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THE MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC WORLD VIEW AND THE THEORY OF THE TWO CULTURES

I.

SVERRIR JAKOBSSON postulates that Medieval Icelanders, or at least the writers whose thinking is accessible to us through the written word, did not have a world view in our modern sense of the world, because they did not have a concept of the term "world view".[1] He goes on then to define what he understands as "world view", namely something that "provides meaning to events in the given surroundings, placing them in the context of things known and tangible."[2] In this abstract and hermeneutic meaning, he may be right that as such, the concept did not exist, but I would like to show that we may very well detect a world view in the Middle Ages generally and in Medieval Iceland in particular.

I define the term world view as something more universal than Sverrir, whose book otherwise seems to augment in most respects my own study, *Altnordische Kosmographie*, by using some non-Latin based sources.[3] I, however, would call the given world view of a people at a certain time "the sum of all our concepts of the physical and spiritual world which allows us to come to terms with all the eternal human questions", such as who made this world and in what shape? where do we go after death? and why does it rain so much? to name just a few, but we could also add: where do we come from and who are our ancestors?

Educated Medieval Icelanders were good Christians and as such had read their Latin books in school, as people still do in the Christian world, and therefore they would have had a concept of what many Medieval texts

1 Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan 2005), 363.

2 Ibid.

3 Rudolf Simek, *Altnordische Kosmographie. Studien und Quellen zu Weltbild und Weltbeschreibung in Norwegen und Island vom 12. bis zum 14. Jahrhundert.* Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 4 (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1990).

Gripla XX (2009): 183–198.

call *Imago mundi* ("world picture"), namely not just a physical picture of the world, but a concept of everything that concerns man, including God's role in the world; some examples between the 12th and 14th centuries include Honorius Augustodunensis's *Imago mundi* (the first version finished before 1110), the *Image du monde* by Gautier de Metz (ca. 1245), and the *Imago mundi* by Pierre d'Ailly (ca. 1390).

I know that Sverrir has loaded his usage of the term *world view* with at the same time more and less. *More* in the way that the world view includes also the individual or group distinctions from other groups, but that of course makes the term *world view* a relative term and therefore also *less*. Less because it thus has no overall validity and may therefore be held only by a very small group of, say, 13th century Icelandic "nationalists", if such a term had existed in the Middle Ages, which it did not.

I use the term *world view* in a much wider sense, insofar as it is the concepts described above held by the majority of those people who actually had an opinion and verbalized that opinion in a way still accessible to us, namely via the parchment. These Icelanders were, however, educated and literate and certainly knew the term *Imago mundi*, probably even beyond its use as a book title, as can be shown by a well-known passage from the manuscript AM 685 d 4to (31 r):

> Svo segir *imago mundi* at heimurinn se uæxinn sem egg & suo sem skurn er utan um eggit sva er elldr umhuerfiss heimenn & sva sem skiall er næst skurni sva er lopt næst elldi & hid huita ur eggi þat er næst skialli sva eru uotn næst lopti & svo sem id rauda er j eggi sva er iordin lukt j þessum hofud skepnum (my italics).[4]

This Icelandic passage answers roughly to a passage by Honorius Augustodunensis (*Imago mundi* I, 1)

> Mundus dicitur quasi undique motus. Est enim in perpetuo motu. Huius figura est in modum pilę rotunda, sed instar ovi elementis distincta. Ovum quippe exterius testa undique ambitur, teste albumen, albumini vitellum, vitello gutta pinguedinis includitur. Sic mundus undique cęlo, ut testa circumdatur, cęlo vero purus ether ut

4 Rudolf Simek, *Altnordische Kosmographie*, 387.

albumen, etheri turbidus aer, ut vitellum, aeri terra ut pinguedinis gutta includitur.[5]

However, in my definition I not only exclude that part of the population about whom we have no factual knowledge but also sources that are, in some cases, impossible to interpret. Here, I have in mind not only cryptic texts but also certain symbols in 12th-century French church sculpture, for example, whose meanings are now lost to us unless there is some written text to unlock the meaning. My use of "world view" is therefore closely connected to the history of the mentality of educated Medieval Icelanders, and it encompasses the worlds of:

Religion & History (*Heilsgeschichte*);
the Scholarly World, especially the Natural Sciences;
Everyday Life, and Literature.

Because I do not subscribe to Sverrir's more hermeneutic and also processual definition of *world view*, I shall not claim to establish the world view of all Medieval Icelanders, but rather those at a given period in time, in my case the 12th century, a period particularly prone to the outside influences because of the massive changes happening in intellectual life across Western Europe, known as the Renaissance of the 12th Century.

That the world view is never ahistorical is obvious, but history is something that permeates all aspects of the world view given above: for the religious aspect it is the *Heilsgeschichte* of the world, for everyday life it is genealogies, family history and local history, for the scholarly aspect both time in the astronomical sense and the continuities of (secular) world history, and in literature the preservation and continuation of stories of old.

But seeing that educated Medieval Christians studied much the same books all over Western Europe, it follows that much of the world view throughout Western Europe will also be consistent, of course allowing for local traditions, superstitions and even mythologies that may preserve elements important to peoples' identities on a lower level than their humanity and Christianity. However, many of these lower concepts may never make it into writing and thus present a certain problem to the modern scholar.

5 "Honorius Augustodunensis Imago mundi," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen age*, 57 (1982): 49.

All that can be gleaned through our manuscripts is only a part of the world view, even though it may still show us complex concepts such as the one of God himself (see p. 187, picture from Schedels Weltchronik, 1492).

II.

In keeping with the topic of this volume, I shall go on to show how much – or rather how little – the Icelandic world view of the 12th century differed from that of Western Europe. It has, been postulated that the world view of the Icelanders (reflected in literature on the one hand, in their political system on the other) was radically different from the rest of Europe and "two cultures" have thus been identified: namely what Lars Lönnroth called "the clerics' and courtiers' European culture" on the one hand, and the "Icelandic farmer's attempts to write down the histories of his home country" on the other. [6]

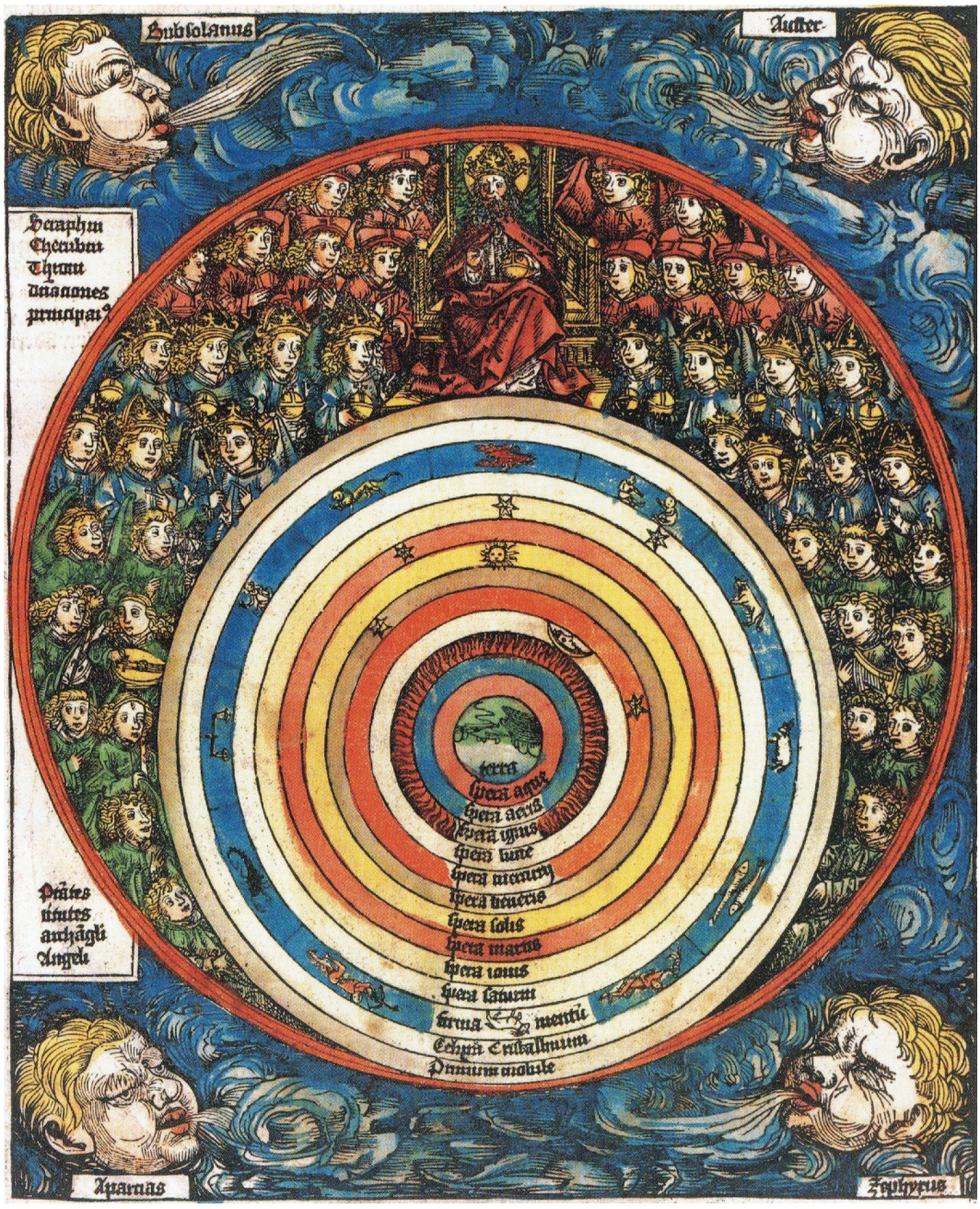
Sverre Bagge brought this argument to a point towards the end of the last millennium when he talked of the two well known heretics, Hermann Pálsson[7] and Lars Lönnroth, "who interpreted Icelandic culture, including the sagas, as part of the common culture of Western Christendom".[8] Bagge went on to suggest that this "heretic view" had, for some time, become the orthodox view. But he then claimed that history and social anthropology have now again helped us to revert to earlier views, a point with which I can not agree at all.

If we really wanted to establish that there was such a thing as two cultures, firstly, we would have to establish that the one culture, the clerical one, was actually the same in Iceland as the clerical Latin culture on the European continent and thus "foreign" to Iceland. This is a view contested by Jesse Byock in his paper at the International Saga conference in Helsingør held in 1985 where he argued that the situation of the Icelandic church was fundamentally different from the continental one – although

6 "... den isländske bonden, som fjärran från klerkers och hovmäns europeiska kultur roar sig med att skriva ned gamla berättelser från hembygden." Lars Lönnroth, *Tesen om de två kulturerna.* Scripta Islandica 15/1964 (Uppsala and Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1965), 97.

7 Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga*. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971).

8 Sverre Bagge, "Icelandic Uniqueness or a Common European Culture. The Case of the Kings' Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies* 69 (1997): 418–442.


Subsolanus
Auster
Seraphim
Cherubim
Throni
dominationes
principatus
Potestates
virtutes
archangeli
Angeli
terra
spera aque
spera aeris
spera ignis
spera lune
spera mercurij
spera veneris
spera solis
spera martis
spera iouis
spera saturni
firma
mentis
Ecthyn Crystallinum
Primum mobile
Aparnas
Zephyrus

he was specifically talking about political power and not intellectual concepts.[9] Secondly, we would have to establish that the supposed native culture was different to this clerically-dominated culture and substantially so, not just geographically and politico-socially, in the way that the 14th-century Czech culture would have been different from 14th-century Italian culture, for example: nobody ever speaks of "two cultures" in this context, although there would have been obvious differences both politically and culturally.

III.

I will begin with the first point above, in order to try to show how the clerical-learned culture of Iceland was related to the learned world of the continent, when it comes to questions concerning a world view.

A "Division of Science" (*arbor scientiae*) in 13th-century Iceland does not, at first sight, seem to conform with the canonical *Septem Artes*, the Seven Liberal Arts, which we have come to accept as the norm for Medieval subjects mainly on the grounds that the Middle Ages inherited this concept from antiquity via Martianus Capella and other early Medieval authors. However, there is no need to think that the Icelandic "Division of Science" shows a deviant picture of the Seven Liberal Arts, because there is also a multitude of different distinctions in Medieval Latin mss concerned with *arbor scientiae*.

Within the Seven Liberal Arts, the single arts are very well represented in Icelandic manuscripts: the four Grammatical Treatises even cover aspects of the *trivium* (rhetoric, grammar, and dialectics). The Icelanders seem to have had a particular predilection for the quadrivium, however; although musical manuscripts are not overly well preserved (perhaps because many of them contained Latin hymns and were therefore destroyed during the reformation),[10] we find tracts on mathematics and geometry (AM 194 4to, AM 685 d 4to, GkS 1812 4to, AM 764 4to) and especially astronomy. It seems that Iceland was particularly up-to-date in the field of astronomy: we find the latest 12th-century theories, like that concerning the heliocentricity of Mercury and Venus, as well as far more traditional

[9] Jesse Byock, "The Power and Wealth of the Icelandic Church: Some Talking Points," *Proceedings of the 6th Saga Conference* (Helsingør, 1985), 89–101.

[10] Cf. John Bergsagel, "Music and Musical Instruments," *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, (New York and London: Garland, 1993), 420–423.

theories derived ultimately from the Venerable Bede. Although not necessarily evident from theoretical tracts, in Medieval practice, cosmography and geography were closely related to astronomy. Illustrations and texts for both appeared side by side and sometimes even within the same picture (as in AM 764 4to).

Medieval Icelandic maps, of which a surprising number are to be found in manuscripts, show us not only an intense interest in geography, but also an interesting addition to the contemporary European world views, namely with regard to the transatlantic discoveries and a very particular concept of Greenland as part of Northern Europe. This is reflected in the maps of Henricus Martellus[11] which were based on the calculations by the Dane Claudius Clavus (fl. ca. 1420),[12] and also in the early modern Skálholt maps, but not in Medieval central European maps of the same time (such as the widely known early Ptolemaic map in Hartmann Schedel's *Chronicon universale* of 1492). But not only was the North West better known to Scandinavians than to any other European scholars, obviously through the Scandinavian voyages of discovery undertaken in the 10th and 11th centuries, even Eastern Europe is presented in considerably more detail in Icelandic manuscripts than it is in concurrent European maps.[13] Examples include the location of the Biarmones, or of the town of Kiev, on the largest of the Medieval Icelandic *Mappae mundi*, the one in GkS 1812 4to (5v–6r), but also the naming of a whole series of towns in Icelandic geographical treatises (such as AM 736 I 4to, 1r–1v, and especially Hauksbók, AM 544 4to, 2r–4r). While Miklagarðr (Constantinople) is of course known, and is shown on most European Medieval maps, towns like Garðar (Kiev), Hólmgarðr (Novgorod), Palteskja (Polotzk) and Smalenska (Smolensk) are only marked on maps in Icelandic manuscripts.

A very specialized but fascinating aspect of Medieval Icelandic map-

[11] Werner Kreuer, ed., *Monumenta Cartographica: Tabulae mundi* (Gotha: Perthes, 1998), 55–58.

[12] Rudolf Simek, "Elusive Elysia, or: Which Way to Glæsisvellir? On the Geography of the North in Icelandic Legendary Fiction," *Sagnaskemmtun. Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson*, ed. by R. Simek, J. Kristjánsson, H. Bekker-Nielsen (Wien: Braumüller, 1986), 247–275.

[13] Rudolf Simek, "Skandinavische Mappae Mundi in der europäischen Tradition," *Ein Weltbild vor Columbus. Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte. Interdisziplinäres Colloquium 1988,* ed. by Hartmut Kugler in Zs.-arbeit mit Eckhard Michael (Weinheim: Acta Humaniora 1991), 167–184.

making is the plan of Jerusalem.[14] It is quite astonishing that out of 15 maps of Jerusalem that survive worldwide from the Middle Ages, three come from Iceland, and these are practically identical to the Flemish source of all those 15 plans, namely Lambert of St. Omer's mighty encyclopedia *Liber floridus* – which I believe was the model for Hauksbók.[15]

When it comes to the more obscure sides of the Medieval world view, Iceland was certainly not behind in soaking up knowledge which was fashionable and up to date in western Europe, even if it was of limited value to Icelanders (or humanity as such). Teratology, the lore of the wonderful as represented by the so-called Marvels of the East, reached Iceland as early as the 12th century, and the Icelanders showed their characteristic lack of exact discrimination between the simply odd, like the elephant (as depicted twice in the Old Icelandic *Physiologus* in AM 673 a 4to, 7r–7v),[16] or the absolutely fictitious, like various types of fabulous creatures, both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic.[17] As is well known, one of these men even made it into *Eiríks saga rauða*, obviously to prove the fact that Vinland did indeed extend from Africa, a point made in the short cosmography in AM 736 I 4to (written around 1300).[18]

This extensive cosmographical knowledge of the Icelanders extended even to mythical creatures from Greek and Latin mythography, which is hardly surprising, seeing that this clerical culture permeated all areas of life. These depictions are not limited to their representation as the symbols of the zodiac (as in AM 249 b fol, or in GKS 1812 4to, 3r ff), but are also found in other contexts outside mere astronomical interpretations of mythological figures (cf. GKS 1812 4to, 3v).

14 Rudolf Simek, "Hierusalem civitas famosissima. Die erhaltenen Fassungen des hochmittelalterlichen *Situs Jerusalem* (mit Abbildungen zur gesamten handschriftlichen Überlieferung)," *Codices manuscripti* 16 (1992) [1995]: 121–153.

15 Rudolf Simek, "Warum sind *Völuspá* und *Merlínuspá* in der *Hauksbók* überliefert?" *Deutsch-Nordische Begegnungen. 9. Arbeitstagung der Skandinavisten des deutschen Sprachgebiets 1989 in Svendborg* (Odense, 1991), 104–115.

16 *The Icelandic Physiologus*, ed. by Halldór Hermannsson. Islandica. 27. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Library, 1938; reprint: Kraus Reprints, 1966).

17 Rudolf Simek, "Wunder des Nordens. Einfoetingar, Hornfinnar, Hundingjar und Verwandte," *triuwe. Studien zur Sprachgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft. Gedächtnisbuch für Elfriede Stutz*, ed. by Karl-Friedrich Kraft, Eva-Maria Lill and Ute Schwab. Heidelberger Bibliotheksschriften 47 (Heidelberg: Winter 1992), 69–90.

18 Rudolf Simek, *Altnordische Kosmographie*, 429–432.

Nor did the learned Icelanders of the 12th and 13th centuries stop at just taking over or borrowing from continental sources, but just like their European colleagues the foundations of their learned culture (perhaps monastic and academic but nevertheless very lively) were so secure that they could play with and develop novel ideas from learned roots. A good example is the unique Icelandic table of fabulous creatures in BL Add. 11250 which does not rest directly on a continental source, but presupposes a knowledge of high Medieval teratology which then was used in a playful way elsewhere, like in the margins of *Flateyjarbók* or in copies of *Jónsbók*.

IV.

All of these examples have been taken from the world of scholarship, which formed only one aspect of the world view as defined above. As the purely religious aspects of the Medieval world view, apart from the local variations of popular religion, were not likely to vary too much in the book-based religion of Christianity, this leaves two more aspects to investigate, namely everyday life and literature. The former is, for all accounts and purposes, out of our reach as it is visible to us only through literature for one thing, and may well, to some extent, be even out of the reach of literature, as the banal occurrences of everyday life were not the topic of literary elaboration even in the pseudo-realistic Icelandic sagas. Thus we are left with the world of literature to establish any significant deviations of Iceland, in terms of the world view, from the rest of the Western world. As all three major genres of Icelandic literature, namely sagas, skaldic poetry and Eddic poetry, have no direct formal counterpart in European literature, it may be worthwhile investigating whether these genres may not be deceptive and whether similar types of literature were not represented on both sides of the North Atlantic as far as themes and topics are concerned. The following table should thus serve as a tentative experiment to look at literary genres as far as their protagonists are concerned, something that has traditionally been done with the subdivision of Icelandic saga literature.

	Iceland	**Western Europe**
Early Saints, Martyrs and Church Fathers	Heilagra manna sögur Religious skaldic poetry	Latin and Vernacular Hagiography in prose and poetry
New Saints and Churchmen	Biskupa sögur Religious skaldic poetry	Local politico-hagiographical literature in prose and poetry
Rulers of Antiquity	Sagas of Antiquity	Epics of antiquity
Heroic Rulers and Heroes	Heroic Eddic poetry Fornaldar sögur	*Lais* *Chansons de Geste*
Kings and Emperors	Skaldic poetry Konunga sögur	*Gesta*, *Historiae*, Chronicles
Arthurian Knights	Riddara sögur	Vernacular court epics and prose romances, Lais
Comic and Romantic Heroes	Legendary romance	Late court epics, prose *Volksbücher*, *Schwank*-literature
Lokal Chieftains and Farmers, past	Skaldic poetry Íslendinga sögur	*Spielmannsepik*, Moral tales, *bispel*
Lokal Chieftains and Farmers, present	Samtíðar sögur	– (Wernher der Gärtner: *Meier Helmbrecht*)
Gods and Powers (non-Christian)	Mythological Poetry O.N. Mythography	(Mythological poetry) Latin Mythography

As indicated by the brackets in the right hand column of the last two groups, stories about contemporary farmers seem to have been underrepresented on the continent as was mythological poetry, although it did exist. However, as the farmer-chieftains of the Sturlung age represent the highest social stratum of 13th-century Iceland, we should perhaps not compare them with the occasional tales found about farmers but rather about nobility – and there is plenty of that in German, French, and English Medieval literature.

This leaves us with the problematic genre of mythological poetry, which is limited to a relatively small group of 12th-century French clerics, who used poetry based on classical mythology in their philosophical writings and nearly all of whom belonged to the so-called School of Chartres. For us, their most important protagonists are Bernhardus Silvestris and Walter of Chatillon.

However, even despite these attempts at composing mythological poetry and even mythography (notably the work of Remigius of Auxerre), the corpus of mythological poetry on the continent is even smaller than in Iceland (where Codex Regius contains 10 strictly mythological poems and few others are found outside). Also, the unique combination of mythology with historiography that we find in, for example, the myths of Odin's immigration in Snorri, Ari and a few other Icelandic texts, never seems to have been produced on the continent.[19] We may therefore safely state that mythological writings (especially in combination with mythological historiography) in Iceland was a far wider and more varied genre than on the continent.

To sum up, in the areas of the scholarly and the literary worldview, Iceland produced a cognitive surplus in two major fields: firstly, in the field of geography, where not only detailed knowledge of Iceland and Greenland as well as the transatlantic discoveries, but also a relatively intimate knowledge of north-eastern and eastern europe is reflected both in scholarship and in literature; secondly, in the field of mythological writings, with the inclusion of genealogies of mythological and heroic ancestry.

V.

The second question posed in section II above concerned the possible difference between a (supposed) native culture and the clerically dominated culture of an intellectual elite. An excellent way of investigating this question is by looking at the actual context of texts as found in the Medieval manuscripts. This "material philology" (or more conservatively: codicology) has been sadly neglected in Old Norse studies until quite recently and

[19] Cf. Heinz Klingenberg, "Trór Thórr (Thor) wie Trōs Aeneas. Snorra Edda Prolog, Vergil Rezeption und Altisländische Gelehrte Urgeschichte," *alvíssmál* 1 (1992): 17–54; Heinz Klingenberg, "Odin und die Seinen. Altisländischer Gelehrter Urgeschichte anderer Teil," *alvíssmál* 2 (1993): 31–80; Heinz Klingenberg, "Odins Wanderzug nach Schweden. Altisländische Gelehrte Urgeschichte und mittelalterliche Geographie," *alvíssmál* 3 (1994): 19–42; Rudolf Simek, "Der lange Weg von Troja nach Grönland. Zu den Quellen der gelehrten Urgeschichte in Island," *Germanisches Altertum und christliches Mittelalter. Festschrift für Heinz Klingenberg*, ed. by Bela Brogyanyi and Thomas Krömmelbein (Hamburg: Kovacs, 2001), 315–327.

this neglect has led to many editions presenting "works" of Old Norse prose or poetry quite unconnected from their actual position with the transmission process in Medieval manuscripts. However, this is about to change and more attention is now being paid to the actual place given to texts in their Medieval contexts.

The manuscripts studied by me in the context of the two genres mentioned above, namely geographical and mythological knowledge, give no indication that there was a distinction between a "popular" and a "learned" culture in Iceland: cosmographical information was frequently used to preface historical or pseudo-historical works, such as in Snorri's writings, but also in manuscripts like Eirspennill (AM 47 fol)[20] and AM 764 4to[21] as well as Hauksbók.[22] Hauksbók is also a good example of the merging of native and "foreign" learned material within one manuscript: it uses many native saga texts, as well as texts translated from the Latin, to create a very personal encyclopedia along the lines of a Flemish model known to the collector.[23]

As far as mythography is concerned, we only have to look at the manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* to see what accompanied Snorri's work. Despite the fact that Snorri covered indigenous material only and took great pains to preserve the mythographic, heroic, and poetic lore according to the skaldic sources, of which he quotes 509 stanzas in *Skáldskaparmál* alone (not to mention the skaldic 583 stanzas quoted in *Heimskringla*), the *Edda* is always found in the company of learned works representing the "elite" clerical culture: works like the Grammatical Treatises that deal with grammar and rhetoric, as well as distinctly native texts like poems of the Poetic Edda (see table).

[20] The case of Eirspennill is particularly interesting, as Finnur Jónsson in his 1916 edition chose to ignore the cosmographical introduction on fol. 1r, cf. R. Simek, *Altnordische Kosmographie*, 428.

[21] Ibid., 436

[22] Ibid., 449.

[23] Cf. Rudolf Simek, "Warum sind *Völuspá* und *Merlínuspá* in der *Hauksbók* überliefert?", 104–115; Sverrir Jakobsson, "Hauksbók and the construction of an Icelandic World View," *Saga-Book* 31 (2007): 22–38, chooses to ignore this model, which leads to his assumption of Hauksbók as merely the manifestation of a private "world view" (Ibid. 29).

Manuscripts of Snorra Edda with accompanying texts

Codex Upsaliensis 11, DG 11 8vo (U), 1300-1320: *Snorra Edda* + 2nd Gramm. Treatise + *Skáldatal* + *Ættartal Skjöldunga* + *Lögsögumannatal* + *Rígsþula* (fragm.)
AM 748 I 4to (A), fragm., after 1300: *Skáldskaparmál* + *Þulur* of *Snorra Edda* + 7 Eddic Poems of *Codex Regius* + *Baldrs draumar* + 3. Gramm. Treatise
Codex regius of Snorra Edda, GKS 2367 4to (R), ca. 1325: *Snorra Edda* + *Grottasöngr* + *Jómsvíkingadrápa* + *Málsháttakvæði*
Codex Wormianus, AM 242 fol (W), ca. 1350: *Snorra Edda* + 4 Gramm. Treatises + *Rígsþula*
AM 757 a 4to (B), fragm., ca. 1380–1400: *Skáldskaparmál* + *Þulur* of *Snorra Edda* + 3rd Gramm. Treatise
AM 748 II 4to (C), ca. 1400: only *Skáldskaparmál* + *Þulur* of *Snorra Edda*
Codex Trajectinus, MS Utrecht 1374, (T), ca. 1595: *Snorra Edda* + *Grottasöngr*

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule, such as the *Codex Regius* of the Poetic Edda (GKS 2365 4to), which only contains poems and accompanying prose and contains nothing of learned lore with Latin origins.

Such exceptions (we may add *Flateyjarbók,* but this late and sumptuous manuscript is an unsuitable example for demonstration of the establishment of an indigenous lay culture) are hardly sufficient to justify talking about a completely separate culture that only rested on native lore to the exclusion, or at least part-rejection, of Latin clerical learning (from Andreas Heusler to, in milder form, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson). On the contrary: although the Icelanders managed to surpass the continent in knowledge in the two fields of geography and mythography, and managed to make the best of it both politically (by settling Greenland and attempting to settle Vinland, and at least keeping the knowledge about these places alive) and culturally (by keeping both skaldic poetry and the mythological knowledge necessary for understanding it alive in mythography and Eddic poetry),

they also managed to integrate very successfully both native and foreign learning into a single culture. This culture was, at least in the 12th and 13th century, on a par with continental European culture.

If there had been two cultures – rather than one literary and social elite, interrelated and interacting in life as in literary production – we would have to imagine two different social groups of (say, monastic-clerical and secular) Icelanders that had a very different outlook. Despite the well-known political clashes between the higher clergy and some secular chieftains in the 13th century, the manuscript tradition gives us no clue that this may have been the case when it came to the actual world view of Medieval Icelanders. The examples of geographical knowledge in maps and in cosmographies shows how unlikely it is that it was two different sets of people who preserved the Latin and such native additional information of the "cognitive surplus" to be found in Iceland. The social setup of Iceland in Christian times, as represented by the institution of the Goðakirkja (or Eigenkirchenwesen) makes it even more improbable that priests and farmers who were in daily physical and mental contact could, over a prolonged period of time, preserve or develop two differing world views. [24]

But in saga writing, too, it is unlikely that the Icelandic *literati* who composed hagiography, political history in the kings sagas, or the courtly texts of the *riddarasögur*, would have handed over their quill to somebody else to compose *Eiríks saga rauða* or *Eyrbyggja saga*. Therefore, I see no need to talk of two cultures, of a particular (and unexplained) Icelandic uniqueness or an Icelandic *Sonderkultur*.[25] What the Icelanders achieved, and could rightly be proud of, was a not insubstantial cognitive surplus.

[24] Cf. Gunnar Karlsson, *Goðamenning* (Reykjavík 2004).

[25] Klaus von See, "Snorris Konzeption einer nordischen Sonderkultur," *Snorri Sturluson. Kolloquium anläßlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, ed. by Alois Wolf. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 4. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1993, 141–177.

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SUMMARY

The paper takes the Medieval Icelandic world view as its subject and attempts to demonstrate how closely related that world view was to that of the rest of Europe, from the 12th century onwards. However, given the nature of our sources in surviving manuscripts, we only have access to the conceptions and ideas of an intellectual elite. But as this is also true for Medieval Europe as a whole, there is no reason to assume that the world view to be found in Icelandic manuscripts is less representative than elsewhere. Although in Medieval Iceland, the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century was accepted with amazing speed, there were also two areas of learning where the Icelanders exceeded the knowledge attained in continental Europe. The first of these was pre-Christian mythology which was preserved through Skaldic poetry, the second was the geography of the North and the transatlantic coasts, where the Icelanders managed to preserve knowledge gained through their ancestors' Viking Age voyages of discovery. In these fields of knowledge, we can talk of a substantial cognitive surplus within Medieval Icelandic learning.

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