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MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC TEXTUAL CULTURE

Surveying the Field

MEDIEVAL Icelandic textual culture was, by common agreement, remarkably rich and varied, yet it was not altogether *sui generis*. In the first place it shared in the wider textuality of Old Norse, which includes Norwegian, Orcadian and other Norse colonial textualities. Some elements of Nordic textuality are uniquely Icelandic, however, principally much skaldic poetry, the mythological poetry of the Elder Edda, and sagas of Icelanders, though in the last-named case the saga writers' debt to medieval European literature more generally is usually acknowledged. Meulengracht Sørensen (2000) assessed the likely causes of the prolific textual output of medieval Icelanders, paying particular attention to the enabling process of what his Aarhus colleague Ole Bruhn (1999) called *textualisation*. Bruhn used this term to refer to the double process of a society's adoption of the technology of writing as a social usage and its consequent understanding of social life as a text. Acknowledging the various hypotheses that have been adduced since the Middle Ages to explain the Icelanders' extraordinarily large and varied investment in textual production, Meulengracht Sørensen characterised its probable motivating forces as: the desire to record and celebrate social and cultural origins; the maintenance of ties with the wider Norse and European world; a concern to record Icelandic settlement history; a concern with the law and its bases, together with the re-formation of politics towards a greater decentralisation than pertained in Norway; the importance of the interest and enterprise of private individuals in literary production; the conversion to Christianity and the various textual prescriptions and possibilities that came into play as a consequence of the Icelanders' incorporation into Western Christendom. Towards the end of his survey he wrote:

Gripla XX (2009): 163–181.

> The introduction of Christianity created a new historical consciousness and the country's most important common institutions were inscribed in texts by means of the written word. At the same time it was a decisive factor in the development of Icelandic literature that this early unified social vision was not sustained. In the following centuries it had to give way to a literature that went in the opposite direction and gave textual expression to the decentralized ideology which underlay Icelandic society from the very beginning. Writing was privatized and the result was the sagas of Icelanders and the contemporary sagas, which are characterized by their local and private settings. The forces that combined to shape the oldest literature were not continued (Meulengracht Sørensen 2000, 27).

This statement is accurate only if we privilege one particular kind of Icelandic literary production, the saga, and even then it requires some nuancing. It is true that most sagas of Icelanders, contemporary sagas and even sagas of bishops and kings have a predominantly regional and personal focus, though many of them reach out to more general issues and to the world outside Iceland in various ways. But if we consider the whole of Icelandic textual production during the Middle Ages, the statement is of dubious validity, because a substantial number of medieval Icelandic texts are not local and private in their orientation, but are based on the doctrine and text types of the Christian Church or on the learned literature of the classical world that the Church inherited. Their goals, though they may be inflected towards local tastes and interests, are firmly centralist in the main.

At the heart of the matter, and the topic that is the focus of this essay, is the question of what happens if we give proper weight to all types of Icelandic textual production when we come to consider the placing of Icelandic or even the whole of Nordic civilisation within the wider medieval world. This is not an issue of the evaluation of Icelandic texts on the basis of their literary qualities, as perceived by modern sensibilities. Indeed, it is probably true to say that the modern perception of medieval Icelandic textual culture has been based upon several unstated premises, two of which we need to be aware of if we are to evaluate the nature of medieval Icelandic textual production in the context of medieval European textuality

more generally. These are that: a) what is uniquely Icelandic is more valuable and of greater intellectual and artistic worth than what is found in Icelandic texts but largely derived from non-Icelandic sources; and that b) Icelandic prose literature is more valuable than Icelandic poetry, even though such a premise partly contradicts premise a), because it is clear that skaldic poetry is uniquely Norse, and probably, at least after the twelfth century, uniquely Icelandic.

These premises have led many modern scholars and the wider public to a somewhat distorted view of the nature of medieval Icelandic textuality when it comes to evaluating its relationship to the textuality of the medieval world in general, because what is uniquely Icelandic is seen to be better than what is not, better both in terms of cultural importance and better in literary terms. This position can properly be argued by the literary critic but not by the textual historian. Further, one tends to gain an inaccurate sense of the importance of saga literature about native subjects in terms of its actual quantity if one fails to compare it with the very substantial amount of other textual material in vernacular prose, much of it also designated by the term *saga* in Old Icelandic, including hagiography, translated romances, didactic and encyclopedic works, sermons and translations of historical and legendary works originally written in Latin. Old Icelandic prose literature has been privileged over poetry, partly because in the form in which it has been recorded, it has been embedded in prose as a form of prosimetrum, but also because medieval Icelandic poetry is harder to understand for a modern reader, even for a modern Icelandic reader, and, until recently, people have found its convoluted style and largely conventional subject-matter uncongenial. Yet in the traditional culture of medieval Iceland it is clear that poetry, not prose, was the privileged literary form and the form of long standing and, as such, must be given full weight in any discussion of medieval Icelandic textuality.

It is naturally open to anyone to judge a saga like *Laxdœla saga*, say, as a better, more original or more interesting literary work than the Icelandic prose life of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, which is based on non-Icelandic sources. But, if we are to take a clear-eyed view of the whole range of Icelandic textual production from the Middle Ages, we must acknowledge that a great deal of it is the product of translation in the widest sense of that term and thus a product of the mediation of one culture's textuality,

that of medieval Latin Christendom for the most part, by another, that of medieval Nordic vernacularity with an Icelandic inflection. Mediation of course implies cultural transformation; transformation in its turn often implies appropriation, and it is these processes that will be investigated here, assuming that such intersections will provide a more balanced view of the nature of the whole of medieval Icelandic textual production.

Vernacularity

On the basis of the Icelandic texts that have survived from the medieval period, one of the most striking characteristics of Icelandic textual production is its vernacularity, its use of the vernacular as the normal means of communication. It seems that, virtually from the beginning of written textuality using manuscripts, the impulse was to translate Latin (and sometimes other languages) into Icelandic rather than to disseminate Latin texts in the original. Surviving works from the late twelfth century, such as fragments of the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great (Hreinn Benediktsson 1963) and the Old Icelandic *Elucidarius* (Grimstad 1993), bear witness to this impulse, and it continued throughout the medieval period. It is very likely, however, that the number of Latin texts produced in both Iceland and Norway has been seriously underestimated, and the same is probably true of Latin texts emanating from outside Scandinavia (Gottskálk Þ. Jensson 2003). Certainly, we know of a not inconsiderable number of lost Latin works written by Norwegians and Icelanders (some of which were also translated into the vernacular)[1] and there are likely to have been others we do not know about, which have not survived the Reformation, a time when we can assume Latin texts were treated as the products of popery and undervalued or destroyed.

While we can accept that the impulse towards vernacularity was very strong in medieval Iceland, we must not confuse this situation with an imputed ignorance of Latin on the part of either producers or consumers of written texts in Iceland, in terms of their linguistic knowledge or their access to Latin texts. It has been commonly assumed that the reason why

[1] They include Oddr Snorrason's Latin life of Óláfr Tryggvason, Sæmundr fróði's lost Latin history of the Norwegian kings, the *Flos peregrinationis* of Gizurr Hallsson, the Latin life of Bishop Jón Ögmundarson by Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218/19) and a Latin life of Þorlákr Þórhallsson, of which some fragments remain in AM 386 4to, c. 1200.

so much foreign literature was translated into Icelandic was because most Icelandic audiences would not have known Latin and few Latin works would have been available for people to read. While it is probable that the farm communities who heard saga literature read aloud to them are not likely to have included many – or any – Latinists, this argument does not necessarily hold good for some educated laypeople and, in particular, for religious communities where a great many saints' lives, doctrinal texts, sermons and religious poems are likely to have been composed, as well as many sagas. These religious communities would also have provided audiences for medieval Icelandic texts of all kinds. Further, the evidence of the inventories of religious houses in Iceland during the medieval period indicates that some of them were relatively well supplied with books in Latin and some other European languages, especially German and English (Olmer 1902) and many vernacular texts reveal their authors' acquaintance at either first or second hand with a considerable variety of Latin sources (Lehmann 1937; Sverrir Tómasson 1988). Moreover, there is growing evidence that medieval Icelandic schools may have used both Latin and Icelandic poetic examples in their textbooks (Guðrún Nordal 2001, 22–25), and this practice is clearly reflected in the so-called "grammatical treatises" produced between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. These unique products of vernacularity bear witness to the transformation and appropriation of Latin culture and its incorporation into a cultural product that combined Latin and traditional learning in a new synthesis (Clunies Ross 2005, 141–205; Raschellà 2007).

The phenomenon of medieval Icelandic vernacularity is part of a larger and very gradual movement away from Latin as the mainstream language of authoritative communication in Western Europe, a movement that has only really reached its apogee in the last two hundred years, when the vernacular languages have almost completely ousted Latin in religion, literature, politics, law, science and the schoolroom. It is clear from the evidence of medieval European societies in general, that the proportion of writing in the vernacular (as contrasted with writing in Latin) was highest in societies that did not speak Romance vernaculars descended from Latin and that were most remote geographically from Rome. In these circumstances medieval vernacularity becomes something of a statement of socio-politicial and intellectual independence as much as of an inability to understand

Latin, though undoubtedly a poor command of Latin must sometimes have been the spur to vernacularity. In the early medieval period Anglo-Saxon and Irish textuality was much more pronouncedly vernacular than that of Continental Europe, and yet it is hardly the case that English and Irish scholars were less capable Latinists than their Continental counterparts (Lapidge 1993, 1996; Esposito 1990). Characteristically also, these communities both translated learned or ecclesiastical sources into the vernacular and were able to record at least some of their indigenous literary genres in manuscript, though the latter were of course not untouched by either the new written medium or the culture of Christian Latinity. However, the very fact that vernacular literature was permitted to be recorded in manuscript books is an important indicator of its relative acceptance in the world of those who controlled manuscript production and owed some kind of allegiance to the medieval Church.

Thus vernacularity in early medieval Europe is both a trope of translation and a trope of independence and appropriation. Although it may have arisen for pragmatic purposes, to make the doctrine and culture of Latin Christendom available to a non-Latin-speaking and -reading linguistic world, the very act of translating works that were what the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred called "most necessary for all men to know" (*ða ðe niedbeðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne*)[2] also gave the vernacular a higher official status than it held in societies in which it was not used for such purposes. This is likely to explain why indigenous vernacular literature was able to flourish in such a manuscript environment and why it throve there, appropriating to itself, at least to some extent, the status and privilege that Latin occupied elsewhere. Rita Copeland has written of medieval vernacular academic texts that "these texts have demonstrable relations with exegetical traditions, not simply in terms of content, but in terms of the character of exegesis, which works by displacing and appropriating the materials it proposes to serve" (Copeland 1991, 8). It is arguable that the same sort of phenomenon can be identified in less academic vernacular productions, including those largely developed from indigenous and originally oral textual genres.

[2] From King Alfred's letter (Bodleian Library Oxford, MS Hatton 20, quoted from Whitelock 1967, 6) prefixed to the copy of the Old English translation of Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis* sent to the see of Worcester.

Nowhere did the process of cultural appropriation happen more thoroughly, it seems, than in Iceland. We often tend to forget that medieval Icelandic written textual culture is largely a phenomenon of the later Middle Ages, and seems not to have taken off until the twelfth century. Thus we need to see it in the context of the vigorous textuality, both in Latin and the various European vernaculars, that flourished throughout Western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and which led to many new developments in textual cultures and communities of that period. Within the field of literature, new vernacular genres evolved, many in prose, such as the romance and the chronicle, and these provide an interesting parallel to the development of the prose saga, both chronologically and in terms of compositional technique (cf. Clover 1982; Torfi Tulinius 2009). This does not mean that the Icelandic saga genre is a clone of the romance or the prose chronicle; clearly, it has its own very distinctive character and ideology and its own way of memorialising the past. However, the rise of the Icelandic saga shortly after the rise of new genres of historical writing and the *roman courtois* is unlikely to be fortuitous; the *Zeitgeist* reached to Norway and to Iceland and Icelandic creativity responded with its own version of historicism and memorialising of both past and present.

We can see something similar taking place in the field of poetry. Here, however, vernacular poetry occupied the high social and intellectual ground in indigenous society in both Norway and Iceland, going back as far as we have any evidence. Poetry in eddic measures was traditionally a vehicle for the expression of pre-Christian religious thought and myth; poetry in skaldic measures was the vehicle for expressing encomia in honour of rulers in Norway and other parts of the Norse world, while in Iceland it seems to have taken on other functions in addition, yet still maintained its socially privileged position. Men of high status, or those who composed for them, continued to produce verse in skaldic measures on secular subjects well into the thirteenth century in Iceland (Guðrún Nordal 2001, 117–195), but it was the appropriation of Christian subjects and themes that really shows how far and how thoroughly the vernacular and the latinate were intertwined in the poetic medium both thematically and stylistically. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries vernacular Christian poetry became a major vehicle for devotional piety, as witnessed by the composi-

tion of many poems in honour of apostles, saints, and, above all, the Virgin Mary (Clunies Ross ed. 2007; Jón Helgason 1936–38). If the Reformation had not come to Iceland in 1550, this strain of vernacular piety may well have continued beyond the sixteenth century.

The Third and Fourth Grammatical Treatises are witness to an Icelandic appropriation of Latin poetic and rhetorical culture which is almost certain to have taken place in the schoolroom and the monastery. They reflect a knowledge of Latin grammar and rhetoric, and, to varying degrees, of the thirteenth-century *poetria nova*, and they show the appropriation of these interpretative frameworks and their application to Icelandic poetics (Clunies Ross 2005, 185–205). Some of the figures they recommend may be found in use in Christian skaldic verse of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Clunies Ross ed. 2007, 1, lv). The fact that many of the figures of Latin poetics did not fit well with indigenous skaldic diction (Tranter 2000, 144–147) does not detract from the ideological assertion of a *translatio studii* in these works and does not necessarily imply a subordination of indigenous poetics to that of the Latin schoolroom. Óláfr Þórðarson, following the lead of his uncle Snorri Sturluson in the Prologue to the latter's *Edda*, boldly claims that poetry in Old Norse and poetry in Latin and Greek operate according to the same principles (Björn M. Ólsen ed. 1884, 60). Whereas Snorri had used the theory of euhemerism to explain how the human Æsir, who represented themselves as gods, migrated to Scandinavia from Troy, bringing classical culture with them and imposing it on the hapless natives of the north, Óláfr sees knowledge and learning coming northwards in the more conventional manner of the literate transmission of cultural knowledge in manuscript books, in his case via the writings of the grammarian Donatus.

Strategies of Appropriation

In theory, medieval Icelandic texuality could be seen to exist on a continuum whose poles are, respectively, dependence on and independence of non-Icelandic texts and cultural influences. At one end would lie almost complete – or apparently almost complete – independence, a condition in which a text reveals no perceptible outside influence, completely indige-

nous subject-matter and cultural attitudes and a style and structure to match. Perhaps some of the less complex of the *Íslendingasögur*, such as *Droplaugarsona saga*, might be thought to occupy such a position, or, within the field of poetry, some of the royal encomia composed by tenth- and eleventh-century Icelandic skalds, such as Einarr Helgason skálaglamm or Sigvatr Þórðarson, although even here arguments of foreign influence could be adduced. At the other end of the continuum might lie Norwegian and Icelandic works that are close translations of foreign originals, such as various of the over one hundred saints' lives translated mainly from Latin (Widding, Bekker-Nielsen and Shook 1963). Yet such extreme categorisation is rather meaningless, as there are really very few, if any, medieval Icelandic texts that can have been untouched by their relationship to the world beyond Iceland, and even a close translation shows, in its new linguistic dress, how cultural appropriation has taken place.

The fact is that, when Icelanders entered the world of medieval textuality and manuscript culture, they necessarily became part of the wider medieval European cultural world. This is manifested at a number of levels, both textual and paratextual. By the term 'paratextual' is meant the cultural attitudes that shaped people's approach to composing particular kinds of texts in the first place, whether these were for religious reasons or born of the pressures of cultural recuperation of the past. Even though writers of Icelandic saga literature developed their own ways of memorialising the past, the whole project of saga writing can be seen as part of a pan-European movement to place contemporary medieval society in relation both to its legendary and historical indigenous past and to assert links to the still prestigious culture of the ancient Graeco-Roman world.

One pointer to such paratextual influences is the actual choices Icelandic translators made of the texts they decided to translate. Of course, it is likely that some kinds of texts were unavailable to them, but by and large what has been translated probably reflects the interests of Icelandic society and the branches of knowledge Icelanders found valuable or needed to know. Outside the field of ecclesiastical literature, it is striking that works of a historical kind dominate the list of known translations into medieval Icelandic, ranging from *Rómverja saga*, based on Sallust and Lucan, through the Chronicle of Pseudo-Turpin and *Karlamagnús saga*, derived ultimately from Old French *chansons de geste*, to *Breta sögur*, an Old Norse version of

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* (c. 1136). A great many other historical works appear to have been known to Icelandic writers (Lehmann 1937, 40–41; Sverrir Tómasson 2006, 93–98). Such an interest in non-Scandinavian history mirrors the dominance of historical writing in the vernacular about Scandinavian subjects, whether set in Iceland or in the wider Scandinavian world. In fact one could say that much vernacular writing has a predominantly historical orientation, with Iceland and Icelandic society as the anchor point: *fornaldarsögur* set in prehistory, *Íslendinga sögur* in the recent past of Icelandic society, *samtíðarsögur* in near-contemporary Icelandic society, *konunga sögur* in Norwegian and wider Scandinavian history, *riddara sögur* in the legendary history of courtly societies of southern Europe and other exotic places. Within ecclesiastical genres, hagiography had a predominantly historical orientation as well. This was a genre vigorously pursued in Iceland as in other parts of medieval Europe, and its influence is felt in the many existing prose translations of the lives of foreign saints (usually from Latin) as well as in the lives of Icelandic saints, both in Latin and the vernacular. To this we must add the many poetic versions of saints' lives and lives of the apostles, ranging from the twelfth-century *Plácitusdrápa* to the fourteenth-century *Kátrínardrápa* and *Pétrsdrápa*, all based on vernacular prose translations (Louis-Jensen 1998, CVII; Louis-Jensen and Wills 2007; Wolf 2007 and Ian McDougall 2007).

Another general area in which there is evidence for substantial Icelandic interest, as reflected in the number and variety of works translated, and one covered in more detail in this volume by Rudolf Simek, is geography, including astronomy and astrology. Although much that has survived from these fields is fragmentary and in many cases obtained indirectly through encyclopedias and florilegia (Clunies Ross and Simek 1993), the range of extant material reveals a predilection for information about the physical world. This interest is manifest beyond translation, and was clearly stimulated by reports from individuals travelling to foreign destinations, including pilgrim experiences and itineraries (Lönnroth 1990). There is a pronounced taste for the exotic in medieval Icelandic literature, revealed through the many narratives set outside Scandinavia, whether west, south or east.

Of equal significance, though the evidence is of a negative kind, are

areas in which there is very little indication of an Icelandic interest in translation. The most obvious of these, as Paul Lehmann pointed out in his study of Scandinavia's debt to Latin literature (1937, 15–16, 37), is what he called *Fachphilosophie*, including the writings of classical and medieval philosophers, aside from various of the works of Honorius Augustodunensis and what was transmitted through encyclopedias. In the area of the more theoretically inclined and abstract writings of the Christian Church, too, in contrast to traditional biblical exegesis, there is relatively little to show; few of the Church Fathers seem to have been known directly, although some works like the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great appear to have been known (Hreinn Benediktsson 1963; Boyer 1993) and Augustine of Hippo's *De doctrina christiana* appears in the inventory of Viðey abbey late in the fourteenth century (Olmer 1902, 7, no. 18). From the later medieval period in Iceland, there does not seem to have been much of a taste for the writings of medieval ascetics and mystics, as was the case in much of the rest of Europe. It is possible, as mentioned earlier, that a great deal has been lost, but, if so, one would have to argue that the losses were particularly heavy in the areas of philosophy and theology, and that is rather improbable, given that some at least of the writings of the Church Fathers were widely distributed in medieval Europe. A more likely hypothesis is that there was no tradition of speculative philosophy and theology associated with pre-Christian Scandinavian religion, and that there continued to be little interest in importing foreign literature from these fields after the conversion to Christianity. To the extent that we are able to judge from the medieval reconstruction of pre-Christian religious thought in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* and other Icelandic writings, religious and philosophical concepts were primarily expressed through mythic narratives, which tend to particularise and personalise abstractions, at least on the surface.

If we turn from the paratextual evidence for Icelandic participation in the textual world of medieval Europe to the internal evidence of vernacular Icelandic texts themselves, there are a number of levels on which it is fruitful to document their engagement. The first of these is their treatment of sources. In some kinds of texts, Icelandic writers refer specifically to their foreign sources, especially in types of learned or schoolroom literature. They do this largely to authenticate their work. For example, in a piece about the star of Bethlehem published by Kålund and Beckman in *Alfræði*

íslenzk (III, 1918, 73), the translator acknowledges his source, John Chrysostom (*Patrologia Graeca* LVI, 637), in detail, although he probably knew it through a Latin digest, writing *Svá segir Jón gullmuðr í glósa yfir Matheo* "Thus says John golden-mouth in [his] commentary on Matthew". Some saga writers acknowledge their vernacular written sources, like the author of *Laxdœla saga*, who refers to two other Icelandic sagas as well as to the work of Ari Þorgilsson (*ÍF* 5 1934, 7, 199, 202, 226). Direct acknowledgement of oral sources for purposes of authentication occurs widely in Icelandic saga texts, usually in works of a historical nature, and chiefly involves the citation of skaldic poetry to authenticate what the prose writer is claiming. Here oral witnesses are treated by saga writers in the same way as written source texts are used in medieval historiography generally (Whaley 1993; 2007, 82–85; O'Donoghue 2005, 10–77). Oral informants who had the status of eyewitnesses are also frequently mentioned in historical works, in line with the practice of medieval historiography generally; in his *Íslendingabók* Ari Þorgilsson acknowledges three individuals, Teitr Ísleifsson, Þorkell Gellisson and Þóríðr Snorradóttir, whose combined memories put him in touch with the settlement age. Occasionally a poet cites his oral sources, as Einarr Skúlason does in *Geisli* 45/3 (Chase 2007a, 44), when he acknowledges that the Norwegian traveller and mercenary soldier Eindriði ungi was the source of the miracle story of what happened to S. Óláfr's sword Hneitir after it had been bought by the Byzantine emperor. At the time Einarr was composing, this miracle story had probably not yet achieved written form. Interestingly, Snorri Sturluson cites Einarr's *drápa* as the source of *his* account of the same miracle in *Heimskringla* (*ÍF* 28, 369–371).

Far more frequent than the direct citation of external sources, however, is the use of sources without acknowledgement. This can take one of two forms, the second the more common. In the first case, a vernacular writer indicates that he has used a written source, but does not specify what it is. Such a practice implies the desire to achieve literate *gravitas* more than the desire for authentication. A good example is in stanza 9 of the late fourteenth-century poem *Allra postula minnisvísur*, where the poet composes lines in honour of S. Bartholomew that are strikingly reminiscent of the opening lines of a hymn sung at the feast of this saint and follows this with the interjection *það er ritningar vitni* "that is the testimony of a written text"

(9/6). However, as the poem's editor, Ian McDougall, has indicated (2007, 866), "there seems to be no scriptural parallel".

By far the most characteristic way in which Icelandic vernacular authors use sources, most of which are of foreign origin, is in a free and independent way, so that their sources are often difficult or impossible to trace. This suggests that they felt thoroughly at home with the literature that had come to them from the world outside Iceland and felt little need to acknowledge it directly in their own compositions. We can see such practices, though we can never pin down the sources with absolute certainty, in many works where they are part of the literary whole being created as well as in works of a more scholarly or religious nature. We see it in sagas, such as *Njáls saga*, where likely influences from clerical and chivalric literature have been studied particularly by Lars Lönnroth (1976, 107–164); we see it also in works like Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, for which no specific written sources have been identified.

Another important Icelandic strategy for the appropriation of non-Scandinavian textuality lies in the various stylistic resources indigenous authors used to assimilate foreign material. This matter cannot be divorced from the paratextual observations made earlier about the kinds of texts that Icelandic translators favoured, nor about their treatment of sources. We have seen that they favoured historical texts above all, and after that texts that gave information about the physical world, much of it exotic. On the whole, Icelandic prose writers favoured a plain, though by no means an artless style, which we tend to identify as typical of the native saga style formed on the basis of oral tradition. Translated texts or texts closely indebted to them were also largely turned into the indigenous preferred style, seemingly as a conscious choice (cf. Lönnroth 1976, 160–164). There are exceptions, though, which show that Icelandic writers were perfectly capable of turning their hands to elaborate, rhetorically complex styles or to abbreviating material substantially; such practices are to be found in some passages of *riddarasögur*, some saints' lives and other prose writing that Ole Widding (1965, 1979) first characterised as *den florissante stil*, "the florid style". Many such florid works date from the fourteenth century. Elaborate, rhetorically complex styles were traditionally also very much characteristic of Old Norse poetry.

Recently, Mats Malm (2007) has argued that most Icelandic writers' conscious choice of a plain, pared back style, even in translations of foreign texts, may be attributable to their awareness of classical rhetoricians' repugnance towards what they termed "effeminate language" in contrast to virile and manly language. As such a preference very much resonated with an Icelandic moral preference for manliness above effeminacy, Icelandic writers were reinforced in their preference for the former, even when the texts they translated were of the "effeminate" variety. Ultimately, such a case cannot be proven, but it is likely that Icelandic writers and translators did act to domicile this aspect of the foreign within the preferred conventions of indigenous style and narrative art.

In the field of poetry, however, the situation was somewhat different, as Malm acknowledges, because poetry "was not associated with decadence, effeminacy, or voluptuousness in Old Norse" (2007, 314–315). On the contrary, its traditional complexity was regarded as manly and of high status. Although, as Malm observes, there was a movement towards a plainer style apparent in some works of the fourteenth century, like *Lilja*, the claims of the *Lilja* poet and others like him cannot be taken at face value. The traditional obscurities of skaldic diction conveyed through the kenning system and fragmented word order here and in some other fourteenth-century poetry gave way to a different kind of rhetorical complexity along the lines Geoffrey of Vinsauf recommended in his *Poetria nova*. The influence of Geoffrey's treatise is clearly apparent in several places in *Lilja* (Chase 2007b, 2, 554–677).

The traditional complexity and high status of skaldic verse arguably protected it from the stylistic simplification accorded to much prose literature, even in cases where poets were translating texts of foreign origin, whether through the medium of an Icelandic prose version or directly from Latin. A great deal of the religious poetry of later medieval Iceland involves either direct translation of Latin ecclesiastical sources or translation through the intermediary of a vernacular prose source, and includes hymns, liturgical sequences, homilies and saints' lives. A large number of elaborate kenning-like phrases for God, Christ and the Virgin Mary, in particular, are calques on well-known Latin epithets for them. The extent of this poetry's debt to foreign sources has been partially recognised by earlier scholars, but its full participation *on its own terms* in the international world

of Christian piety, in both Latin and the vernacular European languages, has only recently begun to be fully acknowledged.

As well as other kinds of Icelandic textual production, Christian skaldic poetry demonstrates both dependence on and independence of the larger European cultural world. As a poetic kind, skaldic verse is unique, but the messages it conveyed were part of the culture of Christian Europe translated to Icelandic practices and conditions. The texts in both prose and poetry produced by Icelandic writers to further the cults of Christian saints are very good examples of this kind of translation. Although Iceland did eventually have several of its own native saints, for whom considerable local textual production was undertaken in order to further their cults, and though other Scandinavian saints, particularly S. Óláfr, were of particular importance and again generated indigenous *vitae*, the cults of foreign saints and the apostles were far more numerous. By participating in the cults of foreign saints, and composing vernacular texts in their honour, Icelanders were able to participate themselves in the universal (as it was then seen) and in the local at the same time. There were local cults of foreign saints, both male and female, all over Iceland and a multiplicity of vernacular lives, mostly based on Latin exemplars, to celebrate them. In this, Iceland was little different from the rest of medieval Christendom. What was powerful – what worked for the faithful – were local cults that could be seen to have links to the wider Christian world. As the anonymous fourteenth-century poet of *Heilagra meyja drápa* put it (stanza 18), thinking of S. Cecilia, "The northern world and holy Rome (*Heimrinn norðr og heilög Róma*) receive comfort from a bright maiden" (Wolf 2007, 2, 903), or, as the poet of *Heilagra manna drápa* expressed it (stanza 18/5–8), thinking of S. Blaise, who was known for his ability to cure diseases of the throat, "God's spirit has worked miracles, which are still revealed in our country (*á váru landi*) by means of this dear friend for the healing of a countless number of people" (Wolf 2007, 2, 885). A glance at Margaret Cormack's book on the saints in Iceland (1994) will show that there were active cults of these and many other foreign saints in medieval Iceland, alongside cults of local and Scandinavian saints.

To conclude, in medieval Icelandic texts and practices, largely because of the universalist claims of Christian culture and its dominance throughout medieval Europe, the Icelandic variant of Nordic civilisation was both

dependent and independent to varying degrees, preserving, transforming and appropriating. It seems fruitless to try and determine the exact mix of "indigenous" and "foreign" elements in any medieval Icelandic text. The proportions and the nature of the elements vary, but Nordic civilisation was, throughout the Middle Ages, not *in* the medieval world as the title of the symposium *Nordic Civilization in the Medieval World* had it, but *of* it. After Icelanders accepted Christianity, this had to be the case; it was simply not possible to stand outside, and entry into Christendom came with long strings attached. On the whole the Icelandic people managed their entry into this world very well, and the strings appear to have been made of elastic, but they were still there nevertheless.

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SUMMARY

This article is a revised version of a paper I presented to the symposium *Nordic Civilization in the Medieval World* held at Skálholt in September 2007. I was asked to address the theme of *Medieval Icelandic Textual Culture* in a workshop whose theme was 'The world-view reflected in texts and practices'. The article surveys the debts of medieval Icelandic textual culture to both indigenous and non-indigenous traditions and suggests ways in which Icelanders showed their awareness that their culture was part of the mainstream medieval European culture of Christendom as well as at the same time maintaining an indigenously inflected vernacular tradition within which literary innovation could and did take place. It reviews the very large range of textual kinds produced in Iceland during the Middle Ages, both in poetry and prose, and builds up a map of Icelandic cultural interests and activities in the context of medieval European civilisation.

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