíkar hver annarri, þær þegar er ór einni ok hinni sömu tungu hafa gengiz eða greinz, þá þarf ólíka stafi í at hafa, en eigi ena sömu alla í öllum, sem eigi rita Grikkir latínu stöfum girzkuna ok eigi latínúmenn girzkum stöfum latínu, né enn heldr ebreskir menn ebreskuna hvárki girzkum stöfum né latínu, heldr ritar sínum stöfum hver þíð sína tungu.” [Spelling normalized by editor]

In ancient Greece, the word 'barbarian' was used in the *Iliad* (l. 2,867), where it figures as an adjective to the unintelligible language of a named group of people. Barbarians were inarticulate within the ethnocentric framework of the Greeks. It was Herodotus, however, who in the 5th century B.C. was to launch an absolute distinction between the Hellenes and the barbarians, the latter simply being people who were *not* Hellenes (Lund 1993: 10ff). In the process, Herodotus inadvertently defines a Greek 'nation', when he – in *The Histories* – renders the Athenians' reasons for not submitting to Xerxes, the Persian king:

No doubt it was natural that the Lacedaemonians should dread the possibility of our making terms with Persia; none the less it shows a poor estimate of the spirit of Athens. There is not so much gold in the world nor land so fair that we would take it for pay to join the common enemy and bring Greece into subjection. There are many compelling reasons against our doing so, even if we wished: the first and greatest is the burning of the temples and images of our gods – now ashes and rubble. It is our bounden duty to avenge this desecration with all our might. Again, there is the Greek nation – the community of blood and language, temples and ritual; our common way of life; if Athens were to betray all this, it would not be well done (Herodotus, 1972, 574–575).

What transpires is a sense of distinction relating to descent, language and religion that had to be protected, not only against the Persians, but against all barbarians, who by the same token could not take part in the Athenian sports and games. Interestingly, The First Grammarian also speaks of nations (*þjóðir*), each with their own language. Possibly as significant in relation to the Icelandic case is Herodotus' overarching notion of history being a well researched story about what had happened; where true historical sources are lacking, Herodotus draws on (sometimes conflicting) oral traditions (Burn 1972, 9–10). We know a similar feature from Ari's *Íslendingabók* ('The Book of the Icelanders'), written sometime between 1122 and 1130 (*Íslendingabók. Landnámabók* 1968).

At the present stage of my argument my main point is that within the classical scheme of thought, barbarians were not an ethnic group as were

the Hellenes; they were a category of people beyond the intelligible world. At various points in time, different people were depicted as ‘standard-barbarians’. In Greek pottery-art the Scythians were singled out as prototypical barbarians, being a nomadic people of horsemen and bow-fighters who in their life-style contrasted starkly with people of the Greek *polis*, the city-state (Hastrup, H 1997). This is a first significant observation of an asymmetrical relationship between the civilised and the un-civilised, the former providing the yardstick of civilisation itself.

This skewed relationship was to become cemented in the third century BC, when political thinking developed further with Plato and his pupil Aristotle, who dealt with the nature of the state – that is the *polis* itself. In Book One of his *Politics*, Ch. 2, Aristotle frames his position by referring to a natural order of things in which some are born to rule, others to be ruled; among the latter are women and slaves, internally distinguished by nature by their different functions. He continues: “But among barbarians no distinction is made between women and slaves, because there is no natural ruler among them: they are a community of slaves, male and female. Wherefore the poets say – “It is meet that Hellenes should rule over barbarians”; as if they thought that the barbarian and the slave were by nature one” (Aristotle 1943, 52). Interestingly, the will (and capacity) for distinction here becomes a mark of civilisation itself, along with a recognition of born rulers.

Being the highest mark of human achievement and the natural goal of development, “it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the “Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one”, whom Homer denounces – the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war” (Ibid., 54). In the political domain, lacking a state is a token of homelessness on a comprehensive scale. The counterpoint to civilisation is a free-roaming outcast, tribeless, lawless, hearthless – and stateless. Already we detect the Icelandic sequel.

I shall refer to only one more example from Aristotle, namely his discussion of slavery. In *Politics*, Book One, Ch. 6, he maintains that “there is a slave or slavery by law as well as nature” (Ibid. 1943, 60). The former refers to the Hellenic order, within which slavery is simply a practical convention, while the natural slaves are found elsewhere.

Wherefore Hellenes do not like to call Hellenes slaves, but confine the term to barbarians. Yet, in using this language, they really mean the natural slave of whom we spoke at first; for it must be admitted that some are slaves everywhere, others nowhere. The same principle applies to nobility. Hellenes regard themselves as noble everywhere, and not only in their own country, but they deem barbarians noble only when at home, thereby implying that there are two sorts of nobility and freedom, the one absolute, the other relative (Ibid., 61).

This is a stunning declaration to the effect that the Hellenes stands out as unique; only they are measurable on an absolute scale of nobility and freedom, applicable exclusively to themselves, not to humanity at large. While on the surface, learned Greeks from Homer to Aristotle saw humankind as *one* biological species, and the barbarians as merely babblers within it, the distinction between Hellenes and others went deeper. The inability to speak Greek was in effect much more than a linguistic shortcoming; people who were devoid of both *logos* and *polis* were by definition outside of the *oikumene* (Pagden 1982, 16). The babblers may have been of the same species, but they were certainly of a different kind not having been taught the virtues of the *polis*. The state is a precondition for virtue and the proper use of human intelligence. Says Aristotle in *Politics*, Book One, Ch. 2:

But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state. A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature, and yet he who first founded the state was the greatest of benefactors. For man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all; since armed injustice is the more dangerous, and he is equipped at birth with arms, meant to be used by intelligence and virtue, which he may use for the worst ends. Wherefore, if he have not virtue, he is most unholy and the most savage of animals, and the most full of lust and gluttony (Ibid., 54).

The barbarians are no longer simply incomprehensible; they are uncivilised by all tokens of civilisation that are now seen to form an integrated whole.

When the Romans inherited the word barbarian from the Greeks, the shift of emphasis from language to culture was explicit (Lund 1993, 16). In the first century BC, Cicero wrote his treatise *The Republic*, in which he answers the question of whether Romulus' subjects were barbarians in the following manner: "If, as the Greeks say, all people other than Greeks are barbarians, I'm afraid his subjects *were* barbarians. But if the name should be applied to character rather than language, then the Romans, in my view, were no more barbarous than the Greeks" (Cicero 1998, 26). In contrast to the notion of Hellenes as an exclusive ethnic category, the notion of Romans was inclusive and comprised different groups within the empire. Gradually, some became more Roman than others, and the classification of the (ideal) Romans as barbarians that had been accepted by way of the Greek gaze subsided to a new alignment between Greeks and Romans as equally civilised – they were humans of the same kind in contrast to the Germanic tribes on the northern frontier, for instance (Lund 1993, 18ff).

These preliminary observations serve to highlight the so-called prototype effect inherent in classification which greatly complicates the viewpoint held by semanticists that all members of a particular category are equal (Rosch 1978; see also Hastrup 1995: 26ff). In practice, including linguistic practice, some members are always 'better' examples of the category than others; when 'birds' are mentioned, for Danes, little songbirds spring to mind more easily than ostriches, for instance. Prototypes reflect clusters of experience and socially embedded semantic densities that incorporate experience into the category system (Ardener 1989, 169).

This insight into the nature of categories has important implications for our understanding of social stereotypes, where the prototype effect often results in a metonymic replacement of the entire category by only parts of it (Lakoff 1987, 79ff). It seems to be particularly pertinent in relation to identity categories – such as Hellenes or Icelanders – where all members are not equally good examples; slaves for instance cannot be said to represent the category in either case. When it comes to the identity of civilised or even human, clearly 'we' are always a more likely prototype than the 'others'; the others are less representative of the category to which we ourselves belong. In this way, the eccentric nature of words intervenes in the experience of worlds. When the perspective chosen is from within a self-declared civilisation, the others are by definition less human than us;

this was the case with the ancient Greeks but I shall argue that it is a general feature of the definition of a civilisation is that it marginalises and often dehumanises others, the barbarians, and lumps them together in a single image of alterity in relation to humanity proper.

This was a model that was easily transposed into the early perception of the Christian world, based upon a myth of a single progenitor of humanity but also on a clear demarcation between insiders and outsiders. The Christian congregation was set apart from the rest of the world, but in contrast to the Greek *oikumene* it was open to others who could enter by way of conversion. The barbarians could – and for their own good, should – convert to proper society. As a term for the ultimate others, the barbarians remained a mirror for civilisation proper until modern times. The mirror, of course, was held up by the self-professed civilisation – as first defined in the classical world, where the North was as yet in the mists.

### Ultima Thule: Maps and metaphors

When the far North was first brought to the attention of the classical world of Southern Europe, it was encapsulated in the notion of *Ultima Thule*. Tracing Thule as a concept for the ultimate North means engaging with particular horizons, notably the boundary between known and unknown worlds. As recently discussed by Vincent Crapanzano, people are constantly concerned with both openness and closure in their construction of horizons that determine what we experience and how we interpret what we experience. “When a horizon and whatever lies beyond it are given articulate form, they freeze our view of the reality that immediately confronts us – fatally I’d say, were it not for the fact that once the beyond is articulated, a new horizon emerges and with it a new beyond” (Crapanzano 2004, 2). This process of the shifting of horizons is a key issue in the understanding of any image of the North.

Since classical times, Thule marked the imaginative horizon of the unknown North, and for some it inspired a distinct call. Among the pioneers was Pytheas of Massalia who in the 3rd century B.C. went further north than any other from the classical world. Pytheas visited the British Isles, “but the bold and hardy explorer does not seem to have stopped here.

He continued his course northward over the ocean, and came to the uttermost region, "Thule", which was the land of the midnight sun, "where the tropic coincides with the Arctic Circle" (Nansen 1911, 53). Pytheas was an astronomer and the most important observation he brought back was the length of the day during summer in this place, which was 'six days' sail north of the Orcades. The actual location of Pytheas's Thule remains uncertain because most of Pytheas's own observations have been lost, and are known only through slightly later, and highly critical renditions (by Pliny and Strabo, among others), who were sceptical about the possibility of life that far north.

In the early twentieth century, the Danish geographer H.P. Steensby used geographical evidence to assert that Pytheas's Thule would have been located in western Norway, and probably in the region of present day Bergen (Steensby 1917, 17). Steensby was further inclined to suggest that Pytheas himself had actually only come as far north as the western coast of Jutland (of present day Denmark), where he would have gathered information about this place even further north that he then named Thule. This would fit the mythical portent of the name.

Whatever the actual geographical turning point for Pytheas, the notion of *Thule* soon took on a life of its own and was to refer to a moving and imaginary horizon between an inhabitable and civilised South, and a barely inhabitable land of barbarians in the far North. Perhaps the most influential source for this particular image of the North was found in Virgil's vision of Augustus's resurrection of the Roman Empire to which even Ultima Thule would surrender (Harbsmeier 2002, 37). In Seneca's *Medea* (1st century), the Chorus comments on the future possibilities of the Argonauts, and says that when the world grows older the ocean will open and new continents will be disclosed, and Thule will no longer be the farthest of lands (*nec sit terris ultima Thule* (Seneca. *Medea*, 1927, 267–279).

Thus it is fair to say that in antiquity, Thule belonged to the imaginary horizon of human life, on the edge of which an unknown people lived in strange ways. Space does not permit me to go further into this, and I shall leave antiquity by giving the final word to Fridtjof Nansen, whose image of the misty relationship between the antique south and the far north is evocative of Thule itself:



Thus at the close of antiquity the lands and seas of the North still lie in the mists of the unknown. Many indications point to constant communication with the North, and now and again vague pieces of information have reached the learned world. Occasionally, indeed, the clouds lift a little, and we get a glimpse of great countries, a whole new world in the North, but then they sink again and the vision fades like a dream of fairyland (Nansen 1911, 124).

There is an oscillation between the openness and closure of horizons in this image that was to find a new balance in the Middle Ages. With the extensive travels of the Vikings and Norsemen, communications between North and South became more regular, and with the Viking expansion on the North Atlantic, new horizons opened. People from the British Isles and Scandinavia moved out – to Iceland and beyond. Meanwhile, the various geographies that had been produced in the first millennium maintained the idea of the ‘outer sea’, and the island of Thule on the edge of the world; interestingly, in quite a number of medieval texts, the Scythians are now living in the North, and more precisely in Sweden (Hemmingsen 2000).

In 825 A.D., Thule appears in a work by the Irish monk Dicuil (*Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae*) and given the context, there is no doubt that it refers to Iceland – as it would for Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus a little later. Some authors have wanted to project this back onto Pytheas’s Thule (e.g. Stefánsson 1942), but this is highly unlikely, given that Pytheas (allegedly) speaks of a people threshing and eating oats, among other things. So far, there is no archaeological evidence of human presence in Iceland at Pytheas’ time.

In *Landnámabók* (*Sturlubók*, Ch. 1), the identification of Thule with Iceland is taken for granted. Sturla refers to Beda, who had mentioned the island of Thile six days’ sailing north of Britain, where the sun shines all night when the days are longest but is not seen at all when the nights are longest. The echo from Pytheas is still audible across all of these centuries, and Sturla readily embraces the name of Thile for his island, whose history of settlement he then proceeds to describe. Again, there is a strong feeling that the Icelanders knew their classical texts.

From the outside, the position of the Icelanders in the larger scheme of things is not entirely clear. For Adam of Bremen (1968), writing in the late

eleventh century, the inhabitants of Thule were somewhat anomalous: The Icelanders treated their bishop as king, and took his words for law. It has been suggested that Adam mistook the Lawspeaker for a bishop, but the implication is clear: the Icelanders had no proper king, as had otherwise become the mark of civilised government (Hastrup 1985). This state of affairs was correlated with another apparent paradox in Iceland. According to Adam, the inhabitants were exceedingly primitive (as befalls the inhabitants of legendary Thule!) and lived in a state of nature; yet they were Christians. From the perspective of Bremen, the Icelanders mediated between the truly wild peoples such as the Finns – who had been identified by Procopius as the last barbarians of the northern countries – and the civilised world of Christians and kingdoms. Implicitly, this observation echoes Brink's point that Christianisation is not 'an event', or an abrupt ideological shift; it is rather a gradual change in mentality (Brink 2004).

The history of Thule – first as a metaphor for a distant land in the mysterious North and later as a distinct island in the North Atlantic – is a revealing case of the interpenetration of maps and metaphors. In this case the metaphor preceded the map; or, in a different phrasing, the illusion of an unknown land drove the explorers to the limit and urged them to map the blank spaces; later, the maps themselves became new metaphors as happened to Vancouver's chartings of the Pacific coast of America (Fisher and Johnston 1993). The result of mapping is as much a continuation of metaphor as it is a new map. Even when Thule was finally situated in northern Greenland, when in 1910 Knud Rasmussen established his Thule station (Hastrup 2009), the result was still a 'cartographic illusion' (Ingold 2000, 234). The map never simply represents the world, because in the process of representation, two important processes are bracketed: first, the process by which the explorers had arrived there in the first place – including the process by which they came to imagine Thule as their goal; and, second, the process by which they inadvertently came to represent it in particular terms. The actual way-finding across the sea, the experience of drift-ice and unreliable climes corroborated the classical image of Thule that again filtered into the final map through the process of (mentally) mapping the experience in comprehensible terms.

The illusion of Thule reminds us that both maps and histories are matters of perspective and of available imagery. In the process of the vision

and revision of the image of Thule, the mental map turned into a tenacious metaphor that was itself remapped every time the horizon shifted. The horizon moved but metaphors still informed the maps by which people oriented themselves in space. Thule remained on the edge of the world – as Adam of Bremen articulated so well. For a long time, Iceland fitted this image very neatly.

In a general way, the Scandinavians of the Middle Ages accepted that they were, indeed, peripheral. They lived ‘on the far edge of the dry land’ (Bagge 2004); as testified to by *Konungs skuggsjá*, the learned Scandinavians knew that their lands bordered on the outer sea. Yet at the time, these lands were increasingly affected by the literary impulses reaching them from the centre in the shape of translations or adaptations of European books; and within the northern world a new elite emerged, defined as such because of their having incorporated the literate culture of the larger Christian civilisation. As Sverre Bagge has it, the very position as elite depended on the definition of Scandinavia as peripheral; Bagge continues:

In this situation, two strategies were possible: (1) [to] try to become as similar as possible to what was understood as the ‘common European culture’, or (2) [to] cultivate one’s own originality and show that one’s own traditions were equal to those of the rest of Europe. Both strategies are found all over Scandinavia, but generally the first approach is more common in Denmark and Sweden, and the second in Iceland, with Norway in an intermediate position (Bagge 2004, 356–357).

Thus while Saxo Grammaticus – writing in Latin in compliance with the Danish view of what should be done to match European Christendom – complains that the Danes have only a poor knowledge of Latin, clearly implying that they were still rather uncivilised, the Icelanders take great pride in devising a vernacular literature that is both singular and on a par with southern traditions. By means of both strategies the northern lands gradually became integrated into European civilisation (Adams and Holman 2004).

For Iceland (and for the Norse tradition in general), it has been sug-

gested that writing in the vernacular may not simply have been a matter of pleasing the public, but a more profound issue of the use of older skaldic sources for the new historical literature – sources that were not easily transported into Latin (Mundal 2000). At yet another level, we might also see this as an expression of an ideology of civilisation based on a distinct – and sacred – spirit of ‘Norseness’, in no way inferior to the spirit of Athens invoked by Herodotus.

### Iceland on its own: Textualisation

When Thule was first located in Iceland in the early Middle Ages, it was not yet permanently populated, but this was soon to happen. The process is well described in early Icelandic sources, as is the constitutional moment of the Icelandic commonwealth – when the Alþing was inaugurated and Icelandic law was formalised in 930. At the time, law was synonymous with society in Scandinavia, as explicated in the proverbial statement *með lögum skal land byggja*. The highest office in Iceland was held by the Law-speaker, who had to recite all the laws over a period of three successive meetings at the Alþing; constitutional matters had to be spoken every year, however. We recall how law was diacritical also for the classical notion of civilisation.

In the mind of the Icelanders, law was a precondition for proper society – as it was for the classical scholars. Conversely, if people did not abide by the law, they were outlawed. Outlaws and other outsiders played an important part in the self-perception of Icelandic society, as can be seen from some of the most popular sagas like *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (Hastrup 1986). The outsiders were convenient ‘others’ against which the insiders could see themselves; on the whole the inside-outside dichotomy persisted in Icelandic cosmology as a conceptual scheme for distinguishing between the familiar and the alien, the known and the unknown, at many levels of social life (Hastrup 1981). The law itself was a main factor in closing off a civilised space against the untamed wild. While the actual legal practice was peculiar to Iceland, the general idea of defining society by way of law was also part of the Aristotelian tradition.

*Vár lög* (‘our law’) was the only comprehensive term for Icelandic soci-

ety in the early middle ages, and it goes without saying that any settler could become part of it by abiding to the law. Icelandic society was inclusive, as Roman society had been. At the dawn of Icelandic history there are no specific claims to a distinct Icelandic culture, only to a shared law. In those few contexts where a distinct ‘we’ is pertinent, the diacritical feature is one of language. Thus, to be a member of any court, a person had to be a native speaker of *dönsk tunga* (*Grágás* Ia, 38). This is well known of course, but we may reassess its significance in view of the civilising project; the law cannot be spoken in barbarian babble.

The first notion of the Icelanders as a distinct people is owed to Ari *inn fróði*, whose *Íslendingabók* launches an idea of historical continuity from the settlements until the time of writing, between 1122 and 1130. ‘The Icelanders’ emerged as an ethnic category – with retrospective application from the settlements (Hastrup 1990b). A shared history is what connects them; the formal legal entity is supplemented by a substantial, if implicit reference to what Herodotus said about ‘the common ways’ of the Greek. This was further substantiated with the advent of the *First Grammatical Treatise* (c. 1140), which is singular in its being the only known grammatical work in a vernacular language of the period. The author states that he was prompted to write the treatise because reading and writing had become common by then, and he wanted to facilitate the reading and writing of “laws, genealogies, religious works, and the learned historical works, which Ari has written with great acumen” (Hreinn Benediktsson, ed. 1972, 208–209).<sup>2</sup> Demonstrating the inadequacy of Latin letters for expressing the sounds of Icelandic, he subsequently suggested an alphabet for ‘us, the Icelanders’ (Ibid., 21). The distinctiveness of the Icelandic language is fully recognised – even if it was not until c. 1400 that the deep affinity to west Norwegian seems to have dissolved, judging from the fact that the export of Icelandic books to Norway had come to a complete stop by then (Stefán Karlsson 1979).

The first civilising move had occurred with the *landnám* itself, however much it was only retrospectively identified as made by ‘Icelanders’. The tradition established by *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók* and the Icelandic sagas provides a detailed and vivid history of the settlements as personal-

<sup>2</sup> “... lög ok áttvísi eða pyðingar helgar eða svá þau hin spaklegu fræði, er Ari Þorgilsson hefir á bœkr sett af skynsamlegu viti.” [Spelling normalized by editor]

ised in freedom-loving farmers of predominantly Norwegian origin. This could be seen as an expression of the predominant local self-perception. From the outside, the picture was less clear. In *Historia Norwegiæ*, a twelfth-century history composed by a Norwegian, the first settlers Ingólfr and Hjørleifr are said to have left their native Norway because they were killers (Storm, ed. 1880, 92–93). The inferiority of the (would-be) Icelanders is thus beyond question. By fleeing to Thule they have turned their back on civilisation and whatever safe haven they may have found, they remain criminals – barbarians.

Possibly, this allegation is the reason why the writer of the *Melabók*-version of *Landnámabók* is so articulate about his wish to get history right: “It is important to be able to tell outlanders, who believe that we descend from thralls or criminals, about our true ancestry ... it is mark of all civilised peoples that they themselves want to know about the origin of their country’s habitation” (*Landnámabók. Melabók* 1921, 143).<sup>3</sup> As against the Norwegian claim to superiority, the Icelandic retort is clear: We, the Icelanders, descend from men of honour as appropriate historical knowledge ascertains.

In some ways this is also the key to the Icelandic sagas written in the same period. In the sagas, tenth-century Iceland is depicted as a time of legal and social integrity, of manly honour and of kin loyalty. There were deviants, scoundrels and outlaws, but the social dramas were played out on a scene of original nobility – a nobility that depended on the scoundrels for their own distinction. Through this literary rehabilitation of the past, and of the tenth century in particular, an idea of a pre-Christian era of freedom and statesmanship was established. This is what Gerd Weber called the *Freiheitsmythos* of the Icelanders (Weber 1981). Law, literature and freedom merge in the tradition of the Icelandic settlers fleeing from the tyranny of King Harald Fairhair that is but another way of distinguishing oneself from past compatriots. The literature itself bears witness to what seems like an ‘auto-civilising’ process – with new claims to distinction in terms of language, law and descent.

The literary mediation of the dilemma related to the pagan beginnings

<sup>3</sup> “En vér þykkjumst heldr svara kunna útlendum mönnum, þá er þeir bregða oss því at vér séum komnir af þrælum eða illmennum, ef vér vitum víst vorar kynferðir sannar ... eru svo allar vitrar þjóðir at vita vilja upphaf sinna landsbyggða ...”. [Normalised by editor]

of Icelandic civilisation had an interesting counterpart in the actual conversion of the Icelanders c. 1000. The story has been told and retold a number of times, and I shall only relate the most salient points within the present context. Following missionary activities and a general shift towards Christianity in the rest of Scandinavia (along with the establishment of kingdoms), the *goðar*, that is the lesser local chieftains who had both religious and secular functions and who played a main role also at the annual Alþing, had started to convert. This transformed Christianity from a private to a political matter and accelerated the process of Christianisation considerably. At the opening of the Alþing in the year 1000, the people were divided in two camps, heathen and Christian. Some suggested that the two groups declare themselves 'out of law with one another' (*Íslendingabók* Ch.7), thus effectively establishing two societies within the same space. Others, and among them the Lawspeaker, the heathen Þorgeirr, felt that to rend asunder law was to rend asunder peace, and he suggested a compromise within one law that he then 'spoke': the Icelanders would accept Christianity with some provisos; the exposure of newborn children, the consumption of horsemeat, and sacrificing to heathen gods were still to be permitted on the condition that these activities took place in secrecy.

Within the context of contemporary European views of the world, the shift from heathenism to Christianity marks a shift from barbarism to civilisation, albeit a hesitating one in this case. One element in this is the advent of writing as a corollary to mission and conversion. The more important element, however, is the paving of the way for kingship and a new sense of the state – thus realising what Aristotle saw as the primary element in civilisation. Although the conversion occurred at one point in time in Iceland, we need not believe that there is a distinct before and after in the actual social life of the Icelanders. It is simply a way of thematising a historical process that had begun long before and which was to continue for a long period yet. We should also remember that 'heathenism' itself emerged simultaneously with Christianity, for which it provided an apt counterpoint – which could be annulled through conversion. It was insufferable that the Icelanders were to remain barbarians in the eyes of the bearers of Christian civilisation, even if they had to suffer peculiarly unfortunate material disadvantages on their far northern island.

There is another sense in which the literary activity makes up for something awkward in Icelandic history, namely the descent from pagans. If, as suggested by Kurt Schier (1981), the entire literary activity of the thirteenth century may be read as a more or less explicit wish to raise and maintain a consciousness of the Icelandic prestations in *terra nova*, it also sets the stage for the Icelandic love of freedom and for their noble activities. In other words, the stage was one upon which 'the noble heathen' played an important part (Lönnroth 1969) – a strange precursor to Rousseau's noble savage. In a thoroughly Christianised period – if such is possible – such as the thirteenth century, the literary motif of the noble heathen was a way of solving the dilemma between a pagan past and the teachings of the Church – a dilemma that Adam of Bremen had puzzled over in the eleventh century. Within Iceland itself, the dilemma was solved in writing – the literature mediating the awkward descent from pagans and present nobility.

It is no accident, therefore, that the central and most elaborate chapter of *Íslendingabók* concerns the introduction of Christianity in Iceland; it is supplemented by the accounts of the three last chapters which deal with the early history of the Church. No doubt this was seen as a major civilising move, a move that definitely signalled a turning away from heathenism – and by consequence from barbarism. *Landnámabók* too testifies to a civilising process on the Icelanders' own account. By naming and historicising nameless tracts, the authors of *Landnámabók* definitively claimed Thule for civilisation. The categorical others of the learned classical world now defined themselves, and reclaimed a degree of nobility. Additionally, *The First Grammatical Treatise* measured vernacular Icelandic against Latin and found the latter did not entirely match the sounds of Icelandic. These three texts are among the oldest literary pieces in Icelandic, and together they testify to a local self-consciousness as a civilised society within a larger order of civilisation. The texts offer their own solutions to the paradox of having a kingdom without a king, a law without ruler, a written language without religious imperatives.

In this connection it is worth mentioning Saxo Grammaticus who, in his prologue to the *Danish Chronicle*, writes about the nature of Iceland being so savage that one should hardly expect people to live there; he thereby echoes the general opinion held in 'the South' that Thule is on the margins of human habitation. It is well established that Saxo was influ-



enced by classical authors, and among them Virgil who spoke so elaborately about Thule (Friis-Jensen 1975). What is more significant in the present context is Saxo's reverence for the Icelanders' historical writings, which are important sources for his own work. The Icelanders, so to speak, fast all the year round because of natural scarcities, but they use their days to collect and expand knowledge of their own and other people's ways of life; "they make up for their privations by means of their art" (Saxo 1941, 34). Saxo gives a hint of another measure of civilisation here: artistic expression may compensate for material wants. The irony is that all the time that they were (re-)claiming European civilisation for themselves, the Viking descendants had to live with increasingly pointed European literature, which derided their achievements and once again portrayed them as the true villains of Europe, merging them with Saracens and other 'others' who were presented as waiting (in vain, as it happened) to destroy the virtue of Christendom (Levy 2004).

Looking back at Icelandic literary activity from a broad perspective, however, there is no doubt that it contributed to an accelerating process of self-objectification through writing. It is not a simple matter of technology and I am not making a universal statement of writing in itself being civilisational; studies of literacy have made us aware that it is not so simple (e.g. Bloch 1989). Even in ancient Greece, writing itself was not liberating (Andersen 1989). I am more concerned with *textualisation*, understood as a "double process which consists in a society's adopting writing as a social usage, and, as a consequence of that, understanding and construing social life, and society considered as a whole, as a text" (Meulengracht Sørensen 2001, 309). This was what made it possible for the Icelanders to write themselves (and their fellow Norsemen) into European history and – in the same move – to do so from a peculiar Icelandic perspective. The Icelanders' artistic activities did not simply make up for material wants, they placed Iceland solidly within European civilisation on the basis of an autonomous canon.

## Relocating the Barbarians: Canonicity

The creation of a distinct textual canon of (a Northern) civilisation almost immediately co-produced a new counterpoint. In Iceland itself, heathens

had been converted, slaves freed, and criminals outlawed according to the canon; and in the colonising of Greenland (and the voyages to Vineland and Markland), the Icelanders expanded Northern civilisation into a new and apparently empty territory that had to be textualised accordingly. As intimated by the author of *Konungs skuggsjá*, it was now Greenland that was located on the absolute edge of the land (*Konungs skuggsjá* ch. xix; cf. Bagge 2004). With the discovery of new territories, the unknown was translated into the known, and the canon was stretched to incorporate new knowledge (cf. Paine 1994:2). The horizon shifted but the canon remained in place.

However, in these new lands, the Icelanders met with people who defied every notion of civilisation, namely the *skrælingar*. The others by law (the Icelandic converts and outlaws) once again were measurable against the Other by nature. The civilised Self was further cemented with the new-found knowledge of a truly savage people. In a paradoxical way these savage people confirmed the canon of civilisation; by definition, a canon is exclusive and impregnable to the possibility of critique (Paine 1994:5). This is in contrast to – say – modern scholarship, which was founded on a principle of doubt in the Enlightenment and an idea of referentiality, rather than canonicity. In canon-governed circumstances, the unknown is closely linked to the known, either by incorporation or by refutation. The *skrælingar* are an example of the latter.

The etymology of *skrælingar* is not entirely clear, but probably it is related to *skræla*, ‘skranté’, and to *skrælna*, ‘to shrink’ (KLNLM XV, 715; de Vries 1977). The general bearing of the term is a small person, and a weakling. Others have suggested that it refers to a howling creature, reminding us of the original use of the word barbarian as an adjective, denoting an incomprehensible speech.

The earliest source for the Skrælings is, again, Ari’s *Íslendingabók*: Eiríkr and the first settlers in both east and west found remains of skin-boats and stone-smithies ‘... from which we may understand that the people who built Vineland and whom the Greenlanders called *skrælingar* had gone there.’ (*Íslendingabók. Landnámabók* 1968, 13–14).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, here it is suggested that the people of Vineland had originally populated

<sup>4</sup> ‘... af því má skilja, at þar hafði þess konar þjóð farit, es Vinland hefir byggt ok Grænendingar kalla *Skrælinga*.’ – Where no translated edition is referred to, the translations are the author’s own.

Greenland, and on the whole it is impossible at this stage to say definitively whether the *skrælingar* were Indians or Eskimos; the distinction certainly was immaterial at the time, when the people that met the Norsemen were truly 'new'.

In *Eiríks saga rauða* ('The Saga of Eric the Red') itself, the *skrælingar* are described thus: 'They were black and ferocious men, who had wiry hair on their heads; they had big eyes and broad cheeks' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 227).<sup>5</sup> The Norse observers were none too pleased by what they saw; in other stray references to the native Greenlanders, the *skrælingar* were described as trolls (e.g. *Flóamanna saga* 1932, 43). Seen from the Icelandic centre, the Eskimos were definitely not human. They could in fact be anything but.

In slightly later sources, where actual meetings between the settlers and native inhabitants of Greenland are related, the references are still slightly mythical. When the (Greenlandic) Norsemen went hunting for seal and walrus at Norðrseta (their northernmost hunting grounds on the western coast of Greenland) they would see traces of settlements and also meet the 'small people' of *skrælingar*. An early source is *Historia Norvegiae* (c. 1200) in which it is said that "further north, hunters have found a small people, whom they call *skrælingar*. Hit by weapons when alive, their wounds turn white and do not bleed, but when they die their blood does not stop flowing" (*Historia Norvegiae* 1880, 75ff). The encounter probably was not entirely peaceful but that notwithstanding, a picture is given of a people of hunters, totally lacking iron but with a remarkable craft in using walrus bone and stone. These people would have been members of what was later to be known as the Thule-culture among archaeologists (Hastrup 2008); from the detailed description of their weapons and skin-boats, there is no doubt that the references in both *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlandinga saga* are to members of this (archaeologically defined) early Eskimo culture – in so many ways the 'Scythians of the North' by their hunting and nomadic ways. Most encounters between the Greenlanders (of Icelandic descent) and the *skrælingar*, are depicted as a meeting between a farming and a hunting people that are driven towards each other by equal amounts of curiosity, enmity, a wish to exchange goods and a wish to remain untouched (e.g. *Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 261f).

<sup>5</sup> 'Þeir váru svartir menn ok illiligrir ok höfðu illt hár á höfði; þeir váru mjök eygðir ok breiðir í kinnum.'

The Norse colonies in Greenland were Christianised like Iceland, and even had their own bishop after 1126; they established their own Alþing, shared by the two settlements (Vestribyggð and Eystrbyggð), and eventually they pledged allegiance to the Norwegian king in 1261, a year before Iceland. The story thus far is parallel to that of Iceland, but it took its own turn with the disappearance of the settlements. Characteristically, the lingering explanation for this is the enmity of the *skrælingar*. It is very likely, however, that changes of climate and a decline in commercial and other forms of exchange with Iceland proper, as well as countries further away, were the main factors. We know how in Iceland, similar developments account for a remarkable demographic and social decline (Hastrup 1990a).

The settlers died out, the story goes, and quite likely they had trouble in reproducing themselves. However, with a stock of c. 5000 people at their height (KLNMI XIII, 654), the settlements would not have died out over night, without leaving a solid trace of human remains. We therefore may have to think in different terms; instead of dying out, possibly the Norsemen in Greenland were 'defined out'; they no longer knew themselves as before. By no longer adhering to old farming and herding ways, and having out of necessity adopted local 'Thule' ways, the Norsemen – as they knew themselves until then – ceased to exist. (The Hellenes had merged with the Scythians, so to speak.) In Iceland, we know how the farmers at the Alþing recurrently sought to counterbalance the demographic decline by introducing various restrictions on fishing (Hastrup 1990a, 67ff). As a kind of hunting, it could not take centre stage in a population of *soi-disant* farmers, even when farming was seriously hampered by climatic and other developments.

Farmers and hunters were not on a par; the former were civilised, the latter were barbarians. By becoming one with the Other, the Norsemen in Greenland could no longer be distinguished. They had 'died out'. The Norse colonies simply fell out of the civilisational range, and the metaphor of Thule took on a new life. Thus, when the Spanish King Charles V set out to conquer the New World, he took Virgil's *Tibi serviat ultima Thule* as his motto (Harbsmeier 2002, 37). His quest did not take him North, but others went there and warned their compatriots. Jean Malaurie, who went to the northernmost part of Greenland in the 1950s, quotes a certain Pierre Bertius, cosmographer of the Roy Très-Chrestien, Louis XIV, who wrote in 1618:

The cold is indomitable ... and ... it kills in number. Winter lasts nine months without rain ... The richest protect themselves ... by fire; others by rubbing their feet and others by the warmth of the caves in this earth ... All this land is full of cruel bears with which the inhabitants wage continual war. There are also ... if what they say is true – unicorns. They hold that there are men called pygmies . . . Pygmies have, it appears, a human form, hairy to the tips of the fingers, bearded to the knees, but brutish, without speech or reason, hissing in the manner of geese” (Quoted by Malaurie 1956, 30).

The little people, the trolls, the *skrælingar* or whatever the prototypical others had been named so far, are here joined by the Pygmies. They are located in a mythical nature, populated also by ‘unicorns’ (probably narwhals that had become larger-than-life). Whatever trace – genetic and otherwise – the Norsemen had left, they were no longer visible. Civilised life in Greenland had proved too far out.

The general point of this section is that once a true canon of civilisation is established, other ways of life cannot find a place within it – as ‘other’ that is. Canonicity turns thought into ideology, and either ‘the other’ is incorporated into the known as ‘same’ or must remain homeless and lawless within the civilised world as perceived. The others, however, remain necessary as accessories to self-perception and to ward off doubt about the canon by their very otherness.

### Shifting horizons of civilisation: Urtexts

As is well-known, Icelandic civilisation declined after the Black Death in 1402–04. This is not simply an external, pejorative observation, it was also a decline by Iceland’s own canonical standards (Hastrup 1990a), even if the foreigners were more outspoken. Internally, there were endless battles against fishermen refusing to take up residence as farm labourers, against *flakkarar* (vagrants), *útilegumenn* (‘outliers’) and others who did not fit the scheme of proper sedentary life. Even the humble practice of distant herding on *sel* (shielings) was given up, in the interest of keeping the shepherdesses at home. While before, the boundary had been drawn between lawful

and lawless people, in the centuries following the Black Death which were gradually more marked by decline in many ways, the boundary was redrawn: people who did not fit the local standards, as set by the farmers, were simply deemed inhuman – *ómennskir*. They abounded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

For 16th- and 17th-century travellers from other parts of Europe, Iceland had (once again) turned barbarian. Gories Peerse, a German observer, left no doubt about the savage nature of the Icelanders. Thus: “Ten or more of them sleep together in one bed, and both women and men lie together. They turn heads and feet towards each other, and snore and fart like pigs under the homespun” (Sigurður Grímsson, ed. 1946, 27); Peerse also noted how “many priests and clerics make only two sermons a year” (Ibid., 25). So, beastly habits were accompanied by a notable laxity towards matters of religion. The latter is testified to in other contemporary sources; thus the critical observer Dithmar Blefken noted about the Icelanders that they “are all prone to superstition and have demons and spirits in their service. Some of the men with luck in fishing are woken up at night by the devil to go fishing” (Sigurður Grímsson 1946, 37). In a different manner, this is also the implication of the *stóridómur* of 1564, in which heresy of all kinds is banned (*Lovsamling for Island I*, 84–90). Probably, Iceland was hardly faring any worse than other European peasant communities, but when measured against the medieval self-perception as embodied in the literature, the one-time flourishing part of, and contributor to, European civilisation had certainly come down in the world.

The allegation of barbarism once again spurred a textual response. Just like the author of *Melabók* had once sought to redress the external assumption of Icelandic descent from scoundrels, so Arngrímur Jónsson now sought to improve the image of Icelandic society as essentially savage. In his *Brevis Commentarius* (1593, 1968) Arngrímur explicitly wanted to redress the negative image that had been bestowed upon Iceland, notably by Münster’s cosmography. He wanted learned European contemporaries to know about Iceland’s true geographical position (that the island is not as far off as assumed), and to convince them that if Thule was once seen as barbarian and inhabited by ‘Skriðfinns’, this has no bearing on the Icelanders who are Christians and live in proper houses. A significant feature in the present context is his wide use of classical points of reference,

and his explicit position as a spokesman for Iceland as civilised. In his *Crymogæa* (1609, 1985), Arngrímur further describes the initiatives taken by the Danish kings after the reformation to improve the standards of the Icelanders. Significantly – with a view to the wave of European humanism in the wake of the renaissance, Arngrímur wrote in Latin – this was now the means to re-inscribe Iceland into European learning. No autonomous canon would now serve this end. Latin was instrumental to emphasizing the oneness of European civilisation. In the case of *Crymogæa*, it was further burdened by bearing the Greek name for Iceland.

I shall not continue this story, only use it to note how the horizons of civilisation shift, even if some of the parameters remain the same. The boundaries between selves and others are constantly redrawn, but it is only in the process of textualisation that a definite boundary towards an absolute Other – the radically different, or the barbarian – can be drawn. The power of literature in the process of civilisation – which is also a process of canonisation – is to provide a means of self-objectification; Cicero was well aware of that when he hailed poetry as the true means to eternal knowledge.

What happened in Iceland as well as in Greece, where the barbarians were first born as such, was that society itself was shaped in texts – texts that became canonical and therefore continued to frame the perception of propriety and truth. In both cases people were favoured – at first, if later burdened – by a set of *ur-texts*, to which they might refer whenever self-definition was an issue, and against which all new forms were seen as more or less successful variants (Herzfeld 1987; Hastrup 1998). Such *ur-texts*, defining the Ur-Norsemen and the Ur-Europeans respectively, are cornerstones in the perception of civilisation itself. Even today, we find that Icelandic uniqueness is still claimed with reference to medieval Icelandic history, and a purity of language, life and nature (Magnús Einarsson 1996).

In Greece the classical *ur-texts* canonised the Ur-Europeans, while in Iceland, the Ur-Norsemen were and often are still portrayed in terms of medieval canonical literature. In both cases, the literature propounds the defining features of civilisation. What connects the classical European and the Icelandic notions of civilisation goes deeper, however, and takes us to a profoundly European view of the world, not only textualising it, but bas-

ing it in a profoundly logocentric perspective. This is what makes the Icelandic view of civilisation so distinctly European, while also so remarkably northern. Beyond the *logos* of the literati and the lawmen, vagrants and babblers live another life altogether.

In this study I wanted to show how the idea of civilisation, and its expression in distinct political and other institutions, may be understood in terms of an absolute canon of civilisation, first established in a set of ur-texts, which transcends lesser cultural differences – provided people are still recognisable as civilised. In a logo-centric Europe, textualisation was a prime feature in the politics of recognition. This also applies to Iceland, providing the ur-texts of the early Nordic civilisation.

#### REFERENCES

- Adam of Bremen. 1968. *De hamburgske ærkebispers historie og Nordens beskrivelse*, transl. by C.L. Henriksen, 2nd ed. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger.
- Adams, Jonathan and Katherine Holmen, eds. 2004. *Scandinavia and Europe 800–1350. Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Andersen, Øivind. 1989. “The Significance of Writing in Early Greece – a critical appraisal.” Karen Schousboe and Mogens Trolle Larsen, eds. *Literacy and Society*. Copenhagen: Center for Research in the Humanities.
- Ardener, Edwin. 1989. *The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Aristotle’s Politics. 1943. Transl. by Benjamin Jowett. New York: The Modern Library of the World’s Best Books.
- Arngrímur Jónsson. 1968. *Brevis commentarius de Islandia* (1593). Preface by Jakob Benediktsson with an English Summary. Íslenzk rit í frumgerð 2. Reykjavík: Endurprent sf.
- Arngrímur Jónsson. 1985. *Crymogæa* (1609). *Þettir úr sögu Íslands*, ed. and transl. Jakob Benediktsson. Reykjavík: Sögufélagið.
- Bagge, Sverre. 2004. “On the Far Edge of Dry Land: Scandinavian and European Culture in the Middle Ages.” Jonathan Adams and Katherine Holmen, eds. *Scandinavia and Europe 800–1350. Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Bloch, Maurice. 1989. “Literacy and Enlightenment.” Karen Schousboe and Mogens Trolle Larsen, eds. *Literacy and Society*. Copenhagen: Center for Research in the Humanities.



- Brink, Stefan. 2004. "New Perspectives on the Christianization of Scandinavia and the organization of the Early Church." Jonathan Adams and Katherine Holmen, eds. *Scandinavia and Europe 800–1350. Contact, Conflict, and Co-existence*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Burn, A.R. 1972. "Introduction." Herodotus. *The Histories*, transl. by Aubrey de Sélincourt, revised, with an introduction and notes by A. R. Burn. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics.
- Cicero. 1998. *The Republic. The Laws*, transl. by Niall Rudd. Oxford: Oxford World Classics.
- Crapanzano, Vincent. 2004. *Imaginative Horizons. An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eldevik, Randi. 2004. "What's Hecuba to Them? Medieval Scandinavian Encounters with Classical Antiquity." Jonathan Adams and Katherine Holmen, eds. *Scandinavia and Europe 800–1350. Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Eyrbyggja saga. Brands þáttur orva. Eiríks saga rauða. Grœnlendinga saga. Grœnlendinga þáttur*. 1935. Ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson. Íslenzk fornrit IV. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Flóamanna saga*. 1932. Ed. by Finnur Jónsson. Copenhagen: Samfund til Udgivelse af gammel nordisk Litteratur.
- Fisher, Robin and Hugh Johnston, eds. 1993. *From Maps to Metaphors. The Pacific World of George Vancouver*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Friis-Jensen, Karsten. 1972. *Saxo og Vergil*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.
- Grágás. *Íslendernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid* Ia, Ib. 1852. Ed. by V. Finsen. Copenhagen: Det Nordiske Litteratur-Samfund.
- Harbsmeier, Michael. 2002. "Bodies and Voices from Ultima Thule. Inuit Explorations of the Kablunat from Christian IV to Knud Rasmussen." Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin, eds. *Narrating the Arctic. A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practices*. Science History Publications/USA.
- Hastrup, Helene B. 1997. "Det er skythere!" *Sfinx* 20(4)4, 150–155.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 1981. "Cosmology and society in medieval Iceland." *Ethnologia Scandinavica* 1981: 63–78.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 1985. *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland. An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 1986. "Tracing Tradition. An Anthropological Perspective on Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar." J. Lindow, L. Lönnroth, and G.W. Weber, eds. *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*. Odense: Odense University Press.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 1990a. *Nature and Policy in Iceland 1400–1800. An Anthropological Analysis of History and Mentality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 1990b. *Island of Anthropology. Studies in Past and Present Iceland*. Odense: Odense University Press.

- Hastrup, Kirsten. 1995. *A Passage to Anthropology. Between Experience and Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 1998. *A Place Apart. An Anthropological Study of the Icelandic World*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 2008. "Shadows of Myth. The Emergence of the Thule Culture." *Facets of Archaeology*. Oslo Archaeological Studies 10.
- Hastrup, Kirsten, 2009. "Images of Thule. Maps and metaphors in representations of the far North." Sverrir Jakobsson, ed. *Images of the North. Histories Identities Ideas*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.
- Hemmingsen, Lars. 2000. "Middelaldergeografien og *Historia Norvegiae*." Inger Ekrem, Lars Boje Mortensen and Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, eds. *Olavslegenden og den latinske historieskrivning i 1100-tallets Norge*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Forlag.
- The First Grammatical Treatise*. 1972. Ed. by Hreinn Benediktsson. Reykjavík: Institute of Nordic Linguistics.
- Herodotus. 1972. *The Histories*, transl. by Aubrey de Sélincourt, revised, with an introduction and notes by A. R. Burn. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1987. *Anthropology Through the Looking-Glass. Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1995. "Hellenism and Occidentalism: The Permutations of Performance in Greek Bourgeois Identity." James G. Carrier, ed. *Occidentalism. Images of the West*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Historia Norvegiae. Monumenta Historica Norvegiae*. 1880. Ed. by Gustav Storm. Oslo: Brøgger.
- Ingold, Tim. 2000. *Perception of the Environment*. London: Routledge.
- Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*. 1968. Ed. by Jakob Benediktsson. Íslensk fornrit. I Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- KLNM: Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder fra Vikingetid til Reformasjonstid I-XXII*. 1956–1978. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger.
- Lakoff, George. 1987. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things. What categories reveal about the human mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Landnámabók, Melabók*. 1921. Ed. by Finnur Jónsson. København: Kommissionen for det Arnemagnæanske Legat.
- Levy, Brian J. 2004. "The Image of the Viking in Anglo-Norman Literature." Jonathan Adams and Katherine Holmen, eds. *Scandinavia and Europe 800–1350. Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Lovsamling for Island I-XXI*. 1853–1889. Ed. by O. Stephensen and Jón Sigurðsson. Copenhagen: Høst og Søn.
- Lund, Allan A. 1993. *De etnografiske kilder til Nordens tidlige historie*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Lönnroth, Lars. 1969. "The Noble Heathen. A theme in the sagas." *Scandinavian Studies* 41(1), 1–29.

- Magnús Einarsson. 1996. "The Wandering Semioticians: Tourism and the Image of Modern Iceland." Gisli Pálsson & E. Paul Durrenberger, eds. *Images of Contemporary Iceland*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press.
- Malaurie, Jean. 1956. *The Last Kings of Thule*. London: George Allen and Unwin. (Translated from the French, *Les derniers rois de Thule*. 1955. Paris: Plon)
- Meulengracht Sørensen, Preben. 2001. "Literature and Society." *At fortælle Historien/Telling History. Studier i den gamle nordiske litteratur/Studies in Norse Literature*. Trieste: Edizione Parnaso.
- Mundal, Else. 2000. "Den latinspråklege historieskrivinga og den norrøne tradisjonen: ulike teknikkar og ulike krav." Inger Ekrem, Lars Boje Mortensen and Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, eds. *Olavslegenden og den latinske historieskriving i 1100-tallets Norge*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Forlag.
- Nansen, Fridtjof. 1911. *In Northern Mists. Arctic Exploration in Early Time I–II*. London: William Heineman.
- Pagden, Anthony. 1986. *The Fall of Natural Man. The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paine, Robert. 1995. "Columbus and Anthropology and the Unknown." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 1: 47–65.
- Rosch, Eleanor. 1978. "Principles of Categorisation." Eleanor Rosch and B. Lloyd eds. *Cognition and Categorisation*. New Jersey: Social Science Research Council Committee on Cognitive Research.
- Saxo Grammaticus. 1941. *Danmarks Krønike*, fordansket ved Nicolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, new edn. by Vilhelm La Cour. Copenhagen: Det Tredje Standpunkts Forlag.
- Schier, Kurt. 1975. "Iceland and the rise of literature in "terra nova". Some comparative reflections." *Gripla* I, 168–181.
- Seneca. *Medea*. 1927. Transl. Frank Miller. New York.
- Sigurður Grímsson, ed. 1946. *Glöggð er gests augað. Úrval ferðasagna um Ísland*. Reykjavík: Menningar- og fræðslusamband alþýðu.
- Stensby, Hans Peter. 1917. "Pytheas fra Massalia og Jyllands Vestkyst." *Geografisk Tidsskrift* 24, 12–34.
- Stefán Karlsson. 1979. "Íslandsk bogeksport til Norge i middelalderen." *Maal og Minne*. 1–2: 1–17.
- Stefánsson, Vilhjálmur. 1942. *Ultima Thule. Further Mysteries of the Arctic*. London, Toronto, Bombay, Sydney: George G. Harrap & Co.
- Vries, Jan de. 1997. *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Leiden: Brill.
- Weber, Gerd Wolfgang. 1981. "Irreligiosität und Heldenzeitalter. Zum Mythencharacter der altisländischen Literatur." Ursula Dronke et al., eds. *Speculum Norroenum. Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, Odense: Odense University Press.

## SUMMARY

The notion of civilisation implies its own negation – that which is not civilised. For civilisation to register, a negative mirror image must be invoked, located either in another time or in another place. Whether the opposition is constructed temporally or spatially, and whether it is symbolic or real, images of otherness may provide fresh insights into the constitution of the declared civilisation. For the early Nordic civilisation on the edge of the European world, a study of its proposed ‘others’ reveals how the idea of being civilised owes as much to classical thought as to the contemporary Nordic outlook.

In the case of Iceland, literary and other written sources provide rich material for reflecting on the Icelanders’ perceived position in the world; by defining and redefining ‘the others’, they constantly sought to distinguish themselves and to draw the relevant boundaries of their own civilisation. This paper starts by exposing some of the classical ideas of civilisation and otherness by which the Icelandic singularities may be measured. Having themselves once been perceived as Barbarians of the North, the Icelanders were particularly explicit in redrawing the boundaries of proper culture. Through their literary efforts, they provided canons of a civilisation that is recognisably ‘European’, yet also quite distinct.

*Kirsten Hastrup*  
*Department of Anthropology,*  
*University of Copenhagen*  
*kirsten.hastrup@anthro.ku.dk*