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DECONSTRUCTING
THE "NORDIC CIVILIZATION"

UNTIL the eleventh century, Latin Europe was still "busy" with its internal developments, the most important of which was the northward and eastward political expansion. The post-Romano-Carolingian zone was replaced with a much more pluralistic system of states built upon differentiated cultural traditions. By the year 1000, the political map of the continent had taken the shape that is still recognizable today. There is a tendency to label this process the "Europeanization" of the new territories, which suggests a unilateral expansion of the obviously superior model. I would rather say that it was when the new northern- and central-European Christian states entered the continental stage that Europe became Europe (Urbańczyk 2004). That merging of different traditions and the substantial enlargement of territories where ruling elites felt some supra-regional unity triggered a truly dynamic development across the whole continent. This process is differently understood in various countries, largely depending on individual countries' interpretations of the earlier situation.

In Scandinavia, there is a deeply-rooted scholarly tradition of looking at the northern Viking Age/Early Medieval[1] period, which has established a rather uniform picture of an area that was internally homogenous but at the same time, very different from what was observed elsewhere. The popular idea of a common "Viking Age culture" across the whole North is based on archaeological, linguistic and historical arguments. This vision may be explained as a result of the exceptional richness of vernacular literature that kept historians preoccupied with "internal" northern problems,

[1]   There is a traditional "discrepancy" between the Nordic system of subdividing the first millennium AD and the one used elsewhere in Europe. I will use here the general European concept of the Early Middle Ages with its termination period ca. 1000 AD and thus including almost the entire Scandinavian Viking Age.

and also by the material culture which shows continuity from the previous periods. Both resulted in studies focused on the pan-regional commonalities of the Nordic area that were produced in some kind of "splendid isolation".

Thus, the natural geographic and linguistic definition of Scandinavia received an additional historical-cultural dimension. This allowed the inclusion of all of the insular "colonies", which in turn resulted in the enlargement of the Nordic area over the whole of the north Atlantic. There is no doubt that this part of the globe really did show specific traits that sustain these historical generalizations. However, such a perspective may not be scientifically fruitful because it overshadows obvious points of differentiation across the area in question. The dominant trend of looking for the similarities of the "common" Nordic Viking Age culture produced elegant synthetic interpretations but it has made it difficult to understand local and regional variations which eventually resulted in different political and economic developments during the High and Late Middle Ages.

Therefore, I do not like Arnold Toynbee's concept of a specific pre-Christian "Nordic civilization" which was a conscious northern "response" to the breakdown of the imperial Roman world and the ensuing tripartite division into Western Christendom and Byzantium flanked to the south and east by the Islamic world. Such a view is based on a rather simplified contrast between the North and the post-Roman world but at the same time, implies their historical equality in the further development of Europe.

This added an "historiosophic" dimension to the picture of the uniqueness of the homogenous North which had already been established through the combined efforts of Scandinavian geographers, linguists, historians and archaeologists. The idea of an ancient unity and a common destiny is, however, undermined by yet another, equally strong historiographic tradition which divides this huge "Nordic civilization" into original "ethnic" sub-regions. It is generally taken for granted that the earliest history of Scandinavia concerns the primordial Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish peoples who were soon to be followed by the Faroese and the Icelanders. They are all the obvious subjects of national(istic) scholarly interests. Thus, the idea of "national" continuities determined the tracks of the historical

narratives that refer to the Nordic early Middle Ages. Even in Iceland, the desire for a deeply-rooted ethno-political continuity is so strong that it is necessary to be reminded that "...those who first settled in Iceland were not Icelanders, but immigrants" (Orri Vésteinsson 2006, 85).

One should ask whether these two somehow contradictory concepts of the original homogeneity promoted mostly by archaeologists, and of the original subdivision of Scandinavia into three "ethnic" parts promoted by historians (and strongly supported by politicians), have a firm foundation in the available data. The study of the problem must be interdisciplinary but I feel that the leading role in such an endeavour will be played by archaeologists who have access to data that are local by their very character, while historians have to deal with sources the majority of which originate (in their extant form) from the geographically limited area of Mediaeval Icelandic scholarly tradition. Optimally, one should apply a combined argumentative approach that refers to both material and written sources of information in order to help cross-check new hypotheses. Unfortunately, this may be impossible in many cases where geographical areas simply lack relevant historical data detailed enough to allow serious discussion of specific problems that may be revealed by archaeological studies.
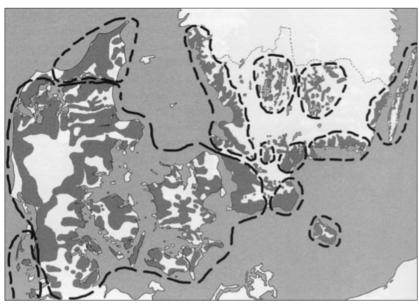
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Let us look, then, at some examples of studies that suggest the necessity of including local and regional diversities as an obvious element in further research on mediaeval "Nordic civilization." To challenge the dominating concept or myth of a pan-Scandinavian cultural unity, or even uniformity, one may combine a basic knowledge of the Middle Ages with anthropological experiences of traditional societies, which imply that general ways of life and ideology, and their cultural manifestations, must have somehow differed between the north and the south as well as between the west and the east of such a vast and differentiated area as Scandinavia. This refers not only to the obvious linguistic and ethnic differentiation between the dominating majority of the Germanic people who were, of course, the main object of scholarly interest, and the long overlooked Sami who occupied the far north and the mountainous interior (cf. Hansen and Olsen

2004) [2], and also to the largely neglected presence of the Slavs in southern
Scandinavia (cf. Roslund 2001 and Naum 2008). More important for this
particular discussion is the internal variability of the "Nordic civilization"
itself.

Scandinavian archaeologists traditionally interpreted the visible uneven-
ness of cultural manifestations as merely local variations of one unified
cultural tradition. This deeply rooted assumption may be checked by
studying collective death rituals that were important for both the external
differentiation of particular communities and their internal integration.
Fredrik Svanberg's (2003a and 2003b) analyses of south-east Scandinavia
during the period 800–1000 AD, indicate that there were eleven quite
distinct burial traditions (Svanberg 2003b, Fig. 61). This undermines the
popular concept of some homogenous "Viking Age culture" because terri-
torial variability of grave types indicating differentiation in burial customs
and death rituals, may be interpreted in terms of religious differentiation.
This, in turn, undermines the concept of common pan-Scandinavian reli-
gious symbolism and eschatological beliefs because "...it is hard to see how
a number of different traditions may all simply be reflections of one and
the same coherent mythology or religion" (Svanberg 2003a, 142).

Even in Denmark, most of which is dominated by inhumations, Jutland
exhibits a significantly large number of cremations. Unfortunately there
are no such detailed regional studies for other parts of Scandinavia but also
there are other clear points of differentiation. For Norway we might
regard the more general observation that "there were probably major dif-
ferences in culture and belief" in the area of contemporary Norway (S. W.
Nordeide 2006, 222), because the late Iron Age burial customs there seem

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2   Today, the early contacts between the two populations, Germanic and Sami, are seen as
     equally important for both parties. The times when mutual relations were interpreted
     mostly in terms of the forced exploitation of the Sami by Germanic chieftains are long
     gone, while references to numerous medieval accounts of the use of Sami expertise in
     magic and the marrying of Sami women to Norse men of high rank are held to be signific-
     ant. Contacts during pre-Christian times are now discussed in terms of symbiosis and
     co-operation rather than confrontation and subordination (Hansen and Olsen 2004, ch.
     3.3). Rich female graves in the Norwegian zone containing typical Sami ornaments, and
     females buried in the Sami zone with Scandinavian jewellery, seem to testify to an opport-
     unistic "exchange" of women. This may suggest some institutionalization of the cross-
     ethnic contacts, which is further suggested by some linguistic connections and place names
     (Hansen and Olsen 2004, ch. 3.5).

An illustration of the geographical dispostion of different ritual system in south Scandinavian c. AD 800–1000 as argued in this work. (F. Svanberg 2003b, 148).

to be very heterogeneous (S. W. Nordeide 2007, 3f). Other research indicates that while inhumations were the dominant custom in Vestfold, cremations seem to be equally common in western Norway and also became dominant in the north (Stylegar 2007, 87). However, closer analyses of various regions might disclose a more detailed picture. The ritual differentiation observed among various cemeteries of Kaupang — a centre that functioned as a central place visited by various people who traded, lived and occasionally died there — clearly suggests a more complex picture. Unfortunately, this "ethnic" aspect of the site has not provoked deeper reflections (Stylegar 2007, 101). Iceland with its surprising lack of cremations and domination of "one prescribed ritual performance concerning the disposal of the dead" (Þóra Pétursdóttir 2007, 59) showed still another variant of the Nordic world.

Nonetheless, we must accept that obviously, "there were profound chronological, regional, and social differences in pre-Christian religion practice in Scandinavia" (A. Andrén, K. Jennbert and C. Raudvere 2006,

14). This change in critical attitudes results in reflections such as "the source material for Old Norse religion is the expression of a process and a frozen glimpse of a vast universe in motion. It is also a picture of a religion that was part of a much bigger cultural whirlpool and cannot be studied separately" (Bertell 2006, 299);that Scandinavian religion was "an inherent part of the European cultural tradition" (Clunies Ross 2006, 412). In addition, it "may have had large differences within itself" (Bertell 2006, 299).

When discussing the problem of "uniformity vs. differentiation", one should also keep in mind the ambivalence of the Nordic archaeological evidence, which indicates that "the burials of the social elite followed traditions that were primarily supra-regional, while the burial customs of the vast majority of people were primarily connected to ritual traditions more or less limited to relatively small geographical areas and human groups" (Svanberg 2003a, 142). This suggests the dual identity of Scandinavian aristocrats who, in addition to having ties that connected them to their domains, "saw themselves as members of more or less well defined supra-regional communities" with which they maintained intense contacts (Svanberg 2003a, 180; also 2003b, 17). Obviously, it is these rich burials that have always attracted common attention, have dominated literature, and have been the focus of exhibitions, thus obscuring the real differentiation between the prevailing masses of Scandinavian peoples.

The duality of the political elite's cultural affiliations became even more striking and more "cosmopolitan" after the network of Christian monarchies was established in Europe in the late 10th century. One may observe how royal dynasties subsequently began to promote a continental model of rulership with its standard elements such as anointment, coinage, royal titles, iconography, the foundation of churches and monasteries, the introduction of "national" state names, and so on. It was necessary to adopt this conformity with the pan-continental symbolism in order to become acknowledged players on the geopolitical stage. This did not, however, remove attachment of members of the ruling dynasties to their "own/ national" traditions that ensured the cultural coherence of their territorial domains.

One may presume that, apart from the elitist behaviour of the top social levels that signalled their membership in the interregional elite, quite common people too could have belonged to several cultural or symbolic com-

munities through relating themselves differently to available collective perceptions of tradition, mythology or cultural landscape. This could have been the case, first of all, in pre-Christian times when no political power could or would enforce ideological and symbolical uniformity. "Beyond the Vikings, then, lies a world of many cultures, realities and life ways, not just a single and uniform 'Scandinavian Viking Age culture'" (Svanberg 2003a, 202). This should be rather obvious for archaeologists who study precisely localized communities and contemplate the differentiation in these communities' material cultures. For historians, a warning is sounded by those who claim that the authors of the source texts recorded in the 12th and 13th centuries were "...playfully, but quite innocently, playing with forms and contents inherited from a previous, but religiously speaking long dead era" (Simek 2006, 380). Therefore, "...the use of these mythographical, high-medieval texts as source material for a pre-Christian, pre-medieval Scandinavian religion certainly is abuse" (Simek 2006, 380).

Taking into account such results of recent studies on the pre-Christian past, one should not be surprised that Christianization was not uniform in Scandinavia. "There was not a single Christianization process but in fact many different Christianizations" (Svanberg 2003b, 147) that geographically conformed to the identified Viking Age regions of specific ritual systems (*Ibid.*, Fig. 62). It was only the gradual reinforcement of territorial control of the early state centres that enforced relatively homogenous reactions to the eschatological expectations of Christianity. Thus, in the long perspective, Christianity – which raised social consciousness above the individual and local "ethnic" beliefs – helped to overcome cultural differentiations and subsequently eased contradictions, allowing the formation of much broader "national" identities. That is why Christianity may be understood as the corner-stone of the establishment of the stable territorial organizations that took shape in the 10th–11th centuries.

Not so long ago, the Christianization of the areas that bordered the northern and north-eastern edge of the post-Roman core of Europe was viewed as a rather rapid process, initiated by zealous missionaries and effectively executed by devout monarchs. This concept followed the ecclesiastic tradition which equated the end of paganism with the official inclusion of whole peoples (*gentes*) into the Church. The general character of the process was also defined through focusing on similarities between the

regional developments that were to follow the continental trend. This gen-
eralizing attitude may be questioned by asking whether the similarities are
not just superficial manifestations of continental political circumstances.

Similarly, not so evident is the postulated smoothness and linearity of
the conversion process, which was, for a long time, considered to be obvi-
ously progressive and advantageous for both political organizations and
social structures. The recent tendency has been to explore the dialectic
aspects of the "acceptance versus resistance" attitudes and to expose the
confrontation and the continuation of the "old" and "new" religion-driven
socio-political systems (e.g. Kaliff 2007). The research perspective has
broadened both by including studies of longer periods "before" and "after"
the official conversions, and by looking for details that might shed light on
the reality, observed at the regional, local or even individual level (cf.
regional studies in Berend ed. 2007).

Religion has always been an important aspect in collective and individual
self-definition. Therefore, we may assume that an inter-religious dialogue
has played an important role in the processes that shaped the ethnic structure
of the continent, and the function of Christianization in inter-ethnic rela-
tions deserves closer study. Studies on Christianization must include
research on the tensions typical for situations where there is radical ethnic/
cultural/linguistic differentiation. The struggle took place not only at the
stage of ideological dialogue/conflict (cf. Urbańczyk 2003b) but also in the
material expressions of different world views which are manifested in
funeral rituals. All this resulted in a long and difficult Christianization and
in an actively vigorous or passively stubborn resistance on the part of local
people. This is archaeologically witnessed in syncretic practices and pagan
burials which are still observed in peripheral regions in the High Middle
Ages (for Poland see Urbańczyk and Rosik 2007).

Such differences may be observed in eschatological manifestations that
are best visible in burial rites. Here, archaeological records may be the only
source of information due to the lack of relevant written sources. However,
interpretations of material evidence must be devoid of ready-made clichés
that result in circular argumentation. A good example is the easy categori-
zation of early medieval burials as exclusively either of "pagan" or
"Christian" character or types. Such exclusive categories are placed sepa-
rately within two different historical periods: before or after the official

conversion. This way, the historiographic tradition of the clear-cut periodisation finds obvious support in archaeological evidence which in fact has been interpreted according to this periodisation. This works in such a way even in Iceland, which obviously had no indigenous traditions that could blur the bi-polar vision of "pagans" versus "Christians". To be honest, one must admit that such logical loopholes were typical also of other historiographies. A good example of the radical separation of two distinct periods is to be found in Polish medieval studies where such an *a priori* scheme, however primitive, also spares the trouble of explaining a transition from one ideology to another.

The way out of this circular argumentation is through complex multidisciplinary studies that must include precise accelerator (AMS) dating of every burial. Only a skilful combination of critically assessed texts and analyses of material evidence, supported by linguistics, theology, numismatics, history of art and historical anthropology, may ensure real progress in our understanding of the fascinating process of Christianization of North Europe. This will reinforce the already visible departure from the simplistic "text-driven" archaeology that concentrates on the "confirmation" of the written sources, and from "item-fascinated" history that uses archaeological data as simple illustrations of ready-made concepts, both of which were parasitic substitutes of the postulated multi-disciplinarity.

There is a need for thoughtful discussion about the Christianization of Iceland which is still viewed through the rather naïve lens of the story constructed by the late "republican" tradition of the peaceful and radical acceptance of religious change. Dominance of this concept saves archaeologists interpretational troubles when discovering early graves and results in a suspiciously clear story devoid of the expected tensions connected to ideological conflict. Instead of contemplating this unique situation of the cleverly negotiated compromise, one should rather ask what could have been the political function of the conversion, viewed as the "capitulation" of the old world (Toynbee 1951, 358).

I suspect that this myth of an unproblematic conversion that hid the real conflicts was consciously created by the Icelandic intellectual elite, perhaps in order to reinforce the idea of the power of negotiability that was deeply embedded in the ideology of the medieval Icelandic political system. Ca. 1130 this was openly expressed by Ari Þorgilsson who in his

Íslendingabók made the Lawspeaker Thorgeir argue that: "We should rather mediate the matters so that each party gets some part of what it desires."[3] This may be taken not as the essence of the historical event but rather as the essence of the political mentality that prevailed in "republican" Iceland.

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Because of the general premise of the three original ethnicities, the state formation period in Scandinavia is usually viewed as a merely political unification of the hitherto ethno-culturally uniform lands. Therefore, it is interpreted as the final giving of some centrally controlled "law and order", and thus just one more step in the long history of the original existence of the three great nations. From such an evolutionistic perspective, early kings acted as natural "unifiers" who only invigorated the already present process, not as "creators" who triggered and promoted internal unification and external differentiation while striving for the reinforcement and enlargement of their dynastic spheres of political and economic interests.

Scandinavian historiography of the early Middle Ages does not easily acknowledge the theory that in most cases it was the execution of "egoistic" dynastic interests and monopolistic strategies that led to the establishment of the Early Mediaeval states and subsequently resulted in the "production" of political nations. The nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalists "...constructed or even re-invented modern nations, but did so on the historical foundations of older *ethnies* with specific myths, memories, symbols, and values as inspirational sources. In this process the consciousness of a former ethnicity was re-discovered and re-vitalized, and thus formed the roots or origins of the nation..." (Fewster 2006, 401).

A nationalistic reading of early written sources is not, of course, unique to the Nordic part of Europe and such an attitude has been, and still is, typical for many "national" historiographies that more or less consciously respond to dominating political needs to "dig up" the possibly ancient roots of modern nations and states. Neither is the opportunistic manipulation of the past a modern invention. The process of shaping "national" ethnicities can already be discerned in medieval scholarship. This is well represented in Saxo who ca 1200 in his *Gesta Danorum* formulated the idea of a Danish

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3   Translation in Theodore M. Andersson 2003, p. 91.

identity which served to integrate the social upper class (Fældbek 1996, 133f). To enhance a common identity of previously differentiated communities, which were to be integrated, Saxo invented the legendary king *Dan* as the symbolic protoplast of all Danes. Saxo acted in concordance with the already current method of the conscious and purposeful enriching of the past, which may be illustrated by the similar action taken some twenty five years earlier by the anonymous author of the *Historia Norvegiae* who, in the first chapter of his work, introduced king *Nór*; this character reappeared as king *Nóri* in Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (ch. 22) ca. 1190. It is difficult to believe that those medieval historians did not understand the meanings of *Denamarc* and *Nordvegr*. Therefore, one should suspect conscious manipulation introduced in order to produce a past that would "better" fulfill the current political integrational needs. The introduction of eponymic nation-founders, and the establishing of reference points for the "national" identities of all subordinates of competing territorial dynasties, was quite popular throughout medieval Europe, e.g. *Brutus* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Bohemus* by Cosmas of Prague, or *Rus* by Nestor.

"Republican" Icelanders did not need to invent any common king-founder because their land was self defined by its insular geography, which automatically determined the common destiny of all those who had chosen the island for settlement. Instead, we may imagine competition between the leading families who challenged each other with alternative visions of the heroic deeds of their ancestors. Just as elsewhere, ownership of the past was important in Iceland as a crucial argument in struggles for power. However, the disappointing shortness of the Icelandic past forced Icelanders to refer to more ancient times. Thus, they recalled the common Nordic past with special stress being put on their Norwegian ancestry. "The sagas of kings contributed to create a Norwegian identity, but at the same time they may have contributed to the creation of an Icelandic identity at least in two ways, both by showing a common Norwegian and Icelandic past and close relations and by telling about conflicts between the Norwegian kings and Icelanders. The *fornaldarsögur* which mostly told about distant past in the Scandinavian mainland may have strengthened the Icelanders' feeling of sharing the history and identity with their Nordic neighbors" (Mundal 2007).

The function of multiple references to the pillars of the high seats, brought from Norway by the emigrants and thrown into water before landing on the Icelandic coast, must have been similar. These references directly symbolized a continuity of tradition and a connection to the Scandinavian mother-land. Such declarations of original Norwegian identity also helped to overcome the multi-ethnicity of the settlers and explained the later "special" relations of Iceland with the overseas kingdom of Norway. The Icelandic "representation of the past, initiated by Ari and elaborated to baroque proportions by the subsequent two centuries of scholarship, had very little to do with any 'genuine' traditions about the *landnám* that may have existed at that time. Instead, it was probably generated by the social and cultural needs of the Icelandic intelligentsia in the High Middle Ages" (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 2003, 141).

This relatively common, medieval creative approach to the past proved very effective in achieving "national" identities within various states. Such affiliations were further reinforced by the nationalistic ideology of the late 19th and early 20th century, when European historians searched the early Middle Ages for heroic ancestors, e.g. vikings in Nordic Europe or Gauls in France. Everywhere, archaeologists eagerly supported these evolutionistic concepts of the direct continuation of demographic and cultural traditions by authoritatively appointing "national" monuments of pride and veneration. Gamla Uppsala, Jelling, Oseberg or Thingvellir, however different, all symbolically indicate "ancient roots" and belong to the school-book canons of collective identities at both the specific national levels, and at the broad pan-Nordic perspective. Political/ideological reasons for their selection are quite obviously related to national traditions, and symbolically support state ideologies. Thus, in the three kingdoms, three royal burial grounds have been chosen, while in Iceland the assembly site is most venerated. This way, the "national" monarchic and republican ideologies are symbolically anchored in the possibly most distant past in order to prove their ancient origins.

This leads us to the question of the supposed Icelandic anti-monarchism. Taking such a perspective, some scholars identify some kind of a conscious "refusal" of the monarchy on the part of people disgusted with the atrocities connected to the establishment of the Norwegian kingdom

(e.g. Byock 2000, 66). Having freedom as their highest value, these people were to choose emigration to a distant island rather than subordination to some monopolistic royal power. And once there, to avoid the domination of one kinship group, they thoughtfully introduced a complex system of keeping a political balance between the numerous local leaders (*goði*) who could aspire to a permanently dominant position. This was viewed as the programmatic "democratic" option that stood at the very foundation of the Icelandic "commonwealth"/"republic"/"free state".

This romantic view of the "republican" farmers, who effectively managed to halt the pan-European process of power centralization and deliberately established a "democracy", is somewhat simplistic. First of all, there is an obvious contradiction between the supposedly anti-monarchic ideology on the one hand, and the message conveyed by many sagas that depict the disastrous results of the obligation for revenge because there was no power strong enough to stop it. That lack of a paramount decision making power, and of a supreme judicial authority, led to the development of a complex system of negotiations which, however, did not furnish final solutions for conflicts that could have lasted for generations.

In my view, medieval Icelandic historians somehow admired the centralized power system even if, at the same time, they were "obligatorily" stressing the hardships introduced by the autocratic monarchy. They were almost obsessed with the effectiveness of radical decisions being taken by rulers, who could apply executive power even if it was achieved by harsh methods. These order-makers immediately dominated the stage whenever they entered the story. The Icelandic intellectuals could have realized that the aim of the monarchic system was not to implement justice but to effectively sustain general social order through immediate intervention, even if this might have left some individuals and their families unhappy. Therefore, despite the open ideological contradiction between the viking ethos of unlimited freedom and the oppressive royal autocracy, the overseas Norwegian court always attracted young men who gained fame there and learned political lessons. Even the Papacy, which in the early Middle Ages had no effective power over distant Christian societies, was looked upon as a semi-legendary paramount authority that was able to pacify even the bloodiest conflicts, as in the famous stories of Njáll and Grettir, whose kinsmen found final reconciliation only in Rome.

Why then was some version of a permanently centralized system armed with executive power not established in Iceland? I suggest dropping the romantic explanations that refer to some original "democratic/anti-monarchic" ideology of the immigrants, and turning to practical reality. Knowing the structure and economic foundations of medieval kingdoms, one should accept the simple fact that monarchy could not have worked in Iceland. There were several reasons for this, which are based on the country's geography, geopolitics, and economy.

The natural borders of the island and its remoteness from the continental network of competing territorial kingdoms excluded the important factor of external political challenge, and the danger of sudden conquest attempt, which could trigger centralizing defensive counter measures. On the other hand, Icelandic territorial expansion was also excluded. Therefore, there were no geopolitical factors which would externally provoke the centralization of political power necessary for both defensive and aggressive military actions. Nor was there any indirect impulse for the local elites to reach for status comparable with the Christian monarchs, who sat too far away from Iceland to pose a permanent challenge.

However, in my view, economic reasons might have been more decisive. A permanent power centre was a very costly solution because a Christian ruler with his family, servants, necessary armed forces (retinue) and clergy (needed for religious and administrative services) must be financed by the rest of society. This meant the regular collecting of a substantial fiscal surplus needed not only for daily consumption but also for the ostentation of the paramount status of the monarch and his entourage. To sustain regular "taxing", some sort of collecting body empowered with executive means must be employed, which adds to the overall running costs because they themselves were also serious consumers.

This was a really heavy burden that posed problems to many medieval kingdoms, even in countries with much more fertile agricultural lands and better climates than Iceland. That was why almost none of the early medieval states (with the significant southern exceptions of Byzantium and the El Andalus caliphate) had capital towns. A king of that time was a *rex ambulans* who was in "permanent" motion. This was not only because the difficult logistics and the personal character of his executive power which necessitated a king's frequent presence in as many places as possible but

also because there was simply not enough food to sustain prolonged visits of the numerous and "luxury-hungry" royal court. That was why kings aimed to establish their own local centres (e.g. royal farms or royal strongholds) that furnished them with living conditions but, first of all, with a reliable source of staple food. Otherwise, they had to rely on the more or less voluntary hospitality of local aristocracy, which unavoidably involved some undesirable interdependence.

I believe that the Icelandic economy itself would not have been able to permanently support such expenditure because of the lack of good arable lands and climatic restrictions on cereal production, in addition to the lack of forests full of wild animals. The original settlers arrived with various culturally embedded ideas about the environment and tried to implement them in different geographic circumstances. In many cases, the direct application of strategies common in various parts of the Continent appeared to be catastrophic for both the people and for their natural environments because the delicate ecological balance was seriously disturbed by the newcomers and their animals. The pollen-confirmed removal of birch (Orri Vésteinsson 2000, 167) which was cut or simply burned (Buckland 2000, 147), overpasture by cattle and the results of the presence of pigs and goats (McGovern 2000, 331; also 2003) led to the quick loss of much of the original plant cover (Sigurður Þórarinsson 1974, 49f).

In addition to the negative effects of the overexploitation of the land's resources, which added to the natural shortcomings, the end of the heroic time of the viking expeditions brought an end also to the inflow of luxury imports, e.g. arms and jewellery. Not having substantial quantities of attractive export products, the Icelanders still had to import commodities for daily use (e.g. most metals and steatite pots). Archaeologists studying the early settlement and economy of Iceland may admire how sophisticated the combined exploitation of land and water resources was (cf. numerous analyses by Thomas McGovern), but they also observe how much poorer the level of material culture in medieval Iceland was when compared with the contemporary situation on the Continent. But despite this, the Icelanders managed to finance the building and upkeep of numerous churches, even if these were extremely small and simple.

Economic realities may also explain the weakness of the Icelandic Church, which was much less centralized than elsewhere in Christian

Europe and therefore less effective imposing observation of the strict rules of the universalistic Christian doctrine. The decentralized pagan religion thus found some continuity in the decentralized Church that had no institutionalized backup in the decentralized state. Christianity was attractive for the *goðar* who could reinforce their power by becoming official sponsors and controllers of the ideological centres. The Icelandic Church was "domesticated" through the domination of the *goðakirkjur* which, by their affiliation to central farms, were not only a cheaper solution but also allowed easier manipulation than independent parishes.

However, even such an expenditure must have affected the overall economy and resulted in a generally flatter social structure, with the differentiation between the common people and the elite less obvious than on the Continent. Therefore, Iceland was much less aristocratic than continental Scandinavia which, in turn, was less aristocratic and less centralized than the more southern European societies. And the typical medieval interdependence of political and ecclesiastic spheres made a highly centralized Church "impossible" in a decentralized society such as Iceland. Economic preconditions eventually changed with the adaptation of the Icelandic economy to the demands of the European markets, where *vaðmál*, sulphur and dried fish were in demand during the high Middle Ages. Probably these revenues helped to finance the two bishoprics but were not enough to introduce an ecclesiastical province.

It was the economic inability to support permanent and strictly centralized political and ecclesiastical organizations that made medieval Iceland a special case. Iceland's political organization was not the result of some premeditated ideological programme but rather the necessary outcome of the need to find a specific and effective solution to sustain social order and to avoid devastating military conflicts. Thus, the process of organizational development was halted at some pre-state level where contradictory centralizing and decentralizing tendencies were mutually balanced by the mechanism of collective control institutionalized by the assemblies. Such a stage of achieving a balance between "egalitarianism" and the stately centralization of social power is described in historical anthropology (e.g. Mann 1986). From this perspective, the Alþing resembled "tribal" assemblies where common decisions are carefully negotiated in order to sustain basic social order, and to channel violence. However, such institutions do

not have the executive means so typical of central stately powers in order to enforce decisions.

The complicated Icelandic political system and sophisticated law code had to compensate for the lack of a supreme executive power. Collective pressure based on tradition and on common decisions replaced the authoritative implementation of "justice" by some paramount power centre. As the sagas tell us, the results were often not satisfactory for some individuals and their families but in the long term, this programmatically weak system managed to sustain a relative political equilibrium and to curb the possible over-ambitions of leading families which, on the other hand, did not have the economic means to launch long-term warfare or to finance stable domination. This system was definitely not a "democracy" but, rather, some oligarchy of several kinship groups that carefully kept an eye on each other.

One could even rightfully question whether the Icelandic "commonwealth" was a state, at least in the contemporary meaning of the term that requires the permanent centralization of the power sphere's control within a defined territory. It was not even a federation, i.e. a union of self governing regions co-ordinated by a permanent central government. It was a much looser organization that was voluntarily accepted by regional leaders who regulated their mutual relations at the general assembly at Þingvellir once a year. The balance of power and social order were achieved through complex negotiations that were often supported by physical pressure. Lobbying and seeking compromise at the Alþing prevented open military conflicts that would surely have been disastrous for the small insular society, as so clearly became the case during the Age of the Sturlungs.

Thus, the medieval Icelandic "democracy" was not the conscious product of anti-monarchic citizens but rather a necessary but clever response to the lack of a centralized monarchy which could not be introduced because of the reasons explained above. The Icelandic "republic" survived because for a long time, no continental king had any real interest in establishing power there. It would not have been especially difficult for Norwegian rulers of the 11th–12th century to send to Iceland a dozen war ships filled with well-armed warriors who could take the upper hand in the battlefield and declare a conquest. This did not happen because such an "investment" would not pay back dividends. For the Norwegian kings, it was easier to

declare a symbolic sovereignty over Iceland as one of the *skattlǫnd* and to use such a claim as an argument for sustaining status on the continental geopolitical stage than to keep garrisons and implement administration which would probably "eat" all possible surpluses.

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This economy-determined prolonged political decentralization, which resulted in parallel ecclesiastic decentralization, possibly contributed to the survival of ancient tradition and to the development of the vernacular literature. All pre-Christian societies had rich oral traditions but in most cases these were effectively erased by the Church which ideologically supported authoritative monarchy but demanded strict adherence to its universalistic doctrine. The pagan past must have been forbidden and consequently forgotten except for the elements that were effectively Christianized. In striving towards this, the Church was strongly supported by co-operating kings who, in turn, depended on the ideological and bureaucratic support of the clergy. In Iceland, remembrance of the pagan past survived (in a surely contaminated form) because there was no power strong enough to erase it effectively. As a compromise, the pagan ideology there was superficially Christianized when recorded by the monks and priests who mixed the folk tradition with Christian motives. This ideological compromise helped to keep cohesive a society endangered by the hardships of economic crises. The unusual political organization contributed to the development of the unusual literary tradition, without which the pan-Scandinavian identity would surely look very different to how it does today.

The differentiated interdependencies of economic, political and ideological factors have to be considered when discussing the commonalities of the whole "Nordic world" and also the regional specificities of each of its parts. In the context of this discussion one might also refer to the Swedish phenomenon of the carving of rune stones that appeared suddenly and flourished after ca. 990, lasting until the early 12th century. Although these carvings show direct continuity of the vernacular (linguistic and artistic) traditions, the majority of them explicitly endorse Christian values. I think that it is possible to discuss and compare the rune stones with Icelandic literature and to look for common reasons behind both phenomena. The

level of political organization in 10th–11th century Sweden was far "behind" its Scandinavian and trans-Baltic neighbors. The territorial power of Erik Sägersal, Olof Skötkonung or Anund Jakob was not comparable to that of other monarchs who managed to implement a high degree of administrative and ideological control over their subordinates, including the aristocracy. The weakness of the early Swedish kings resulted in the weakness of the Swedish Church, which was unable to uproot pagan traditions effectively and had to opt for some compromise. The almost one and a half century long history of the Swedish "Christian" runic stones which were raised in their thousands may be taken as material evidence of the ideological compromise necessary to sustain social order.

However, in contrast to the Icelandic "pagan" literature that survived in the unchanged political circumstances, the Swedish semi-pagan runic stones had to give way to new ideological developments. The raising of these stones ceased after ca. 1130, i.e. when both the monarchy and the Church finally gained the upper hand over the anti-monarchic elites who naturally preferred the pre-Christian/pre-kingship tradition. Thus the two apparently different phenomena of Icelandic "pagan" literature and Swedish "pagan" rune stones can be seen as different solutions to the ideological challenge involved in the process of a long and difficult Christianization that took place in different parts of the "Nordic civilization" where various strategies of direct challenge, but also compromise, adaptation and acceptance were applied.

In such a context one may wonder to what extent the Icelandic vernacular literature and the Swedish "vernacular" stones recorded any real pre-Christian traditions. I am not questioning the obvious continuities from earlier times but rather, asking how big the impact of the expansion of Christianity was on the recording of "pagan" tradition in societies that had a long time to adapt to the new situation. Taking as a point of reference the example of the mutinous Polabian Slavs, who in the late 10th and in the 11th century developed a "new" counter-Christian pagan religion and introduced a theocratic political system (Rosik, Urbańczyk 2007), I suggest seriously considering exactly to what extent the "traditions" recorded on vellum (in Iceland) and on stone (in Sweden) were real traditions or the invention of writers.

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Still another possible way to challenge the myth of the monolithic common Nordic Viking Age is to promote studies on the multi-ethnicity characteristic of many northern populations. There are numerous examples of such an approach that focus on various parts of the "Nordic civilization" (e.g. Roslund 2001, Urbańczyk 2003a, Hansen and Olsen 2004, Naum 2008). There has even been an attempt to connect the early meaning of the term *víkingr* with some "outsiders" of undefined ethnicity, including the Slavs/ Wends (Jesch 2001, 49–50 and 56).

One of the promising but as yet underdeveloped fields for such research is the peri-Baltic region. Archaeology shows that during the Viking Age and even the High Middle Ages, the Baltic Sea was just a "lake" that was easy to cross and over which intensive demographic and cultural exchange took place. People moved in both directions: Scandinavians settled on the south and east coast and Slavs established their homes in Scandinavia. There were numerous multi-ethnic societies, of which the best known are those of the Wolin and Rügen islands. Cultural traditions penetrated both ways and had a profound impact on local developments. Here, an important scholarly contribution has been offered by Mats Roslund. His studies on south-Scandinavian pottery showed the diverse reception of Slavic tradition in various regions (eastern Denmark, the Mälaren area and Gotland) and proved that "Slavs had a deep impact on Scandinavian culture" (Roslund 2001, 322). Even the ship-building tradition, proudly considered a specifically Scandinavian development, in the Baltic area shows considerable typological parallelism in Nordic and Slavic constructions (cf. Indruszewski 2004, 245f). Evidently, there was an intensive trans-Baltic exchange of experiences between ship builders who shared their local traditions. We know this thanks to dendrochronological analyses that elucidate not only chronology but also provide insights into the histories of individual vessels, i.e. the precise areas of their construction and places where they were subsequently repaired.

Despite these affinities, cultural prejudices expressed by historically based underestimation of some problems or even whole 'directions' of research influenced Scandinavian attitude towards the Slavs. "There seems to be a deeply embedded common premise that the only positive direction of mutual contacts was from the north to the south, of course with Scandinavians as bearers of higher civilization standards and Slavs as sim-

ple recipients of the cultural development that took place elsewhere. The obvious disproportion in [Scandinavian] academic didactic referring to the Western Slavs (e.g. in comparison with the always present interest in Russia) results in the lack of research, which further 'proofs' the lack of interesting common problems, which gives excuse for the lack of academic didactic, etc. etc." (Urbańczyk 2005, footnote 3). Ethno-political background of this strange situation has recently been well analyzed by Mats Roslund (2001, chpt. 1).

Archaeology clearly shows the multi-ethnic substrates of the famous peri-Baltic trading centres where cemeteries consist of a "mixture of rites: boat graves, chamber graves, and coffin graves, as well as relatively balanced numbers of cremations and inhumations" (Stylegard 2007, 66). This does not change, however, the traditional narratives that easily "nationalize" early urbanization. Therefore, three Scandinavian original "peoples" must have equally important towns equally early: Hedeby in Denmark, Birka in Sweden and Kaupang in Norway. The emergence or rather, development of early towns is still part of national pride, which may result in exaggerated interpretations (cf. the recently-published volume *Kaupang in Skiringssal*, ed. by Dagfinn Skre, and the discussion in the *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 2008). One may suppose that Iceland will soon join this trend by supplementing this series with its own medieval trading centre in Gásir that has been recently excavated.

Personally, I have tried to promote an inter-disciplinary investigation of the multi-cultural/ethnic origin of the north Atlantic colonies in Iceland and Greenland (Urbańczyk 2003a). Both medieval written sources (e.g. *Grænlendinga saga* and *Landnámabók*) and archaeological evidence (e.g. the series of non-Scandinavian sunken houses built on Iceland during the Viking Age) as well as micro-molecular analyses of the mitochondrial DNA (Helgason et al. 2001), indicate that the picture of the conquering of the north Atlantic was much more complex than the old simplistic "Scandinavian colonization" model.[4] Interpretation clearly depended on national traditions. E.g. for the Norwegian scholars, who eagerly refer to the *Íslendingabók*, "Iceland was settled from Norway"; consequently, this story is a part of Norwegian heritage. At the same time, however, the Irish

4   Of course, one should remember that biological descendance does not automatically equal cultural affiliation.

suggest that "the colonists followed the trail of hermit-settlers" and the colonization was, to a large extent, a part of the common Hiberno-Scandinavian history (e.g. MacShamhráin 2002, 79 and ch. 4).

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

The above-quoted recent publications and ongoing discussions "assert that there were many small specific 'regions', 'lands' or similar 'units' in Scandinavia ... but these 'units' are never seen as primary subjects of history. They always exist *within* the general Viking Age culture, *within* the boundaries of the later nation-states and *within* the metahistorical 'unifications' of the later states" (F. Svanberg 2003a: 93). These states, in turn, are often treated first of all as a specific Nordic whole that was relatively isolated from the rest of medieval Europe, which had different kings, different states and different towns. The discussion of possible external connections is usually limited to the "straight east" or "straight west" directions which were established already during the Viking Age. What is completely missing is the new situation that appeared around the Baltic Sea where monarchs of the surrounding states played a complex game of "co-operation versus competition". The dynasties of Ynglings, Skjoldungs, Rurikids, Piasts and Nakonids maintained lively "diplomatic" relations that were strengthened by numerous cross-Baltic inter-marriages. These contacts also included cross-Baltic Christianizing missions and the issue of parallel coinage. When added to the already mentioned diffused contacts indicated by archaeology at the level of the common people, one could argue that in the 10th century, there emerged a sort of a "peri-Baltic civilisation" which is an idea that is surely worth more detailed study.

Anyway, challenging the concept of an isolated, unique and homogenous early medieval "Nordic civilization" is one of the important tasks of the modern medievistic studies.

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SUMMARY

Arnold Toynbee's concept of the "Nordic civilization" added a historiosophic dimension to the already popular idea of a common "Viking Age culture" throughout Northern Europe. However, the study of local and regional diversities that may lie hidden behind the attractive products of the elitist "cosmopolitan" culture, must be seen as a necessary element of future research. There is also a need to question the easy separation between the "pagan" and "Christian" periods, by which all the problems of religious transition are avoided. Equally dubious is the tendency to view state formation in Scandinavia merely as the political unification of previously ethno-culturally uniform lands instead of as the ruthless competition of "egoistic" dynasties. And different conversion processes should be recognised in the different parts of the Nordic area involving various strategies of direct challenge, but also compromise, adaptation and acceptance.

Thus, instead of generalizing about an isolated, unique and homogenous early medieval "Nordic civilization", an important task for modern scholars of medieval studies is to explore specific problems that pertain to specific areas. Iceland might be considered to be an ideal testing-ground for this approach with its medieval declarations of original Norwegian identity that helped to overcome the multi-ethnicity of the original settlers; with the romantic view of the "republican" farmers, which concealed the fact that a monarchy could not have worked in Iceland; and with the ideological compromise regarding religion in Iceland, which resulted in survival of the pre-Christian tradition.

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