



## Iceland and Images of the North

Edited by Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson  
with the collaboration of Daniel Chartier

With a radically changing world, cultural identity and images have emerged as one of the most challenging issues in the social and cultural sciences. These changes provide an occasion for a thorough reexamination of cultural, historical, political, and economic aspects of society. The INOR (Iceland and Images of the North) group is an interdisciplinary group of Icelandic and non-Icelandic scholars whose recent research on contemporary and historical images of Iceland and the North seeks to analyze the forms these images assume, as well as their function and dynamics. The twenty-one articles in this book allow readers to seize the variety and complexity of the issues related to images of Iceland.

The research project is led by Sumarliði Ísleifsson of the Reykjavík Academy, Iceland, where most of the participants are based, and Daniel Chartier of the International Laboratory for the Comparative Multidisciplinary Study of Representations of the North, based at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

The "Droit au pôle" series, published by the Presses de l'Université du Québec, disseminates literary and cultural studies that enable readers to understand and interpret the imaginary of the North, Winter, and the Arctic.

Other members of the INOR group with articles in the book are: Clarence E. Glad, Reykjavík Academy, Júlíana Gottskálkardóttir, Einar Jónsson Museum, Reykjavík; Guðrún Rísa Gunnarsdóttir, Hólar University College, Iceland; Sýfrí Gunnlaugsson, Reykjavík Academy; Heidi Hansson, Umeå University, Sweden; Edward H. Hulbjörn, University of Akureyri, Iceland; Sveinir Jakobsen, University of Iceland; Heiða Jóhannsdóttir, University College London; Kalla Ágústardóttir, Icelandic Centre of Ethnology and Folklore, Hólmavík, Iceland; Marion Lerner, University of Iceland; Kristín Loftsdóttir, University of Iceland; Daisy Neijmann, University College London; Karen Olund, Towson University, Maryland, USA; Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Reykjavík Academy; Kristín Schram, Icelandic Centre for Ethnology and Folklore, Hólmavík, Iceland; Olaf Geirþor Sigfusdóttir, Iceland Academy of the Arts; Julia Zemack, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Germany; Halldór Þórhásson, Reykjavík Academy; and Þorgeir Þor H. Þorvaldsson, Reykjavík Academy.



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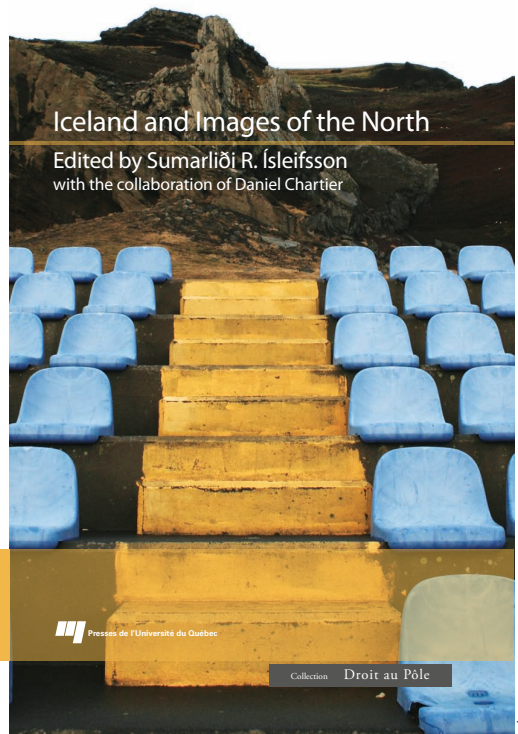


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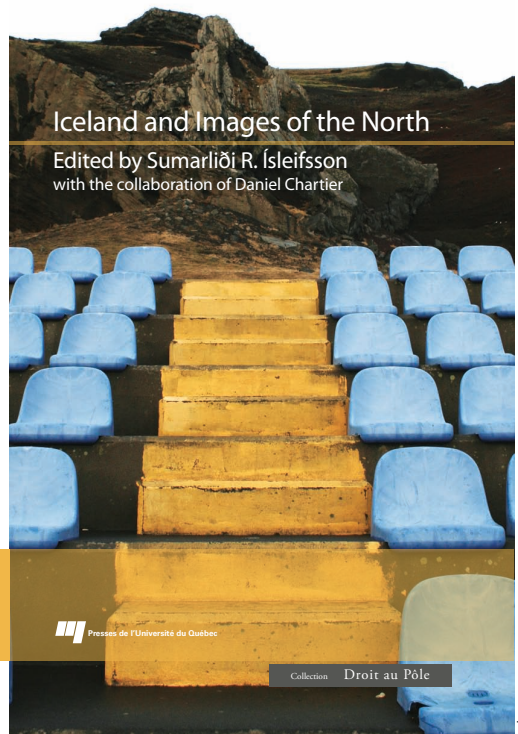


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## FOREWORD

### **Iceland and Images of the North**

INOR is a collective project on Iceland and images of the North, the purpose of which is to conduct multidisciplinary studies on the identity appropriation of the idea of North. It is thus part of a fertile current of thought that began a few years ago and that seeks to compare the paradigms underlying the imagined world of winter, the North, and the Arctic. This current of thought—involving not only Scandinavia, Russia, Canada, Québec, and the Inuit world but also cultures that, while not geographically belonging to “the North,” share some of its characteristics—has revealed commonalities between the cultural representations, traversed by tension between the specific and the universal.

Started by a group of researchers from the Reykjavík Academy, this project was initially intended to counter a tendency to define Iceland’s image according to fairly compartmentalized notions of foreign politics, marketing, and tourism. It was also designed to open up the study of Iceland and ask questions about its place in the world, first of all in relation to its northern neighbours, but also in a broader and more circumpolar perspective, through which the country, its culture, history, and achievements offer a singular experience in the definition of cultural identity.

The twenty-one researchers in our collective come from a variety of disciplines, which shows the multifaceted nature of relations between

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Iceland and “the North.” Stemming from an Icelandic base group to which European and North American researchers were gradually added, the project gave rise to a working process that was resolutely original, collegial and collective, and had the luxury of not being rushed to propose, review, criticize, reformulate, and fine-tune the study. Every year over the past four years, each of the proposals now making up the chapters of this work was discussed in collective work groups overseen by external specialists, up to the final version found here.

Iceland’s recent political and economic turmoil has not overly affected our work, since our analyses examine identity construction and resilience based on both historical images and their contemporary extensions. This long collaborative process, fed by the knowledge and insights of its participants, has yielded a new image of Iceland, patiently constructed from a unique combination of borrowings and historical specificities.

Daniel Chartier  
Université du Québec à Montréal

## INTRODUCTION

# **Imaginations of National Identity and the North<sup>1</sup>**

Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson  
The Reykjavík Academy (Iceland)

Jón Ólafsson (1593–1679) is known in Iceland as Indíafari, or the Traveller to India.<sup>2</sup> In his autobiography, he gives a recount of a visit with his Icelandic companions to a restaurant in Copenhagen, where he lived as a young man. He describes the visit thus:

One chattering fellow, a master mason, sat up there with the others, and declared that he could describe the manners and customs in many countries, among which were the inhabitants of Iceland, who cut a poor figure in his text and its clumsy

---

1. Translated from Icelandic by Brynhildur Heiðar- og Ómarsdóttir.

2. Jón Ólafsson joined the Danish navy at a young age and sailed all around the world, including eastern Asia. After just over a decade abroad he moved back to Iceland. He wrote his autobiography in his old age.

Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson, “Imaginations of National Identity and the North,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson with the collaboration of Daniel Chartier, Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, “Droit au Pôle” series, and Reykjavík: ReykjavíkurAkademían, 2011.

interpretation. But his hearers were readily hoodwinked and admired his talk. He was flattered and added to his stories until there was great mirth and no mourning up at the table. I asked Einar [Jón's friend] how long he could suffer the like. He said one must often hear such things about Iceland. I asked him if I could count on him, in case of need [...] I stood right in front of the middle of the table and addressed the fellow who had spoken so contemptuously about this country, and had wound up by saying that its inhabitants could not be human beings, but rather the most contemptible beasts. I [said] to him: "Friend, I hear thou art acquainted with many countries and canst wonderfully describe them, and what seems not least strange to me, thou hast such certain knowledge of Iceland; now, hast thou sailed thither?" He asked God to preserve him from such a thing, saying Odin might go thither, but not he. At that moment I [dealt] him a couple of lusty boxes on the ear.<sup>3</sup>

We can well imagine what stories that chattering fellow had heard of Iceland and Icelanders. Icelanders were imagined as being uncivilized barbarians.

The Danish master mason and Jón Ólafsson play opposing roles in Ólafsson's travelogue. The master mason disseminates commonly accepted ideas about a country far up north, a country that is a colony of Denmark. Jón Ólafsson opposes this assessment of Iceland as a country of barbarians, while simultaneously participating in the dissemination of national stereotypes in his own work, writing lurid

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3. Ólafsson 1923, vol. I: 79–80; Óðinn here denotes the devil. See the Icelandic text in Ólafsson 1946, vol. I: 76–77. "Einn hvatorður maður, sá eð var múrmeistari, sat þar á meðal annarra og lézt kunna að segja hegðan og háttalag fólks í mörgum löndum, á meðal hverra var Íslands innbyggjarar, sem aumlega sáu út í hans texta og óvandaðri útlekkingu. En hans tilheyrendur voru auðtrúa og dáðust að hans ræðu. Hann tók því vel og teygði ræðuna, svo mikill glaumur gjörðist þar, en grátur eigi. Ég spyr Einar að [vin Jóns], hversu lengi hann geti slíkt liðið. Hann kvað slíkt tíðum heyra mega um Ísland talað [...] Ég stend svo fyrir framan mitt borðið og tala ég til þessa manns, er svo lastlega hafði þessa lands fólki tiltalað og til ályktunar hafði sagt, að þetta fólk mætti ekki fólk heita, heldur sem svívirðilegustu kvikindi. Ég segi: 'Vinur, ég heyri að þú ert víða um lönd kunnugur og kannst dáfallega frá mörgu að skýra og hvað mig ei sízt undrar, að þú um Íslands háttalag ert vís orðinn, eður hefir þú siglt þangað?' Hann bað Guð sig þar frá varðveita og segir Óðinn mætti það gjöra en hann aldrei. Í því bili ljet eg honum tvær eyrnafíkjur ríða."

tales about countries in the South and the East.<sup>4</sup> This scene described by Ólafsson highlights the importance, the nature, and the role of national stereotypes. Such stereotypes are clichéd and prejudiced and they affect us all in various ways. We most often take these stereotypes for granted. We can agree with them and sometimes we condemn them.

In this introduction I would like to question the concept of these stereotypes of national identity. They are an important part of the world of ideas and transnational communication in which we live, a world which is based on longstanding ideas about nationality and identity. They affect the way we understand the world. It is not often that we observe first and define afterwards. Rather, we are prone to defining ideas and things before observing them since we have specific expectations about new experiences, expectations based on our ideological background.<sup>5</sup> Those who study national identity and the creation of this identity emphasize that national stereotypes are not based on facts, on information that can be verified by objective observation. Rather, national stereotypes are imaginations, “artificial formations” of a culture and of a society.<sup>6</sup> Scholars who interrogate notions of national identities approach their iterations as text and discourse rather than as nature or character.<sup>7</sup> This scholarly approach is antithetical to essentialist ideas that a specific nation has a specific character.<sup>8</sup> Such essentialist beliefs have long been a part of human discourse, reaching back to the time of the ancient Greeks, and were well known in the early modern period. The Danish scholar Peder Hansen Resen proclaimed confidently in the 17th century that different nations had different characters. The vice of the French was “vanity and inconstancy”; Germans were afflicted with drunkenness, and the Spanish with “arrogance and unclean passions.”

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4. See Ólafsson 1923, vol. II, on his travel to Africa and East Asia, for example pp. 75, 129.

5. This statement is attributed to the American scholar Walter Lippman in the 1920s. Lippman was one of the earliest scholars to write about the role of stereotypes. See Beller 2007b: 4.

6. Petkova 2009: 17, 44; Alphen 1991: 2–3, “not presences behind the self or the other, but changeable products of the ongoing process of constituting a self-image.”

7. Leerssen 2007c: 27.

8. Petkova 2009: 16–17.

Icelanders' main flaws were "arrogance and ambition."<sup>9</sup>

Even though I assume here that stereotypes of national identity are "imaginings," I fully recognize the influence these ideas have on the daily life of people and the important role these imaginings play in the arenas of politics and economics. These imaginings are therefore no less "real" to an individual than any other personal experiences that affect his or her values and ideals. An obvious example of the role of national stereotypes in modern society is the negative image people in the West often have of Jews and Muslims. These stereotypes have a verifiable impact on modern society.<sup>10</sup> Another example is the financial collapse of Iceland in 2008: we can argue that the expansion of the financial sector in Iceland leading to the collapse was influenced by national self-imaginings. The imagined superiority of Icelandic financiers in international business and ideas about the cultural significance of the nation proved to be influential in the way Icelandic businessmen conducted their affairs.

The creation of a national identity has two aspects that are unthinkable and meaningless without each other. When we create an image of ourselves, we simultaneously create images of the Other. These two aspects of identity coexist and intersect and neither can exist without the other. They are in a dialectic relationship.<sup>11</sup> We assume more often than not that self-images are positive while images of the Other are negative, since we assume our own culture to be the norm but other cultures to be foreign and (sometimes) inferior since they deviate from that self-defined norm.<sup>12</sup> However, sometimes this process is reversed. Images of the Other can be presented as an ideal for us to emulate; other cultures can be described in a positive and often effusive manner, while our own society can be described as being lacking.

The creation of a national identity is influenced by various factors. These factors are concepts such as centre-periphery, North-South, East-West, island-continent, city-rural, small-big, and powerful-powerless, to name a few. The construction of a national identity is

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9. Resen 1991: 272-273.

10. Hoppenbrouwers 2007: 54.

11. Lehtonen 2005: 69-70; see also Leerssen 1991: 129.

12. Said 2003: 54; Pieterse 1991: 201.



thus not a haphazard process, but based on “structural constants in the stereotypical imagination.”<sup>13</sup> The imagination of a national identity is deeply rooted in history and is, for example, defined by transnational contact, rumours, conflicts of interest, fiction, misunderstandings, and mistranslations. These imaginations are longstanding and can be hard to combat. An example of the longevity of a national stereotype is the idea that people in the North are drunkards. This stereotype can be found in the writings of the Roman writer Tacitus (ca. 56–117 CE), who promulgated this idea in his work *Germania*. After *Germania* was published in the early modern period, the idea of Northerners as drunkards found easy passage into other texts that dealt with the people of the North.<sup>14</sup> In the past two centuries, this drunken imagination of the North was common, and it was popularly believed in the 19th and 20th centuries that Northerners were incapable of controlling their drinking if they were given access to alcoholic beverages.<sup>15</sup>

Each era bequeaths to us different and often contradictory images of a national character.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes stereotypes of a given national identity are positive, even utopian, but at other times they are negative. The shifting boundaries of national imaginations are often related to a struggle or tension within a society or between different nations. These images also change and evolve, and the boundaries between images of the self and images of the Other are often blurred or even shifted. Sometimes the image of the Other is transposed onto the image of the self. This transposition can appear as the self-exoticization of a society, when exotic ideas about a specific nation are adopted and co-opted by that nation (such as in Iceland, where common German imaginations have been adopted by Icelanders themselves).<sup>17</sup> The national identity of a country is simultaneously changeable and constant, positive and negative, uniform and composite, visible and invisible.

Scholars of national identity study the imaginations and stereotypes of different societies and illuminate their origins, nature, context, and purpose. Those scholars who are deeply invested in this study consider

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13. Corbey & Leerssen 1991: xvi.

14. Zacharasiewicz 2009: 29.

15. See for example Barrow 1835: 50–51.

16. See Leerssen 2007b: 343–344; see also Beller 2007b: 11.

17. See Leerssen 2007a: 340–341; see also Leerssen 2007b: 343.

it their duty to uncover the negative impact national stereotypes have on cultures, whether those stereotypes are of the East, the South, or the North.<sup>18</sup> However, other scholars have reminded us that there is a long tradition of positive imaginations of the Other, the celebration of the foreign and the exotic, and that we cannot simplify the impact of national stereotypes.<sup>19</sup>

## The North

The Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said (1935–2003) introduced us to the concept of Orientalism. Said’s Orientalism refers to the standardization and systemization of ideas about the East, ideas based on and promulgated by power colonialization. Said’s concepts and methods have been adopted by other areas of study and his ideas transposed upon other geographical parts of the world. Thus we have the concept of “tropicality,” which refers to northern European imaginations of foreign cultures “alien in climate, vegetation, people and disease.”<sup>20</sup> The Icelandic scholar Gísli Pálsson has proposed we use the term “arcticality” to analyze the discourse about the Arctic regions.<sup>21</sup> And then we have the concept “borealism,” which denotes the standardization and dissemination of ideas about the North and mainly the far North.<sup>22</sup>

The concept of “North” appears simplistic on the surface. It clearly

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18. Edward Said (2003) writes that it was necessary to fight against the tendencies to create “collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse [...] [they] must be opposed, their murderous effectiveness vastly reduced in influence and mobilizing power”; see pp. xxviii–xxix. See also Petkova 2009: 161; Beller 2007b: 12; Grace 2002: 24. Sherrill Grace writes that representations are “at best a necessary practice that mediates socially constructed images of the self and the world, while at its worst it can block the real by replacing it and directing our attention or desire away from complex lived experience of a heterogeneous reality towards a simulacrum.”

19. See for example Lovejoy & Boas 1965 [1935] and their well-known study from the first half of the 20th century, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*.

20. Arnold 1996: 142.

21. Pálsson 2002: 276–277.

22. See the article “Banking on Borealism: Eating, Smelling, and Performing the North” by Kristinn Schram in this volume; see also Krebs 2010.

denotes one of the cardinal directions, the opposite of the South. But the meaning of the North is both complicated and malleable. For example, in the beginning of the 17th century, the Danish scholar and vicar Claus Christoffersen Lyschander (1558–1624) wrote a description of areas in the far North, in which the North is equated with evil. But his North is also a place of great riches that can be exploited by Southerners. And of course, the North is populated by ghosts and spirits, and the inhabitants of the far North are pygmies, an amalgamation of man and animal. According to Lyschander, the North is simultaneously exotic, desirable, and repulsive, even devilish.<sup>23</sup>

Lyschander's ideas were not particularly new. The Roman writer Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, ca. 43 BCE–17/18 CE) wrote about Scythia, the ancient equivalent of the North:

There is a place [...] a freezing place,  
At Scythia's farthest bounds, a land of gloom,  
Sad barren soil with never crop or tree;  
This is the numb wan home of Cold and Ague  
And starving Hunger.<sup>24</sup>

In the ancient Mediterranean it was commonly believed that the North was a place of barbarians and of ignorance.<sup>25</sup> Christian writings promulgate this imagination of the North. For example, in Jeremiah's prophecies in the Old Testament is the following text:

The word of LORD came to me a second time, saying, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see a seething pot; and the face thereof *is* toward the north." Then the LORD said unto me: "Out of the North an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land."<sup>26</sup>

It was prophesized that during the end times, Gog and Magog, archenemies of God and Christianity, would break out of the North and storm south, razing the earth. Medieval and early modern Christian

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23. Lyschander 1989: 143–144.

24. Ovid 1986: 195.

25. Hartog 1988: 17.

26. Jeremiah 1:13–14 (*King James Bible*); see also Pochat 1997: 44; also Zacharasiewicz 2009: 33–34.

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scholars claimed that some northern nations, such as the Mongols and the Vikings, were direct descendants of Gog and Magog.<sup>27</sup> Northern people were described as having more in common with wild animals than with humans.

The imaginations of the North closely correlate with ancient theories of climate, ideas that were revived in the early modern period. The temperate areas were considered to be ideal. In temperate countries society and culture were believed to flourish and the people to be highly intelligent. Conditions worsened the farther they were from the temperate medium.<sup>28</sup> These theories of the effect of climate on national and individual character were inherently ethnocentric and were used, for example, to justify colonialism and the enslavement of the inhabitants of regions outside the temperate zone.<sup>29</sup>

The stereotype of the North in ancient times was commonly a negative one, but more positive descriptions can be found. The ancient Greeks told stories of a northern paradise, the nation of Hyperborea, which supposedly was located in the far North. The people of Hyperborea lived in luxury beyond the reach of the northern winds. Hyperboreans were believed to be sacred people, often living several centuries, and they were known for the various wonders found in their land.<sup>30</sup> They lived in balance with nature, unmarred by the corruption and evils of the world.<sup>31</sup> The climate of Hyperborea was temperate and Hyperborean life was one of enjoyment. The Greeks believed that the god Apollo preferred to live amongst the Hyperboreans.<sup>32</sup> What is fascinating about the idea of Hyperborea is that the Hyperboreans are supposed to live at the edge of the world, yet they enjoy all the benefits of the “centre” and were even considered to be superior to the Greeks.<sup>33</sup>

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27. Davidson 2005: 28; *Brockhaus Encyclopädie* 1969, see Gog und Magog.

28. This is widely discussed in classical writings; see for example Ovid 2009: 30. See also *Konungs Skuggsjá* [The King's Mirror] 1955: 61.

29. See Beller 2007a: 298–300.

30. See Davidson 2005: 23–25, 50–51, 106; Romm 1994: 60, 65–67.

31. See for example Davidson 2005: 23–25, 50–51, 106; Romm 1994: 60, 65–67.

32. Romm 1994: 60.

33. Romm 1994: 66–67.

## Different Kinds of North

The geographical location of the North is as ephemeral as its ideological definition. In the ancient Mediterranean everything north of the Alps was considered to be the North and Africa was considered to be the South.<sup>34</sup> With the changing balance of power in Europe during the Middle Ages, the idea of the North changed and the boundaries of the North shifted northwards. The importance of the Mediterranean slowly diminished and countries north of the Alps—France, England, and Germany—became the real centre of the continent. Simultaneously, the idea of an ideal climate changed so that the temperate zone now encompassed the countries north of the Alps rather than the Mediterranean Basin. The centre of power was also the centre of the climate!<sup>35</sup> We can argue that from the end of the Middle Ages until around 1800, Scandinavia, Russia, and most of what is now defined as Eastern Europe were considered to be in the European North. But in the 19th century the definition of the North narrowed and the idea of Eastern Europe was born. The Scandinavian countries were now considered to be the true North, and to the north of Scandinavia was the far North.<sup>36</sup>

We can trace a few prevalent imaginations about the North from the 16th to the 18th centuries. First, there is the barbaric North. Descriptions about the barbarism of the Scandinavian countries and the far North were commonplace until the late 18th century and their influence was felt even longer. The idea of the barbaric North was based on classical ideas about the North and the experience of Mediterranean nations of Northern invasions. The crude living conditions in the North were believed to be the result of the extreme conditions of the area. The idea of the North as barbaric is not only a European imagination, and can also be found, for example, in China and Japan.<sup>37</sup>

The idea of the barbaric North was exceptionally longstanding in relation to areas geographically located in the far North. It was believed

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34. See Tacitus 2001: 52.

35. Zacharasiewicz 2009: 34–35.

36. See for example Kliemann-Geisinger 2007: 70.

37. See Davidson 2005: 175.

that the far North was hardly inhabitable due to the inhospitable nature, and culture and society in those areas were commonly described as barely human. Common descriptions of culture in the far North emphasized immorality in sexual practices, witchcraft, barbaric appearance and clothing, sexual confusion (the sexes were believed to have a similar appearance), small stature, stench, and speech—or lack thereof, since it was believed that many Northerners communicated by emulating the sounds of animals.<sup>38</sup> These stereotypes of the far North were alive and well in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1772 the Englishman Thomas Salmon asserted of the northernmost part of Scandinavia that

human species of these cold and sterile climates seem very different from those to the Southward of them: the people [...] are ill-shaped, with large heads, and short, scarcely exceeding in stature five feet; and their intellect is very inconsiderable.<sup>39</sup>

And Northerners themselves, such as Olaus Magnus, proclaimed in the 16th century that the minions of the devil resided in the far North and aggravated their inhabitants.<sup>40</sup>

Alongside these lurid descriptions we can also find different ideas about the North and the far North. Some of them are derived from the ancient ideas about Hyperborea. Olaus Magnus and other writers of the early modern period sometimes praised the primitive existence of northern Scandinavia. Magnus admitted that many of the inhabitants of the far North were wild and had strange habits, but he admired their sincerity and their simple way of life.<sup>41</sup> Other writers later claimed that the inhabitants of the far North were honest and hospitable and that their faith was admirable and worth emulating.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the North and the far North were not only described in dystopian terms. Their image was also a positive, “hyperborean” ideal, the idea of the noble savage where primitiveness and simplicity denote an honest nobility.<sup>43</sup>

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38. See for example Barrow 1835: 46; Ísleifsson 1996: 47–77.

39. Salmon 1772: 256–257.

40. Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. I: 169.

41. Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. I: 171; Rauwen 1597: 616.

42. See for example Guthrie 1782: 59.

43. Zacharasiewicz 2009: 39–41.

Closely related to the idea of the North as a primitive paradise is the common imagination of the North as a place of great wealth and riches. It was also believed that Northern inhabitants were incapable of harnessing and utilizing this wealth themselves.<sup>44</sup> For example, Adam of Bremen (ca. 1040–1081) wrote about an island in the northern seas where gold and gems were in abundance and where the inhabitants possessed only a rudimentary understanding of this wealth.<sup>45</sup> In later eras, writers extolled different kinds of wealth in the North. Around the year 1700 stories abounded of the great wealth European fishermen found in the northern seas.<sup>46</sup> In the middle of the 18th century, the German missionary David Crantz described these ideas thus:

The desire of discovering new lands was every where [sic] roused, because adventurers flattered themselves with the hopes of gold and silver mines in every new discovered country. There was the same sanguine expectation from the unknown northern countries.<sup>47</sup>

The search for gold was an important impetus for the voyages of exploration to Greenland in the 16th and 17th centuries.<sup>48</sup>

Since the late Middle Ages the centre of power in Europe was shifting towards the north. Discourse about the North changed accordingly. Scholars were an integral part of this redefinition of the North, scholars such as the Swedish bishop Olaus Magnus (1490–1557) and in the 18th century the French philosopher Montesquieu (1689–1755).<sup>49</sup> In his history of the Nordic nations Olaus Magnus attempted to respond to Northern stereotypes prevalent in the South. He combated the idea that only immoral savages populated the North and described the Northern nations as cultural ones. He admitted, though, that Northern traditions were in some ways wild and harsh, but proclaimed that some were even superior to those of the South.<sup>50</sup>

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44. See Tacitus 2001: 123.

45. Adam of Bremen 2000: 234.

46. Melissantes 1715: 966.

47. Crantz 1767, vol. I: 273.

48. Crantz 1767, vol. I: 274–275, 278; see also Egede 1818: xl.

49. Zacharasiewicz 2009: 36–40.

50. Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. I: 171.



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The economic and political power of the North grew in the 18th century alongside the ideas of the Enlightenment. In that era it became ever more common to consider the North as hardy, progressive, and democratic, in opposition to the South, which was considered attractive and seductive but at the same time weak, old-fashioned, autocratic, corrupt, and inconstant. This era is exemplified in the way some nations began to celebrate their Northern, rather than Greco-Roman, cultural heritage.<sup>51</sup> This transposition can be clearly seen in the writings of Montesquieu and other scholars of the period. They based their ideas on writings of the classical ancients (Aristotle) and medieval scholars.<sup>52</sup> Montesquieu claimed that freedom itself sprung from the North:

Jordanes the Goth called the north of Europe the forge of the human race. I should rather call it the forge where those weapons were framed which broke the chains of southern nations. In the north were formed those valiant people who sallied forth and deserted their countries to destroy tyrants and slaves, and to teach men that, nature having made them equal, reason could not render them dependent, [except] where it is necessary to their happiness.<sup>53</sup>

The idea that the North was the birthplace of freedom but the South the cradle of slavery was an idea that was echoed in later writings. According to this philosophy, the North was a place of innovation and creation, and even of science and scholarship.<sup>54</sup>

In geographical descriptions written in central and western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, it became common to proclaim that people of the North were intelligent and attractive.<sup>55</sup> The habits of these people were perhaps crude and unsophisticated, but writers of the period emphasized that, for the most part, Northerners were “very alike” the people of England and other civilized nations.<sup>56</sup> The

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51. See Arndt 2007: 388.

52. Stadius 2005: 41–43.

53. Montesquieu 1952: 124. Jordanes lived in the 6th century.

54. See for example Holberg 1729: 30.

55. Mallet 1684, vol. IV: 18.

56. Salmon 1772: 255. Similar ideas can be found in Guthrie 1782: 59.



Nordic countries were slowly being drawn into the geographic centre of “civilization” and were considered (at least the southern part of these countries) to be civilized. They became a part of the “centre,” if at the edges of it.<sup>57</sup>

Romantic ideas of the 18th and 19th centuries further strengthened the position of the Nordic countries in Europe. The Romantics defined the North as a place of the sublime, as a pure and awe-inspiring place of freedom. The aestheticism of the era celebrated the magnificent and even terrifying nature of the North. Instead of fearing the harsh landscape of the North, writers revelled in its beauty, admiring the waterfalls, the glaciers, the expansive plains and dark forests and rough mountains, and even the darkness and the gloom.<sup>58</sup> These new ideas about the North correlated with the Romantic search for that which is pure and true, for that which is “real.” Integral to this quest were emotions, free expression, and creativity. Simultaneously, the Romantics denigrated that which was constructed or regularized and proclaimed those things as being “not real.”<sup>59</sup> The concept of the North played an important part of the Romantic imagination, and in the 19th century the idea became prevalent that Nordic countries were “more original” than the more sophisticated countries such as England, the Netherlands, or Germany.<sup>60</sup>

Romantic ideas of the North, including Iceland, were pervasive in the 19th century, surviving alongside other influential stereotypes of the North.<sup>61</sup> According to Romantic ideals, writers recreated the North as the birthplace of creativity, the desire for freedom, individuality, and human kindness. And the North, not least the far North, was defined as the home of heroism, masculinity, and poetry:

I cannot love thee, South, for all thy sun,  
For all thy scarlet flowers or thy palms;

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57. A good overview about the theories of climate can be found in Beller 2007a: 298–304.

58. See Stadius 2005: 53–54, 56. These ideas have been connected to the ideas and theories of the Englishman Edmund Burke about the Sublime.

59. See Stadius 2005: 55.

60. Stadius 2005: 49–51.

61. See Stadius 2005: 59–60.

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But in the North forever dwells my heart.  
The North with all its human sympathies,  
The glorious North, where all amidst the sleet,  
Warm hearts do dwell, warm hearts sing out with joy;  
The North that ever loves the poet well.

This poem was written by the English poet William Morris in the middle of the 19th century, and it is probable that he had Iceland in mind when he penned these words.<sup>62</sup>

Ideas about the superiority of the North compared to the South became ever more prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries. These ideas would fuel the racism of the 19th and 20th centuries and greatly impact society all around the globe. According to some racist thinkers in the late 19th century, the race that populated the southernmost part of Scandinavia was the essence, the kernel of the race they named *Homo Europæus*. These ideas permeated cultural life and discourse in central and northern Europe in the latter half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th.<sup>63</sup>

The redefinition of North as being the enlightened, educated, and technologically advanced countries of Scandinavia was achieved during this time period. Writers began to praise the high level of education of the populace of these countries, to extol its open and free politics and government, and to admire the great technological advances in these countries and their citizens' high quality of life.<sup>64</sup> Icelandic and Nordic cultural heritage played an important part in this process of redefinition.

During this time period the concept of the far North was divided between the northernmost part of Scandinavia and Greenland on the one hand and Iceland and the Faroe Islands on the other. Iceland and the Faroe Islands became a part of the Germanic North and played a significant role in the system of ideas created by nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Greenland and the territories populated by the Sami people became the representatives of the primitive North.

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62. Quoted in Wawn 2000: 249.

63. Stadius 2005: 92–97; see also Grace 2002: 96–97.

64. See Stadius 2005: 171–187.

## IMAGINATIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE NORTH

However, political and social upheavals, especially following the end of the Cold War, have changed popular conceptions of the different regions of the high North. It is likely that in the near future the idea of the people of the far North will be more harmonious than in the recent past.

I have discussed here the various imaginations and definitions of the North and the far North, and traced the history of the ideas from the Middle Ages up until the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. We can generally claim that many of the historical stereotypes and imaginations of national identity that have been discussed here, both the positive and the negative, survive and thrive in the modern era. Among the stereotypes about the North and the far North that appear to be common now in the 21st century are:

- The Utopian North: According to these imaginations, people live a primitive and self-sufficient life in the far North, in balance with nature. These ideas are common today about Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and the northern part of Scandinavia.
- The Historical or Original North: Ideas about the original North are also thriving. According to them, we can still find traces in the far North of the early culture of Europe. Culture and traditions are believed to have survived in the far North but lost elsewhere.
- The Creative North: Closely related to this belief is the idea that the North is a place of creativity and freedom. Some believe that people and nature have a closer relationship in the far North than elsewhere and that this relationship engenders the desire for freedom and initiative.
- The Progressive North: The image of the progressive North is also applied to regions in the far North, at least to Iceland, but it is more common to think of the Nordic region as a whole as being progressive.
- The Unfeeling or Unemotional North: It is common to contrast the cold, unfeeling, quiet, and material North to the warm, emotional, and cheerful South.

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- The Wealthy North: In the last decades it has become increasingly more common to consider the far North as a place of cultural and material wealth. The far North is considered rich in cultural heritage and also in raw materials and energy. Examples of these ideas can be found in the daily discussions about the rich energy sources of Iceland and Greenland, as well as in discussions about the fish stock in the oceans and the raw materials in the earth. These ideas have an impact on modern international politics, where geographical and economic superpowers attempt to gain control of natural resources in the North.
- The Evil or Immoral North: According to these ideas, life in the North is still defined by cruelty. This image is exemplified by Faroese whaling and Greenlandic drinking, as well as Icelandic overindulgence, both alcoholic and sexual.<sup>65</sup> News about Icelandic behaviour in international business in the recent years has strengthened this stereotype.

Depictions of the North, the Nordic countries, and the far North have been many and varied throughout the centuries. These regions oscillated from being considered traditional to being progressive, from embodying the primitive to embodying the technological advancement of the modern era, from being a horde of barbarians to being a civilized people; they have moved from poverty to wealth, from enlightenment to romanticism, from being cold and callous to being warm and kind. All these ideas were well known in earlier eras and they have survived to this day. The North is simultaneously a utopia and a dystopia.

The Canadian Scholar Sherill Grace writes in her book about northern Canada, “North is multiple, shifting and elastic; it is a *process*, not an eternal fixed goal or condition.”<sup>66</sup> This overview of the different permutations of the North is meant to illustrate constant change in the imaginations and stereotypes of the North. We can argue that it is perhaps more correct to speak of many and various Norths rather than one individual North.

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65. “Ísland í sviðsljósi Conans” [Iceland in Conan’s Spotlight] 2009: 40.

66. Grace 2002: 16.

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*HISTORICAL IMAGES*



# The Emergence of *Norðrlönd* in Old Norse Medieval Texts, ca. 1100–1400

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**Abstract** – The subject of this article is the emergence of the term *Norðrlönd* in Old Norse textual culture, the different meaning and functions of this term, and its connection with the idea of a Northern people who shared certain features, such as a common language, history, and identity. This will be explained through analysis of the precise meaning of the term *Norðrlönd* within medieval discourse, in particular with regard to how it was used in the Scandinavian *lingua franca*. A secondary aim is to explain its connection with related concepts in other languages, for example, Latin. In order to achieve this, an analysis will be made of how the term was used and in what context. In addition, the influence of power structures on the term and their uses will also be analysed. A third consideration will be how the inhabitants of *Norðrlönd* were defined, in other words, who was included and who was not. This study of medieval discourse is qualitative rather than quantitative, as befits the nature of the documentary sources consulted. The primary sources themselves, and the information they provide, is the major focus of the study. Through careful analysis of the term *Norðrlönd* and its use in contemporary texts, the dominant discourse concerning the North in Scandinavia during the Middle Ages will be elucidated, as will the creation of an image of the North and a specific Nordic identity.

**Keywords** – The North, Iceland, worldview, medieval identities, ethnogenesis, literacy, medieval historiography, medieval geography, exoticism, mental maps

## Introduction

Any study of historic phenomena has to start from a set of assumptions. To study the images of the North, one has to take for granted that the North can signify something besides a cardinal direction, that it includes places and communities that can be imagined. The meaning of the North can be both varied and multiform, as evidenced by the heterogeneous views on offer in this collection of articles. To study the North from a historical perspective also presupposes that the images and identities of the North can evolve according to the existing historical circumstances.

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The purpose of this article is to analyze the identities of the North from an etymological perspective by examining the term *Norðrlönd* as it appears in the earliest known Scandinavian sources and providing a general overview of its use in medieval Scandinavian sources. The emphasis on the Old Norse terminology turns the focus to the internal image of the North and how a specific discourse about a certain society was shaped by those belonging to that specific society. Of particular interest is the way in which those who belonged to the North could represent it to other peoples as an exotic location with inherent wonders, in works such as *The King's Mirror* (*Konungs skuggsjá*), written in Norway in the 13th century (see also Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson in this volume).

Any analysis of the term, however, can only benefit by taking into account the terms used to represent the North in other languages, in particular the international language of the day, Latin. The use of this comparative method should offer some insight into northern identities and shed light on how the people of the North identified themselves and made a distinction between themselves and others. The function of the term within literary discourse is also of interest for establishing whether the North was primarily seen as a geographic, social, or even a linguistic community. How did those who identified themselves with the North distinguish between themselves and others who were seen as outside that community? Were all who lived in northern lands seen as part of the North?

From the inception of literary discourse in the northern countries, history was seen as a vital marker of identification. Through the construction of a legendary past in works such as *Tales from the Ancient North* (in Modern Icelandic: *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*), the Nordic countries were reinvented as a historical community with an ancient and hallowed lineage. Of special interest is how the image of the historical North was, to a great degree, created at its western margin, in Medieval Iceland, even if Iceland was a new society that had only come into existence in the 9th and 10th centuries. To some degree, the northern past invented in the *fornaldarsögur* was a product of Icelandic literate culture and the introduction of an international system of discourse to this society on the margins of Catholic Christianity.

To summarize briefly, the subject of this article is the emergence of the term *Norðrlönd* in Old Norse textual culture, the different meaning and functions of this term, and its connection with the idea of a northern people who shared certain features, such as a common language, history, and identity.

## New Systems of Discourse

In the 12th century a new medium of discourse, literacy, was introduced to Iceland, a country without a structure of government where the inhabitants had only recently been introduced to organized religion. An important milestone in the organization of the Icelandic Church was the introduction of tithes in 1096. This event was witnessed by the first generation of Icelanders who possessed literate culture, historians such as Ari Þorgilsson (1067–1148) and Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056–1133), who had enormous influence on the development of Icelandic historiography.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of a new medium of discourse thus went hand in hand with the adaptation of a new organized religion, Catholic Christianity.

Catholic Christianity had for centuries been spreading through Europe, from the confines of the defunct Roman Empire into virgin territories in northern and eastern Europe. During the process of conversion and consolidation, Catholic Christianity brought along with it a certain type of discourse and rationale, a method of constructing new truths. Within this discourse, there existed a dominant worldview, a method of clarifying the measure of the world, and classifying its lands and inhabitants. A name, whether of a person, a place, or a region, was an important signifier of status within this worldview.

The introduction of literacy coincided with the advent of a new system of discourse, the Old Norse–Icelandic literary language. As a literary language, Old Norse–Icelandic was in many ways an offshoot of other languages using the Latin alphabet and shared with them a common Christian method of discourse. For a few centuries, between ca. 1100 and ca. 1400, this common literary culture was shared by

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<sup>1</sup> Their special status and influence was noted by their unique appropriation of the epithet *fróði* (the learned).

members of a linguistic community that reached from Greenland to the eastern shores of the Gulf of Finland. Of course, there were differences between West Nordic and East Nordic dialects, but the speakers of these dialects made no distinction between them until the 14th and 15th centuries, when they began to call their languages Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic.<sup>2</sup> The written language of the Nordic peoples was fairly standardized from the 12th century onwards, even if the dialects had started to differ several centuries before. This would indicate that a standard of linguistic communication between Scandinavians from different parts of the region had developed well before the advent of literacy.<sup>3</sup>

This linguistic community of speakers of Old Norse–Icelandic had recourse to terms by which to identify themselves, terms with a reference to location or natural phenomena, names such as *Ísland* and *Norðrlönd*. The name of Iceland, evocative of northern chilliness, was recognized in Europe from the 11th century. Adam of Bremen, in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* from the 1070s, mentions both *Ísland* and its inhabitants, the *Islani*.<sup>4</sup> However, no interpretation of the name or its connection with ice and coldness can be found in the earliest Latin medieval sources.

According to this source, Icelanders were loyal to several institutions in the 11th century, including the kings of Norway and the archbishops of Hamburg–Bremen. The evidence of Icelandic sources is less categorical in this respect, which demonstrates the importance of perspective. A person from an important Catholic centre, such as Adam of Bremen, had a predisposition to see structures and hierarchy in place whereas such connections were much more tenuous from the viewpoint of marginally situated Icelanders.

How about the larger entity to which the Icelanders belonged, the area known as *Norðrlönd*? How was the name of that particular region

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<sup>2</sup> Compare with Jakobsson 2005: 195–196; see also Karker 1977: 484–487; Árnason 2002: 176–179. Literary Faroese was not created until the 18th and 19th centuries, eventually coming to resemble Icelandic far more than the spoken dialects would warrant.

<sup>3</sup> Compare with Árnason 2002: 165–172.

<sup>4</sup> Trillmich & Buchner, eds., 1961: 426, 484.

constructed, and how did the invention of the name contribute to the identity of the community that inhabited *Norðrlönd*, the people who shared a common linguistic and literary culture? For the rest of this article, I shall look at the context in which this term appears, and what it signifies.

## Bipolar and Quadripolar Systems of Distinction

Despite the statement of Adam of Bremen, Iceland was evidently a land that was not subject to any king in the 12th century (or indeed, before), as is amply demonstrated by contemporary sources. In the 13th century, the relationship of Icelanders to the King of Norway was becoming more problematic, as many or most of the leading chieftains in the country became the retainers of the king and subject to his jurisdiction. In the end, this led to the submission of Iceland to the Norwegian kings, which was accomplished piecemeal in 1262–1264.

However, the relationship of the Norse king to power centres in the South was no less problematic. King Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–1263) sought approval for his status from both the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope.<sup>5</sup> In 1247 a special emissary from Pope Innocent IV came “hither to the Nordic countries [...] to consecrate King Hákon.”<sup>6</sup> In this instance, the view towards the North (*Norðrlönd*) is externalized by placing it in reference to a person travelling there from an important power centre in the Mediterranean region. However, the word “hither” shows that the term is actually that of the inhabitants of the North themselves.

The term *Norðrlönd* presupposes an ultimate system of direction, rather than a proximate system. The direction north is seen as a constant, the property of certain lands. In a similar way, Rome was defined as the South in Icelandic terminology and pilgrimages there were known as *suðrgöngur* (walks to the South). This definition of North and South was probably influenced by Latin terminology, in which the peoples of the North were known as *gentes septentrionales*.

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<sup>5</sup> Vigfússon, ed., 1887, vol. II: 269–270.

<sup>6</sup> “Hingat í Norðrlönd [...] til þess at vígja Hákon konung undir kórónu.” Jóhannesson et al., eds., 1946, vol. II: 83 (my translation).

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Within this system, the North was not confined to Scandinavia, and in some texts France, Germany, and England are seen as parts of *Norðrlönd*.<sup>7</sup>

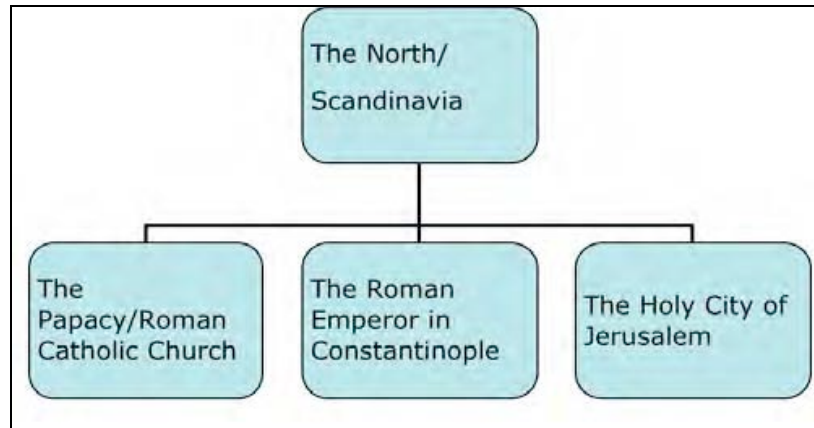


Figure 1. Relevant power structures within the North–South system.

In addition to this bipolar system of contrasting North and South, authors writing in the Old Norse–Icelandic language also appear to use the term *Norðrlönd* within a quadripolar system, in contrast to the lands that were closest to the region, the *Veströnd* (the British Isles), *Suðrriki* (Germany, the Holy Roman Empire) and *Austrriki/Austrvegr* (Russia and other lands to the east).<sup>8</sup>

An example of the way the North was contrasted with its neighbours can be seen in narratives about Óláfr Tryggvason (d. 1000), the Norse king whom Icelandic historians commonly depicted as the most significant missionary of Scandinavia. Óláfr was regarded as the “most famous man in the northern lands,” but the same sources also note his fame within a particular system of discourse, “the Danish tongue” (*dönsk tunga*), in this instance the Old Norse–Icelandic language that was shared by the Scandinavians.<sup>9</sup>

The fame of Óláfr was not confined to the North; he also received “all sorts of fame in Russia and widely on the eastern paths,

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<sup>7</sup> Those examples are discussed further in Jakobsson 2005: 196–197.

<sup>8</sup> Compare with Jakobsson (2005): 193–199, 217.

<sup>9</sup> “Frægstr maðr á Norðrlöndum.” Jónsson, ed., 1932: 231; Jónsson, ed., 1902–1903: 131 (my translation).



in the southern lands and the western lands.”<sup>10</sup> The emphasis that Scandinavian historians placed on the historical renown of this Norwegian monarch in other regions demonstrates that people and events in the North were thought to be of importance for these cultures. In these lands the North was not as distant or marginal as it was perceived in the power centres in the South.

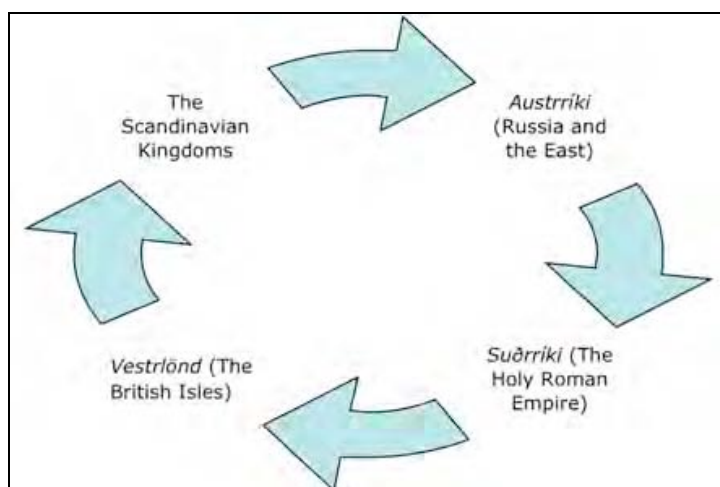


Figure 2. Relevant power structure within the quadripolar system.

The term *Norðrlönd* thus had a dual meaning, depending on the context. It was either a vaguely defined region, north of the great power centres in the South, or a micro-region within a system of four competing structures to the west, north, east, and south.

Within these different systems of distinction there were various possible discourses about the North. From the viewpoint of the South there was a tendency to identify the North as *the Other*, going back to Tacitus’ writings on the Germans. Adam of Bremen has a tendency to depict the Scandinavians as noble Barbarians, free from the corruptions and politics of the South. The cave-dwelling Icelanders get an honourable mention and are seen as Christians in nature, even if recent converts in practice (see also Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson in this volume).

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<sup>10</sup> “Margs kyns frægð í Garðaríki ok víða um Austrvegu, í Suðrlöndum ok í Veströndum.” Jónsson, ed., 1902–1903: 108–111 (my translation).

In part, this view was shared by the Scandinavians themselves, although they saw nothing noble in their isolation and distance from the centres of religion in the South. With the advent of literacy and a general acceptance of the Catholic worldview they were eager to cement their relationship with the power centres and make up for their marginal status within Christianity. The institution of *sudrgöngur* is an example of such a passage to the centre, both in geographical and social terms.

Within the quadripolar system, the North is more often used as a field of comparison. It is a reference that is used to estimate the achievements of individual kings. Their success depends partly on the fame of a particular king within the Scandinavian system of discourse, *dönsk tunga*. Their greatness was seen in terms of their power within this particular geographic frame, *Norðrlönd*. This can be inferred from the manner in which individual kings are classified in the Icelandic *konungasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, as the richest or most powerful kings within “Norðrlönd.”

### East Meets North: *The King’s Mirror* and the Exotic Self

In the 13th-century text *The King’s Mirror* (L: *Speculum regale*; ON: *Konungs skuggsjá*), which is narrated in the form of a dialogue between a wise father and an inquisitive son, there is a detailed discussion about social and natural phenomena that pertain to the work of a merchant or a king. Early in the narrative, the father mentions the difference between the position of the sun in northern and southern parts of the World, which leads to a discussion about the relative temperatures of southern parts of the World (such as Apulia or the Holy Land) and the northern parts of the World, in which the discussion takes place. The father informs the son about the spherical nature of the Earth and the effect of its spherical form on the climate. Then the son wants to go on to lighter subjects, such as the wonders that are to be found in lands such as Ireland, Iceland, or Greenland. This leads the father into a discussion about the “wonders that are here with us in the North,”<sup>11</sup> although reluctantly, as people are loath to believe such tales about things they have not seen themselves. In this section, he clearly identifies himself as belonging to the North.

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<sup>11</sup> “Undr þau er hier eru norðr med oss” (my translation).

However, the father makes an explicit comparison between the North and India, with a reference to a book that was supposedly made in India about the Indies and sent to Emperor Manuel I (r. 1143–1180) in Constantinople. This is the famous book, *De ritu et moribus Indorum*, that was ascribed to the pseudo-Christian Indian king, Prester John, and circulated widely in Medieval Europe. The argument of the father seems to be that this book also contains wondrous tales and yet is highly credible. By analogy, the same should apply to wondrous tales from the North.<sup>12</sup>

In *The King's Mirror*, then, the North is described as if from outside, a place that might seem wondrous to strangers, to people not belonging to the North. However, these wonders are depicted as normal from an inside point of view; it is only a lack of familiarity that makes them strange, just as the wonders of the East seem strange to people not belonging to that part of the world. The wise father figure then goes on to describe natural phenomena that belong to the North, remarkable sea creatures, ice, volcanoes, and northern lights. At all times he attempts to explain them as manifestations of the natural order, not as monstrous anomalies. However, he makes no attempt to classify the wonders of Iceland or Greenland (let alone Ireland) as specifically “Northern” attributes. On the contrary, they are compared and classified with similar strange phenomena in more southern or eastern parts of the world, such as India or Sicily.

Although *The King's Mirror* is one of the earliest works to discuss phenomena that belong to the North, its identification of peculiar Northern attributes is not made with any vigour. The author seems to be implying that each region has its own wonders, which make them seem exotic to strangers, but are all part of the divine order of nature. The author of *The King's Mirror* deliberately shies away from making a sharp distinction between the North and other parts of the world, although he identifies himself as part of the North. Thus, in this work, the North is seen as a separate region but not necessarily very different from other regions. The implication of *The King's Mirror* is that the peculiarities of the North are no more peculiar than those of any other region on Earth.

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<sup>12</sup> Holm-Olsen, ed., 1983: 13.

## The Inherent Model: Latin Discourse about the North

In *The King's Mirror*, the discussion about the wonders of the North is preceded by an explanation of the northern winds and their effects on the work of farmers and sailors and other professions. In connecting the North to certain winds, the author was able to draw upon a very ancient tradition. In ancient Greek and Latin texts, the North was traditionally identified by either the winds or the star signs. The northern wind was known as *boreas* (in Greek) or *aquilo* (in Latin), but these terms usually had negative connotations, especially the Latin *aquilo*. Identifying the North by seven stars in Ursa Major, the *septem triones* (Greek: *arktos*), was also an ancient custom, but these terms had a much more neutral connotation.<sup>13</sup>

When the first Christian missionaries went to the North in the early 9th century, their missionary field was identified as *partes aquilonis*, the region of the northern wind.<sup>14</sup> These lands were explicitly contrasted with the homelands of Christianity in the South. In 11th- and 12th-century works by German Christian historians, however, the more neutral terms *septentrio* and *boreas* gained ground at the expense of *aquilo*.<sup>15</sup> This coincided with the spread of Christianity to the North, which was thus no longer distinct from the South in respect to religion. The use of these Latin terms was of more ancient provenance than the Old Norse term *Norðrlönd* and must have influenced its use in Scandinavian medieval historiography.

In works by authors such as Adam of Bremen, negative characterizations are reserved for those he regards as *pagani*, although not all the people thus termed by Adam were actually pagans.<sup>16</sup> David Fraesdorff argues that the North as an imaginary construction in the writings of medieval clerics was dependent on ancient models identifying the North with darkness and coldness. However, the stark contrasting of the pagan North, *aquilo*, with the Christian South was in retreat from the 9th century onwards. Interestingly, the Pagan-Christian dichotomy contributed also to a western European tradition

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<sup>13</sup> Fraesdorff 2005: 37–40.

<sup>14</sup> Fraesdorff 2005: 58.

<sup>15</sup> Fraesdorff 2005: 355–356.

<sup>16</sup> Janson 1998: 333.

of discourse where the Slavonic eastern lands were seen as parts of the missionary field of the North. This reflected the ambition of German clergymen in the 12th and 13th centuries, but the influence on later discourse was profound.<sup>17</sup>

These Latin terms and models of discourse were available to Northern literati who wished to define their own region. Thus, *The King's Mirror* is far from the only source to identify the cardinal regions with the winds, and the use of stellar constellations was also very common. The Medieval Latin discourse about the North also influenced the identification of North with certain cultural characteristics, such as wildness and paganism. In the works of 11th- and 12th-century authors, however, such inferences were receding in importance, as the North became an established part of the Catholic oecumene.

### The Northern Community: The Other North

As the example of Óláfr Tryggvason demonstrates, it was common in Old Norse historiography to identify “the Northern lands” (*Norðrlönd*) with a particular system of discourse, “the Danish tongue” (*dönsk tunga*), which was shared by those inhabiting the northern lands. Thus, the North was identified with a certain ethnicity and a certain culture. Such a definition, however, was inherently problematic as not all the inhabitants of the North belonged to the cultural group speaking the Danish tongue.

In his overview of the northern lands, Adam of Bremen mentions several peoples belonging to the North, among others such exotic peoples as the Sami (L: *Scridfinni*), who were “steeled by the cold” (L: *gelu decocti*).<sup>18</sup> In *Historia Norvegiae*, a distinction is made between zones that are populated by the king’s subjects and those which are “populated by Finns [Sami] and not cultivated” (L: *Finnis inhabitatur sed non aratur*).<sup>19</sup> A distinction is made between the inhabitants (L: *incolae*) of northern Norway and the godless (L: *profani*) Sami using

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<sup>17</sup> Fraesdorff 2005: 361–363.

<sup>18</sup> Trillmich & Buchner, eds., 1961: 256.

<sup>19</sup> Storm, ed., 1880: 73.

religious terminology, although it is explicit that there is also a distinction between the lifestyle of the Sami as hunters and nomads and the Norse as settled cultivators.<sup>20</sup> A similar distinction can be seen in several Icelandic historical sources, such as the *fornaldarsögur*, where the Sami and other related peoples clearly belong to the “other” North.<sup>21</sup>

The North was then not only a geographic area but a marker of identity. Those who belonged to the North had something in common that they did not share with the inhabitants of the lands nearest to them: a common language, a common culture, a common lifestyle, and, last but not least, a common history. It is this history that defined the North, as can be seen in the statements about Óláfr Tryggvason, who had gained “historical fame” (ON: *sögufræð*) in the North. This was only possible because the North was seen as a region that had a shared culture and origins. The North was defined in the discourse about its past.

### The Legendary Past of the North

A common past was one of the characteristics that defined the identity of the North, as can be seen by the ubiquity of the term *Norðrlönd* within the literature, such as the king’s sagas and legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*). Authors who wanted to compose a history of the North had a lot of legendary material to work with, but the general trustworthiness of such material was questionable. To make the legendary past of the North appear authentic, the author had to anchor the argument by connecting the development of the North to general Catholic history, the authenticity of which was not questioned.

One such connection can be seen in tales about the “Fróðafriðr,” which were recorded by the progenitors of Icelandic history, Sæmundr and Ari. Both seem to have made a reference in their writings to the reign of King Fróði as a period of long-standing peace and good government.<sup>22</sup> This period was thought to coincide in time

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<sup>20</sup> Hansen 2000: 68–70.

<sup>21</sup> Jakobsson 2005: 249–256.

<sup>22</sup> Compare with Karlsson 1969: 332–333; Guðnason 1963: 17, 125, 198.

with the birth of Christ and the reign of Augustus the Great as Roman emperor.

Another attempt to construct a concrete temporal framework for the legendary prehistory of the North can be seen in *Norna-Gests þátr*. The protagonist of that episode, Norna-Gestr, seems to have condensed within a single lifespan (albeit an extraordinary long life of 300 years) all the major characters and events of the legendary history of the North. In this episode, the reign of Óláfr Tryggvason in Norway (995–1000) marks the beginning of a new era, the end of legendary prehistory and the beginning of a properly Christian history.

The hegemonic legend of the ancestry of the Scandinavian kings was under construction in the 12th and 13th centuries, but Turkish origins are hinted at as early as in the works of Ari fróði. In the *Snorra-Edda*, a scholarly exploration of Scaldic verse from the first half of the 13th century, there is a prologue that confidently traces the origins of Scandinavian royal and noble lineages from Odin, and hence to the city of Troy. Other sources, both *Heimskringla* and sagas of the apostles, make a broader case for emigration from Asia Minor to the North. The cause of the emigration is not always agreed upon; some sources cite the campaigns of Roman generals in Asia, whereas others mention the preachings of the apostles.

The general framework of migration from Asia around the birth of Christ seems to have enjoyed wide-ranging currency, although alternative narratives of origin do exist, most prominently those that involve emigration from Ostrobothnia.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion: Icelanders and the Discourse about the North

The discourse on *Norðrlönd* in Old Norse–Icelandic literature centred around two basic systems, one bipolar and the other quadripolar. Within the bipolar system there was a tendency to identify the North as *the Other*, in contrast to wealthy centres of power in the South. This discourse is apparent in writings that reflect a Catholic worldview and

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<sup>23</sup> Jakobsson 2005: 208–209.

define the status of the North in a universal perspective. Within a narrower frame of reference, the quadripolar system, the North was more often used as a field of comparison, to estimate the achievements of individual dignitaries.

Discourses of the past always involve to some degree an invention of the Self. The medieval discourse on *Norðrlönd* included several references to the common past where the North was routinely introduced as a frame of reference. Thus the new medium of literacy was instrumental in bringing about a particular identity of the North, based on a shared historical past and the aristocratic background of the ruling class, which perceived itself as descendants from Turkish immigrants.

The situation of Iceland within the community of people inhabiting the North was ambiguous. In one sense, the prodigious creation of literary works dealing with the common past of the North was of supreme importance for the way scholars of the North came to view themselves. In dealing with the legendary past, Iceland was seen as a repository of ancient knowledge, a fact readily acknowledged by historians from other Scandinavian lands.

The introduction of literacy thus gave Icelandic scholars an opportunity to act as the historians of the North, who had the obligation and prestige of preserving the legends of a common Scandinavian past. Icelanders played a vital role in giving the term *Norðrlönd*, a significance that cemented Nordic identity within a larger, Catholic framework.

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ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

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# Islands on the Edge: Medieval and Early Modern National Images of Iceland and Greenland<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – In this article accounts of Iceland and Greenland from the late Middle Ages to the end of the 18th century will be examined with consideration given to the type of national images appearing there. The aim of the article is to explain these images and discuss their development and origin, not least how ideas about islands and the North in general have influenced the descriptions of these two countries. The research is based on two connected research traditions: the field of imagology and postcolonial studies, which means that the sources are studied as representations, as a discourse on islands in the periphery in the far North.

**Keywords** – National images, islands, far North, periphery, utopia

## Introduction

Between the late Middle Ages and the end of the 18th century, two large islands on the European edge—Iceland and Greenland—were subjected to considerable descriptive effort from the outside world. This article argues that there was ambivalence about these islands, an uncertainty about whether they were dystopian hell or utopian paradise isles. Although islands in general had a special status that made them suspect—either as wondrous or evil—it is likely that these islands were particularly prone to these two divergent attitudes because they had a peripheral status and were situated in the far North. Writers living in civilized Europe could project a variety of opposites onto the unseen far North: good or bad, rich or poor, civilized or barbarian. The duality of being islands and being in the far

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Icelandic by Elisabeth Ida Ward.

North put these countries within a complex matrix of otherness that authors during this time period struggled to comprehend. It is especially important to see how standardized and similar these descriptions became through time, considering that the countries and peoples in question are different in many aspects.

This article will examine the accounts of Iceland and Greenland during this 500-year period to show the most important images of each country. It is the aim of this article to explain their development and origins, not least the extent to which ideas about islands and the North have influenced the descriptions of these two countries.

The article is based mainly on two connected research traditions: the field of imagology and postcolonial studies.<sup>2</sup> The sources for the research will therefore be studied as representations, as images, not as texts representing some kind of truth on the situation in these countries. They will instead be treated as a discourse, building on different traditions and ideas about the situation and life in the far North, about islands and about the periphery in general. These traditions were moulded over a long period of time, though new factors were constantly added. An important concept connected with this discourse is the concept of hegemony, as the balance of power between the centre and the periphery is never equal concerning these representations. Representations of these two countries in this period are mainly composed outside these two islands and coloured by the views of the “civilized” world.

## Iceland in the Late Middle Ages

The honour of writing the first account of Iceland goes to the German priest Adam of Bremen.<sup>3</sup> In his work *Historia Ecclesiae Hamburgensis* (written between 1070 and 1080), he describes an island lying at the end of the world that very few know of. Unique to the island, in his view, was black ice that was so old it was combustible. He also reports that the inhabitants dressed in skin, since it was very cold, and lived solely off their domestic animals, since no grain grew

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Riesz 2007: 400–404; Leerssen 2007: 17–33.

<sup>3</sup> Adam of Bremen 2000: 191–192.

there. Because there were no forests, he says, the Icelanders lived in earthen houses with their domestic animals, sleeping under the same roof and even eating the same as the animals. He states that they treated foreigners exactly the same as locals, and generally expected very little from life. They were perfectly content with their situation and considered all property communal property. The bishop was treated like the king, and everyone obeyed his edicts. Since adopting Christianity, their lifestyles had changed little, as they had also previously lived their lives according to the spirit of Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

The society Adam describes is a strange and very primitive one and the life of the inhabitants might resemble the living habits of animals. But, on closer inspection, we see he is not describing a barbaric society but one of simplicity and virtue, a repudiation of arrogance and pretention, not dissimilar from the vows of monastic orders. According to his description, Icelanders lived an almost holy life, although certainly within extremely unusual circumstances. Compared to life in the cities in Europe, Iceland and the life of its people were certainly anomalous.

About 150 years later, the Dane Saxo Grammaticus took up the subject of Iceland and Icelanders in his prologue to *Gesta Danorum*, an account of the history of Denmark. He states that the lifestyle of Icelanders was unusual, and argues that they worked to write down and assemble the deeds of other peoples. This was done because it was their ardent passion to increase knowledge of other peoples and pass that information on to the next generations. Saxo explains that this obsession with information stemmed from the fact that the country offered no luxury of any kind. The people lived their lives in tempered simplicity, putting their efforts into history and literature instead of pursuing the hedonistic pleasures of life.<sup>5</sup> Saxo also comments on the Icelandic landscape in his prologue, noting in particular those features that make it especially strange, such as volcanoes that were always afire, similar to the volcano on Sicily. He finds it particularly wondrous that such a cold country should have so

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<sup>4</sup> Adam of Bremen 2000: 192, 230–231.

<sup>5</sup> Saxo Grammaticus 2000: 15.

much eternally burning fire and that there seemed to always be fuel available to feed such fires.<sup>6</sup>

Although Saxo dwells on the wondrous nature of the country in his description of the volcanoes and hot springs, his account is in many respects similar to Adam of Bremen's. Both put forward Icelandic society as an ideal, though the aspects vary slightly. Saxo in particular seems to be rather describing the learned society of the monastery, where brothers of the order sit continuously at their desks and deny themselves all earthly pleasures. Like Adam of Bremen, Saxo seems to be using Icelandic society as a yardstick for the wider Christian society, an ideal to encourage improvement among others.

In the first half of the 14th century, Ranulph Higden described Iceland in his work *Polychronicon* as an island lying in the frozen northern ocean. The people were taciturn and direct, and they dressed in the skin of wild animals. Due to the harsh climate, they were unable to raise sheep or grow grain, and thus bread was seldom to be found. The people survived on seafood and their priests were their kings.<sup>7</sup> Higden places emphasis squarely on the difficulty of life in the farthest reaches of the northern ocean, an aspect only hinted at in Adam of Bremen's and Saxo's accounts.

These three texts introduce several themes that would later be expounded upon. They set the tone that Icelanders live a life that is quite primitive and modest, and all three agree that the climate and landscape—especially the cold—by no means make for a life of plenty. Two of them—Adam of Bremen and Saxo—suggest that the simplicity of the lifestyle has benefited the people, made them worthy of imitation in fact, just as service in a monastery would, while Higden's descriptions put more emphasis on the barbaric sides of the life of the Icelanders.

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<sup>6</sup> Saxo Grammaticus 2000: 18–20.

<sup>7</sup> Higden 1865: 323, 325.

## Early Modern Perspectives on Iceland

Between the 16th century and the early 19th century, descriptions of Iceland increased considerably. Certain trends and themes in the discussions of the land and the people emerged. The most dominant one was to emphasize the negative aspects of the country. The Icelandic landscape and nature were particularly apt to be negatively described. For instance, the German Sebastian Franck, writing in the first half of the 16th century, did so in such a negative manner that one would imagine the country was uninhabitable. The snow and ice was constant, there were entire mountains made only of ice, and the landscape was a barren desert. Though grasslands existed, the grazing animals barely survived due to the bitter cold.<sup>8</sup> Other authors stated that the northern winds were so fierce that they could topple a knight in full armour from his steed. And for eight months of the year, the island was icebound, allowing fearsome bears to come ashore looking for food. Around the island swam whales and ocean monsters, often so huge that the seafarers thought them to be islands.<sup>9</sup>

The popularity of emphasizing the negative aspects of the nature was a consistent trend until the end of the 18th century. A well-respected account of Iceland from the 18th century states, among other things, that the countryside did not give

a pleasing view to the eye of the traveller, for it is uneven, covered with rocks and rugged mountains, and continually cloathed with ice and snow, with barren fields between them, destitute of wood, and encrusted with lava for many miles.<sup>10</sup>

In the judgement of these accounts, Iceland is far off the mark as a land suitable for habitation.

This negativity about the climate and landscape was no simple matter; rather, it was considered so unnatural that it was also quite

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<sup>8</sup> Franck 1534: lx.

<sup>9</sup> Olaus Magnus 1964: 8; see also Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. I: 28.

<sup>10</sup> Trusler 1788: 104; see also Guthrie 1782: 61.

common for accounts during this time period to associate both the people and the landscape with the rule of the devil and the realm of death, a depiction that also shows up in a few medieval accounts. Jacob Ziegler, a German author writing in the early 16th century, took up this strand when he described a certain volcanic fissure: he said it was always ablaze, much like Mount Etna, and the spirits of the damned were trapped in its fire. Other spirits of the dead were also to be seen in Iceland, often walking around, acting as if they were alive.<sup>11</sup> Other authors claimed that Icelanders had continual interaction with the dead, and that it was popular to ask them to use their magical abilities, for instance, to control the wind, an ability that was frequently connected to the Sami people.<sup>12</sup> The Dutchman Dithmar Blefken, writing from the perspective of learned European society early in the 17th century, explained the relationship between this magical aspect of Icelandic culture and the climate, temperature, and environment:

And when almost all Christian people, in that lamentable darknesse and title of a Church, as it were by Witchcraft deceived, were detayned in most deepe bonds of superstition; it could not bee but they, who were furthest removed from the societie of Learned men, and dwelling under an uncivill and barbarous Climate, should fall into most foule Idolatrie, when sometimes [...] they had Devils to serve them, as familiar as domesticall servants.<sup>13</sup>

In short, a common theme in the literature on Iceland in that period was to construct the nature of the country as hostile and evil, even demonic, and the island's volcanoes as doors to hell.

When the discussion turned to the characteristics of the people and their lifestyle, the common practice was to fill the accounts with judgemental statements and unfavourable comparisons. The Englishman Andrew Borde, writing in the mid-16th century, stated

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<sup>11</sup> Ziegler 1878: 9.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Schultesius 1650: 485.

<sup>13</sup> Blefken 1906: 495; Zorgdrager 1723: 86. Cornelius Zorgdrager adds that one can only expect that people who live in such a cold climate would be less civilized than those who live in warmer climes.



that Icelanders are “beastly creatures unmanered and untaughte. They have no houses but yet doth lye in caves altogether like swine [...] They do were wylde beastes skinned & roudges.”<sup>14</sup> The German Sebastian Franck claimed that Icelanders lived just like animals, surviving on fish and meat like wild beasts and preferred their food rotten and maggot-infested. The people also looked like wild animals, since all of them wore animal skins, and they were strong and very white.<sup>15</sup> (White is here a sign of the Northern otherness as all wild animals in Arctic climates were supposed to be white.) Still other authors suggested that Icelanders were short in stature, almost dwarf-like; the tallest amongst them were only five feet tall.<sup>16</sup> The view was that this was likely to be symbolic for how little Icelandic society had progressed towards civilization. By definition, therefore, the life of the people in this far-off place, on the edge of the inhabitable world, would bodily bear the marks of their locale: they did not look like people, but rather like dwarfs or wild animals.

How uncivilized the Icelanders were was much discussed, not only in terms of what sorts of houses they built, how they dressed, and how untidy they were, but also in terms of the relationship between the genders. Some authors stated that the men in the countryside had a tradition of lending German traders their daughters:

If any Virgin have familiaritie with a Germaine, shee is honoured among them, and therefore shee is sought of many Suiters. And the time was before this, that Whoordome, which was without the degrees of Consanguinitie and Aaffinite had no Infamie.<sup>17</sup>

These negative accounts went so far as to not only depict the people who live in the far North as looking like wild animals, but conducting themselves—in terms of food, clothing, and sex—as animals as well.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Boorde 1870 (no page numbers); see also Mallet 1684: 134.

<sup>15</sup> Franck 1534: lx; de la Croix 1697, vol. IV: 375.

<sup>16</sup> Mallet 1684: 134.

<sup>17</sup> Blefken 1906: 499; see also Schultesius 1650: 485.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Anderson 1746: 136–137.

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But other authors chose to pick up on aspects of Iceland that could be seen as positive, and expand upon them, even idealizing the country as a sort of utopia. In the early part of the 16th century, the German Albert Krantz saw Icelanders as a people who desired a holistic life, enjoying all that nature had to offer to the fullest extent. He mentioned, however, that foreign merchants had made inroads into the country, such that people were now drinking beer instead of being content to just drink water. They had also begun to look for gold and silver “wie die unseren.”<sup>19</sup>

During the 17th century, this trend continued. Such a positive perspective is clearly articulated by the Englishman Peter Heylin, writing around 1652 about the life of the Icelanders. He stated that the Icelanders “for the most part, are of plain and simple nature, living (as in the *Golden Age*) on that which nature gives them.”<sup>20</sup> During the 18th century, there was a more general tendency to describe Icelanders in this way. Authors, such as the Englishman William Guthrie in the late 18th century, emphasized those elements of the Icelandic way of life that suggested primitivity and innocence:

They are an honest, well intentioned people, moderately industrious, and very faithful and obliging. Theft is seldom heard of among them. They are much inclined to hospitality, and exercise it as far as their poverty will permit.<sup>21</sup>

The aforementioned authors built upon the foundations Adam of Bremen had laid out many centuries earlier: adoration for the primitive, respect for simplicity and a rejection of pretence. There is a suggestion that this simplicity and poverty ensures long life and health, these being qualities also considered most crucial within the teachings of Christianity. From this perspective then, Iceland is basically an ideal land, an exemplar of Christian society.

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<sup>19</sup> Krantz 1558: v.

<sup>20</sup> Heylin 1666: 496; de la Croix 1697, vol. IV: 375.

<sup>21</sup> Guthrie 1782: 59.

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Figure 1. Icelanders in the late 18th century.

The simplicity and hospitality of the Icelanders had become so well known by the beginning of the 19th century that a description of it was put to verse, which accompanied this picture: No bellows to blow, no fuel to find,/ No embers to stir, nor poker to mind;/ They yet boil their dinner with comfort and ease,/ And you may dine with them whenever you please.<sup>22</sup>

Several of the authors who discussed Iceland stated that, to a considerable degree, it was possible to have a very good life in Iceland. A sign of this was the extreme old age of the inhabitants, which is basically akin to the age of the patriarchs as described in the Old Testament.<sup>23</sup> Blefken asserted that he met an Icelander who was 200 years old, and stated that, according to the Swedish bishop Olaus Magnus, they could live to be 300 years old.<sup>24</sup> Certainly such old age is an indication that the land provided well for the people and their needs. This motif was also often repeated in many different sources. Ziegler—of the early 16th century—mentioned that abundant and rich grass sprang up in the countryside, such that cows had to be driven away lest they gorged themselves to death on the plenty, a description Ranulph Higden had bestowed upon Ireland two centuries earlier.<sup>25</sup> Not to be outdone, Sebastian Münster claimed that the land was so amazingly abundant in butter and fish that the catch

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<sup>22</sup> Taylor 1829: 12.

<sup>23</sup> See Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. IV: 215; de la Peyrère 1732: 54.

<sup>24</sup> Blefken 1906: 498–499. Blefken probably never came to Iceland but built his book on other sources. Olaus Magnus only claimed that Icelanders lived to be 100, so Blefken here is mistaken.

<sup>25</sup> Ziegler 1878: 9; Higden 1865: 333. It is interesting to see how often descriptions of Ireland and Iceland resemble each other in regard to the inhabitants and qualities of the two countries, not least according to utopian descriptions of both countries and the wonders that were to be found there. See Ortelius 1606: xli; Meriton 1679: 339.

was racked up outside the houses in stacks as tall as the houses.<sup>26</sup> Olaus Magnus conjured up the same sort of image in the mid-16th century when he said butter was produced in such quantity that it had to be stored in gigantic chests.<sup>27</sup> Other aspects of this utopian island were also to be envied. For example, quite a few descriptions included statements about how beautiful the women were:<sup>28</sup> “The Womenkinde there are very beautifull, but ornaments are wanting,” stated Dithmar Blefken.<sup>29</sup> Curative properties were also assigned to some of the natural elements in Iceland; Blefken said that from one spring “bubbles foorth liquor like Wax, which notably cureth the French disease, which is very common there.”<sup>30</sup>

Here we see that the descriptions of Iceland in this period go beyond the position of the medieval period, especially in terms of claiming that Iceland was a very bountiful country. This accords well with the idea that great wealth existed in the North. The idea goes back to the ancient Greeks, who maintained that circumstances of the Hyperborean people in the far North allowed for prosperity and an unsurpassed quality of life.<sup>31</sup> Similar ideas can be found in Tacitus’s *Germania*.<sup>32</sup> According to that classical tradition, and the various reports from western Europe from the Middle Ages and the early modern period about the unbelievably abundant fish and whale stocks of the North Atlantic, it was natural to include Iceland in that discourse.<sup>33</sup> A land surrounded by such fecundity could not but also be teeming with abundance that well rewarded those who set their course in that direction. That wonders were also to be found here both in terms of the people and the land corresponded well with this general categorization.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Münster 1628: 1365.

<sup>27</sup> Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. IV: 214.

<sup>28</sup> Heylin 1666: 496.

<sup>29</sup> Blefken 1906: 497.

<sup>30</sup> Blefken 1906: 502.

<sup>31</sup> Davidson 2005: 23–25; Romm 1994: 60, 64–67.

<sup>32</sup> Tacitus 2001: 123.

<sup>33</sup> See for example de la Croix 1697, vol. IV: 374; Moll 1701: 347.

<sup>34</sup> See for example Adam of Bremen 2000: 234; Blome 1670: 87; Melissantes 1715: 966.

The Dutch cartographer Abraham Ortelius described the resources of Iceland this way in the early 17th century:

Island a famous ile that's farre remote and distant from the Maine,  
North west from hence doth lie in frozen sea: The countries chiefest  
gaine

Is brimstone pale, which heere in mountaines high in plenty great is  
found;

Or heere and there like sand on shore li'th scattered on the ground.

The goodly pastures passing fatte, the lowly meddowes alwaie green,  
Such store of Neat and Kine in vales do feed, as else where may be  
seen.

The Sea on all sides round about, so many sundrie sorts of Fish  
Doth yeeld, that none their names do know, or greater store may wish:  
Whereof they daily lade great shippes from hence, and those away do  
send

To forrein countries euery way: though many things this ile commend,  
For fish yet doth it farre excell all kingdomes of the world throughout,  
By this the Nation grow'th in wealth, the people lusty strong and  
stout.<sup>35</sup>

One other virtue that Iceland was said to posses in the early modern period is related to the education and literary taste of the Icelanders, an accolade first assigned in the medieval period, as mentioned above. Jacob Ziegler and other authors in the 16th century stated that Icelanders composed poetry about the deeds of their forebears as a sort of testament for the next generation, so that they too could remember.<sup>36</sup> During the 17th century, tales about the intellectual life of the Icelanders were further elaborated. It was stated that Icelanders used to be the most learned of Northern peoples and had composed poems about the ancient days in their own tongue.<sup>37</sup> In addition to Saxo's statements mentioned above, the book *Crymogaea* by the Icelander Arngrímur Jónsson, which was published in Latin in Copenhagen in 1609, contributed substantially to this

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<sup>35</sup> Ortelius 1606: 104. The author also published a Latin version of the poem, which first appeared in the book *De re Nautica*.

<sup>36</sup> Ziegler 1878: 9; Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. I: 83.

<sup>37</sup> Paschoud 1726: 190: "They were formerly the greatest Wits of the North, having preserved their ancient History in Verses."

impression. The French scientist de la Peyrère claimed in the mid-17th century, inspired by Jónsson, that Icelanders had always been recognized and respected by their neighbours for what extraordinary poets they were.<sup>38</sup> The interest of learned men throughout Europe turned more and more to the cultural heritage of the North during the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>39</sup> It was argued that the origin of this heritage was to be found in Iceland.<sup>40</sup>

With the growth of nationalism in western and northern Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, this trend of the cultural Icelanders gained much more momentum, which will not be discussed here. Learned men in these countries looked to Iceland, this island far off on the edge of the European world, as a sort of wellspring and storehouse for their own culture.

## Greenland

There are fewer known descriptions of Greenland from the medieval period than there are of Iceland. Those preserved in the Icelandic Sagas will not be discussed here since they were basically unknown outside Iceland until much later. Adam of Bremen briefly mentioned Greenland and Greenlanders, saying that their skin was of the same green colour as the ocean, and from this derives the name of the country. He also stated that they were similar to Icelanders in lifestyle, though they were fiercer and were pirates.<sup>41</sup>

The medieval Norwegian text *The King's Mirror* (*Konungs skuggsjá*) also discusses Greenland. It states that the country “lies on the outermost edge of the earth toward the north,” and that it was greatly covered in ice though the weather was often good as in other places.<sup>42</sup> The inhabitants were said to be Christians, having churches and priests. They would trade with other countries, and the pastureland

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<sup>38</sup> de la Peyrère 1732: 45.

<sup>39</sup> See Omberg 1976; see also Gylfi Gunnlaugsson in this volume.

<sup>40</sup> *The European Delineator* 1815: 137.

<sup>41</sup> Adam of Bremen 2000: 231–232. Adam also mentions other peoples of the same colour as the Greenlanders, living on an island high in the Baltic Sea; see page 212.

<sup>42</sup> *The King's Mirror* 1917: 143, 148.

was good. The farms were large and prosperous. The farmers would “raise cattle and sheep in large numbers and make butter and cheese in great quantities.”<sup>43</sup> There were also plenty of wild animals: “Hares and wolves are very plentiful and there are multitudes of reindeer.” There were also “large hawks,” “very precious [...] but the inhabitants do not know how to make any use of them.” In addition, there was a great quantity of marble to be found in many colours.<sup>44</sup> But the ocean around Greenland was said to be “infested” with sea monsters. Other marvels worthy of mention were the northern lights, which the author of *The King’s Mirror* discusses.<sup>45</sup> According to *The King’s Mirror*, life was maybe not conventional though it was civilized, and the country is described as a kind of utopia. But, generally speaking, Greenland was not thought of much at all by Europeans during this time.

Images of Greenland had not changed much by the 16th century. Around 1600, explorers—and later fishermen and whale hunters—began to visit these far-off places, and in their wake, a plethora of stories about the lands in the far North began to circulate. Some thought that Greenland was connected to the Scandinavian Peninsula, or to North America, but most argued it was an island. Some accounts stated that there were many other islands around Greenland.<sup>46</sup>

One of the first accounts of Greenland from the 16th century is found in Jacob Ziegler’s *Schondia*. He stated that the inhabitants were much inclined towards magic, as were the peoples of Lapland, since in fact the two lands were connected. They could conjure up a storm at sea that would break a ship to bits, and they would do so on purpose in order to steal the cargo onboard. But Ziegler also reiterated a detail first seen in *The Kings’s Mirror*—that the land was especially fertile. He reports that the grass grew very well and that there was an amazing amount of cheese and butter to be found.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *The King’s Mirror* 1917: 144–145, 149.

<sup>44</sup> *The King’s Mirror* 1917: 143–144.

<sup>45</sup> *The King’s Mirror* 1917: 135, 149–150.

<sup>46</sup> See Capel 1678: 174–175.

<sup>47</sup> Ziegler 1878: 5–7.

Olaus Magnus, in his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, did not have much to say about Greenland either. He mentioned though that the Greenlanders travelled in skin boats, and that they were often pirates, as Ziegler had stated. He also mentioned that the houses resembled boats turned upside down, and that sometimes the ribs of whales were used instead of support beams when constructing houses. Especially strange was that the inhabitants were constantly battling with multitudes of cranes who nested there, an account Olaus himself said he would not have believed were it not for similar reports in such well-respected ancient sources as the Roman author and authority Pliny about the trouble people living in northern lands had with cranes at that time.<sup>48</sup>

The oldest reports then about Greenland and the Greenlandic people were rather mixed. *The King's Mirror* describes the land as a place of bounty where Christian people live, a kind of utopia. But later sources were more negative, stressing the primitive and barbarian aspects: the fact that the inhabitants practiced magic and robbery certainly placed them with Satan and other evildoers. The land itself, however, could be put to good use.

But in 1558, the image of Greenland received a dramatic makeover. Letters and a map were published in that year under the name of the Zeno brothers, two Venetians who were said to have written them around 1400. Both had a long-lasting impact on the geographic understanding of the North: the map became the basis for many similar maps and geographies about the North Atlantic, and the descriptions in the letters were often repeated. Today scholars agree that the documents were a 16th-century forgery.<sup>49</sup> According to the letters, the brothers had sailed across the North Atlantic and stopped at many islands, including Greenland (Engroueland in the Italian text) and Iceland. Many of these islands were described in detail, such as

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<sup>48</sup> See for example Pliny, who argues that short people in the farthest-off mountains in India—"Pygmies, who do not exceed three spans"—were constantly battling with cranes. Pliny 1942: 523; Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. I: 95–96.

<sup>49</sup> See for example Sigurðsson 1971: 225 and onward.



Estotiland, which was said to have an abundance of gold.<sup>50</sup> But some other nearby islands were said to be populated by cannibals.<sup>51</sup>

The Zeno account of Greenland describes a cold place, where it was winter for eight to nine months out of the year. But there was, however, a remarkable city called Alba, where there was a cloister and a church dedicated to St. Thomas at the base of a volcano. Hot springs and vents around the mountain were used to cook food, bake bread, and heat the buildings. The monks tended gardens inside, which were green all year long, and there was always plenty of fish and birds to eat.<sup>52</sup>

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, many authors repeated these tales or described Greenland along these lines, though sometimes with the caveat that that is how things used to be in Greenland, as opposed to the contemporary situation.<sup>53</sup> Over time, the impression generated by the description of Alba—of a peaceful, plentiful city—by the Zeno brothers and influences from *The King's Mirror* were extended to the whole of Greenland.<sup>54</sup> For instance, Richard Blome stated the following about Greenland in the late 17th century:

They say that in several parts of Groenlandt there are Lands which bear as good Wheat as any ground in the World; and Chestnuts so large, that their kernels are as big as Apples; that the Mountains yield Marble of all sorts of colours; that the Grass for Pastures is good, and feeds quantities of great and small Cattel, that there are Horses, Stags, Wolves, Foxes, black and white, Rears, Beavers, Martles, &c. That the Sea is full of

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<sup>50</sup> Zeno 1904: 455–456.

<sup>51</sup> Zeno 1904: 465.

<sup>52</sup> Zeno 1904: 451–454; Ortelius repeated this in his description of Greenland. He describes the greenhouses thusly: “All the monastery is built of a kind of hollow light stone [...] and thus they make a sure worke against the iniury of all weathers, their orcheyards also and gardens watered with this water are alwaies green and do flourish almost all the yeare long, with all maner of flowres, kinds of corne and fruits.” Ortelius 1606: 102. See also Heylin 1666: 497.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Münster 1628: 1368; Capel 1678: 174–175.

<sup>54</sup> See for example Schultesius 1650: 491; Heylin 1666: 497. In Heylin’s work from 1653 (p. 515) this is also quite clear. There he says among other things that the country is “generally knowne to abound in grasse, which nourisheth great store of cattle.”

great Fishes, as Sea-Wolves, Dogs, and Calves, but above all of Whales [...] that their Fish Marhval carrieth a Tooth or Horn so strong and long [...] and they assure us that the Horn is of the same greatness, form and matter and hath the same properties as those which we here esteem on the Unicornes.<sup>55</sup>

This representation of Greenland was common until around the middle of the 18th century: a verdant utopia where at least some of the inhabitants lived luxuriously, not unlike the way some authors described Iceland during the same time period. Some of the authors associated this time of plenty with the past, with a bygone golden age in which the land was abundant, the forest teeming with game, and the ocean overflowing with fish and sea mammals.<sup>56</sup> Others were more simply concerned with what the country could offer to meet their own financial or resource needs, as was fairly common in descriptions of the bountiful North: “In this island the Londoners have met with a good trade of fishing,” said the Englishman George Meriton in his book from 1679.<sup>57</sup>

But the descriptions of Greenland were not all so uniform. Many of the negative ways Iceland had been described were also applied to descriptions of Greenland. Several authors chose to describe the inhabitants of Greenland as basically “savages,” dressed in “skins of wild Beasts, their Shirts of the Entrails of Fish, and their Wastcoats of the skins of Birds with their Feathers.”<sup>58</sup> Dithmar Blefken was one such author, turning his attention to the “pygmies” that lived in Greenland:

The Pigmies represent the most perfect shape of Man, that they are hairy to the uttermost joynts of the fingers, and that the Males have beards downe to the knees. But although they have the shape of men, yet they have little sense or understanding, nor distinct speech, but make shew of a kinde of hissing, after the manner of Geese [...] they were

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<sup>55</sup> Blome 1670: 5.

<sup>56</sup> Büsching 1754: 266.

<sup>57</sup> Meriton 1679: 348; see also Heylin 1666: 497.

<sup>58</sup> Blome 1670: 5.

unreasonable Creatures, and live in perpetuall darknesse. That some say that they have warre with the cranes [...]”<sup>59</sup>

Many other authors in the 17th and 18th centuries described Greenland and its inhabitants this manner. It was stated that even though the Greenlanders would have the same sort of food available as mainland Europeans, they would choose instead to eat raw meat and wild animals, that they could drink ocean water without any ill side effects, and that they ate bread made from fish bone.<sup>60</sup> Most were said to live in caves and were “thievish, revengeful and treacherous towards Strangers.”<sup>61</sup> They were also even more used to sharing their lives with the walking dead than Icelanders, since they had even less knowledge of God than the Icelanders did.<sup>62</sup>

These descriptions are generally similar to the discourse on Greenland in the first half of the 16th century. According to these sources the Greenlanders were even baser than Icelanders, in comparison with the civilized world: like wild animals in appearance and behaviour.<sup>63</sup>

Johann Anderson, who for a short while was the mayor of Hamburg in the mid-18th century, expanded upon the existing description of Greenland to some extent. He said that the inhabitants were certainly unclean, especially the women who washed themselves “with their own water.”<sup>64</sup> They were also thought to be unable to plan long term and were accustomed only to thinking about one day at a time. As the English author and priest John Trusler put it at the end of the 18th century: “When they have plenty, [they] will dance and eat to excess, in hopes that the sea will afford them a fresh supply the next day.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Blefken 1906: 513.

<sup>60</sup> Mallet 1684: 137–138; de la Croix 1697, vol. IV: 376; see also Melissantes 1715: 965.

<sup>61</sup> Paschoud 1726: 392.

<sup>62</sup> Heylin 1666: 497.

<sup>63</sup> Salmon 1772: 255.

<sup>64</sup> Anderson 1746: 243.

<sup>65</sup> Trusler 1788: 53.

But Anderson, Trusler, and other authors could also see Greenland with positive eyes, much more positive than the judgements passed by the same Anderson on Iceland. Though the land was certainly cold, and the inhabitants were primitive and wild, there were positive aspects to their character: their life was honest and humble and their demands few. They enjoyed good health and the women were even attractive.<sup>66</sup> Some of the Greenlanders, it was said, “might easily pass, undistinguished, among the natives of Switzerland.”<sup>67</sup> Anderson even thought that the Greenlandic language had a pleasing sound to it, and he noted how remarkable it was that this might be the case among such base and primitive people.<sup>68</sup> Other authors of the 18th and early 19th centuries continued in this vein, remarking on the many advantages of the Greenlandic

qualities, that must often put Christians to the blush [...] Though the natives of Greenland are a savage people untaught and uncivilized, they are strangers to many vices, which other nations are addicted to. We hear no cursing among them [...] no bitter mockery, no filthiness, nor foolery. Lying, cheating, and stealing are seldom heard of; and violent assaults, or highway robberies, never. Drunkenness is unknown in Greenland [...]<sup>69</sup>

Johann Anderson and John Trusler saw in the Greenlanders many of those admirable qualities they saw most fitting for mankind, just as Adam of Bremen had seen within Icelanders earlier, and as many authors after him reiterated. By the end of the 18th century, Greenlanders had come to represent “the noble savage” to a much greater extent than Icelanders. In fact, by this time, Icelanders had been rather moved to the centre of the scale, and were no longer considered as primitive and uncivilized as they once had been.

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<sup>66</sup> Anderson 1746: 161–162.

<sup>67</sup> Trusler 1788: 44–45, 60–61.

<sup>68</sup> Anderson 1746: 239–241.

<sup>69</sup> Trusler 1788: 70–71.

## Conclusion

Armed with this overview of the treatment of Iceland and Greenland from the late Middle Ages onward, it is readily apparent that there were clear similarities, but also important distinctions. Obviously, idealized projections were the norm in descriptions of these far-off lands right from the beginning. When Adam of Bremen wrote his account of society in Iceland, he created an image that was practically the exact opposite of the way of life of civilized Europe. By describing the people as living in caves alongside their animals, and a nation without private ownership, Adam was representing a simple society, where greed and malice were unknown, unspoiled by the sins of mankind. He clearly intended to suggest an ideal, an Arcadia of the North, where primitive but good people could be found. The parameters he set defined the direction for an important tradition in descriptions of Iceland through the centuries. Greenland was also subjected to this idealization of the primitive. By the 18th century, the description of the noble savages of Greenland and the details of their demeanour—their innocence, their generosity, their fellow feeling and caring—echoed the descriptions of Icelanders from Adam of Bremen onward.

For both countries, the descriptions of the land itself as sorts of paradise islands had recurring motifs: butter dripping off each blade of grass, wild animals easily herded up, oceans teeming with fish. In addition, they had springs with especially desirable qualities, even the power to heal and also precious minerals and metals. The wondrous nature of these islands manifested itself in the people themselves, for they lived extremely long lives—up to hundreds of years if not eternally—and the women of Iceland were said to be more beautiful than in other lands.

It is indeed noteworthy that these islands (mainly Iceland), in the northwest corner of the known world, were also all presented as appropriate storehouses for knowledge. The earliest description of this aspect of Icelandic culture was probably generated by the desire to draw parallels with the solitary, studious life of the cloister as the ideal. But from that initial motivation, descriptions of this sort about Icelandic society became a fixture all the way through the medieval

and early modern periods. It reached an apex in the late 18th and 19th centuries when learned men in western Europe sought information about their own roots in the land, language, and Sagas of Iceland—a remarkable story in and of itself that is addressed by Gylfi Gunnlaugsson and Julia Zernack in this book.

But certainly it would be wrong to say that both islands were simply thought of as good places to live filled with warm-hearted and virtuous people. Quite the opposite. They were often described as devil islands where the behaviour of the inhabitants was barbaric and animalistic. In the case of Iceland, the type of housing, the food and drink, how the inhabitants dressed, and how they interacted across genders were all taken as symbolic for the liminal status of the Icelanders: were they in fact human or subhuman beings? At the extreme end of this discourse were attempts to link the inhabitants with black magic, cooperating with the agents of the devil, but even just mentioning the magical abilities of the inhabitants put them outside of the realm of normal people. The Greenlanders, like the Icelanders, were also often described in this vein. It was clearly questionable whether or not Greenlanders should be considered human or animal. They did not talk, but rather made sounds like birds and animals, and their clothing, eating habits, and style of housing were all too raw and unrefined to be civilized. What is particularly interesting about all of these negative descriptions is that they thrived right alongside the more positive descriptions of these islands, sometimes appearing even within the same text.

What emerges in the comparison is a pervasive ambivalence towards these countries. The wondrous aspects of the land were not simply positive, but also engendered a feeling of unfamiliarity and discomfort. What is not least important, though, about the wonders of these islands is the way they served to blur the boundary between the natural and the unnatural. In this, they reinforced the unclear distinction seen above between man and animal, and many descriptions noted that even the dead were not distinguished from the living. The dead could walk about amongst the living, who took no note of the difference. Some reports noted that it was difficult even to distinguish between men and women, people and animals, dead and living. Such ambiguity was, within Christian thought, a sign of uncleanness. It was as frightening for medieval and early modern

Europeans as pioneers in the Americas could find the Creole people, who were the product of the blending of two different races.<sup>70</sup>

The question of the impact of the idea of the North, and how it influenced the descriptions of these islands, is certainly worth considering. It was generally thought, at least as late as the end of the 17th century, that the further north a land was from civilized Europe, the more barbaric the peoples must be who lived there. It is therefore no surprise that Greenland and Iceland were considered evil islands and even as the abode of Satan. There are signs though that this attitude towards the North was not fixed—there was also a tradition suggesting that the North could be a place of special plenitude, which explains why Greenland and Iceland could sometimes be described as paradise islands. By the 18th and 19th centuries, however, there was less room for such imaginings, and the idea of the verdant North disappeared. But at the same time, there was an expanding tradition that the North could be depicted as a place of learning, advancement, development, and a love of freedom that exceeded the situation in the South, which had previously been considered the cradle of civilization. This change of perspective on the North deeply impacted people's attitudes about Iceland in particular, allowing it to become a sort of Athens of the North in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the minds of northwestern Europeans.<sup>71</sup> Depictions of Greenland, however, were not impacted by this idea of an especially civilized far North: the largest island on the planet continued to be represented as the home of either the noble or the brutish savage.

The descriptions of Iceland and Greenland were greatly influenced by dominating ideas about islands and the far North. Islands were more often considered paradisiacal than the opposite, and the North was generally seen as a negative element in this period (though there are many exceptions, and the attitude about the North was changing by the 18th century). In a way these two islands were trapped within this discourse. The ambiguity about whether or not Greenland and Iceland were utopian paradise islands or the exact opposite, terrible hell, plagued the description of both islands until the end of the 18th century.

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<sup>70</sup> Gyssels 2007: 135.

<sup>71</sup> Ísleifsson 2007: 111–128.

In addition, the discourse on these islands was part of the international power dynamics of the time. The question of primitive versus civilized was particularly important as a means of justifying which people had control over whom and who had the right to exploit the riches in faraway lands. The powerful could also declare a country pleasing and exotic, a suitable locale for the sorts of exploits and adventures that were not appropriate in reality or in one's own backyard, but could be indulged in the playground of the "civilized" world.

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# The Greco-Roman Heritage and Image Construction in Iceland 1830–1918

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**Abstract** – Neo-humanistic classical education formed the core of secondary education for the Icelandic elite throughout the 19th century. Classical texts of the Greco-Roman heritage were utilized to instill civic virtues and establish bonds of friendship among future leaders of the Icelandic nation. These texts helped to shape the self-image of Icelanders as inhabitants of a country which was part of the Danish monarchy but which had ties both to a European classical culture and to a Nordic one. Students were given the keys to unlock edifying classical literature through intensive training in Latin and Greek. The teaching methods in the school at Bessastaðir, in particular, contributed to the renewal of the Icelandic language and contributed to the emerging cultural nationalism in Iceland, which included elements from the classical, Christian, and Nordic heritage. Although several authors integrated elements of this disparate heritage in their discourse on Icelandic nationality, it had negligible impact in the field of political nationalism at first; however, it laid the foundation of a Hellenic discourse, which had substantial impact on the self-identity of Icelanders and eventually influenced the political project of nation-building.

**Keywords** – Greco-Roman culture, neo-humanism, classical education, reception, image construction, cultural and political nationalism, Hellas of the North

## Introduction

This article focuses on the context and impact of Icelandic self-images as formed through a reflection on Icelandic hetero-images, particularly of the ancient Greeks in 19th-century Iceland. The focus will be on the Greeks, since the neo-humanistic perspective, which placed emphasis on the Greek heritage in addition to Roman culture, dominated educational ideals in Iceland for a century. At the beginning of the 19th century, students began in earnest to read Greek classical literature. This laid the foundation for a widespread knowledge among educated Icelanders, not only of the Latin heritage, but also of the language and culture of ancient Greece.

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The era of Hellenism in Iceland opens and closes with social and cultural changes. The opening at the beginning of the 19th century inaugurated a radical change in the structure and purpose of higher education in Iceland; the closing at the beginning of the 20th century involved the erosion of power among the educational elite under the pressure of modernization and social reform, which resulted in a change in public education. The school of Bessastaðir, close to Reykjavík, was the only school of higher education in Iceland from 1805 to 1846, serving both as a Latin school and a theological seminary. In 1846, following discussions on school reforms in the period 1832–1845, the Latin school in Reykjavík was established (1846–1904), which based its curricula on classical education, and a separate theological seminary was formed in 1847. Criticism of the classical education offered in the Latin school became intense in the final decades of the 19th century, leading eventually to the school reform of 1904 with changes in the curriculum. Greek was dropped as a compulsory subject, which it had been since 1805.

This paper asks and attempts to answer the following question: what impact did the classical heritage have in 19th-century Iceland in the educational, political, and cultural spheres? It is possible to answer the above question by drawing attention to representative examples and tie these to both cultural and political developments in the country.

Modern scholars who have discussed nascent Icelandic nationality have not duly recognized its connection with the neo-humanistic classical perspective in the educational ideals of Icelandic schools in the 19th century. A professor of history at the University of Iceland has in a recent book documented the influence of various international ideological currents in Iceland during the period 1830–1918. Not one word is said about the influence of neo-humanism and the educational ideals of the classical schools of the period, as if they were nonexistent.<sup>1</sup> The demands of modernization around 1900 apparently did not only eliminate Greek as an obligatory subject in the schools, but set a trend in scholarly circles that has blindfolded many scholars to the many contributions the classical heritage made to

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<sup>1</sup> Sigurðsson 2006 traces in detail the influence of various international ideological currents in Iceland during the period 1830–1918. I have chosen the same dates in the title of my article as in Sigurðsson's book.

cultural and political developments in 19th-century Iceland. This paper tries to rectify this omission by drawing attention to the Greco-Roman heritage in Iceland, a significant but neglected feature of Icelandic cultural history.<sup>2</sup>

## Preliminary Remarks and a Hypothesis

The Greco-Roman heritage was securely placed in the Nordic countries through the school reforms of the Reformation. In 1537 the church ordinance of the Danish king Christian III decreed the establishment of Latin schools in Iceland in the sees of Hólar and Skálholt. Latin reigned supreme in the schools and the ideology of humanism led to works on Icelandic history written in Latin, resulting in remarkable literary activity among Icelandic intellectuals writing in Latin from the end of the 16th century to the middle of the 19th century.<sup>3</sup> Only few examples survive from the Middle Ages of Greek influence in Iceland, for instance, in the *Prologus* of Snorra Edda, the *Story of Troy*, and the *Story of Alexander the Great*. These, however, came through Latin texts that Icelanders had become acquainted with, possibly in France.<sup>4</sup> The teaching of the Greek language in Icelandic schools probably began at the beginning of the 17th century.<sup>5</sup> Evidence of a greater knowledge of Greek can be seen from the fact that in the late 17th and early 18th centuries several clergymen attempted to translate the New Testament or parts thereof into Icelandic from Greek. Several of these were known to have been fluent in Greek: Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson (1605–1675) was known to have spoken in Greek with a Greek person in Copenhagen, and the

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<sup>2</sup> Full documentation for the arguments advanced in this article is found in my forthcoming book *Klassísk menntun á Íslandi (Classical Education in Iceland)*.

<sup>3</sup> Jensson 2002 has documented the impact of the work *Crymogaea*, written in 1609 by Arngímur Jónsson the Learned (see also Svavarsson 2006). I shall not discuss that work since my focus is on the 19th century.

<sup>4</sup> Árnason 1991a: 14–17. See also Árnason 1991b.

<sup>5</sup> The cryptic remark in Latin by Finnur Jónsson in *Historia Ecclesiastica* (vol. III, p. 187) does not allow us to say anything certain about the beginning of formal Greek teaching in the schools; it only says that Icelanders had begun to have a “taste” of the Greek language around 1600 and towards the end of the period 1620–1630.

same is true of Eyjólfur Jónsson (1670–1745), who was known in Copenhagen as the “Greek Icelander.”<sup>6</sup>

Reading of Greek in the Latin schools increased somewhat after the school ordinance of 1743, but it was still mainly confined to the New Testament, and students continued to translate Greek texts into Latin until the beginning of the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> Late in the 18th century several Icelanders began to learn classical Greek as well as Latin, and several of them translated and wrote poems in both Latin and Greek.<sup>8</sup> A remarkable shift then takes place in the teaching of Greek in the school at Bessastaðir in 1805 when the focus shifts from New Testament texts to include mainly works from the Greek archaic and classical ages. The reading of classical authors was quite extensive throughout the 19th century. The Roman authors most frequently read at Bessastaðir were Cicero, Horace, Virgil, and Caesar. These authors were also the most popular ones in the Latin school in Reykjavík in addition to Livy and Ovid. With regard to Greek, students at Bessastaðir most often read works by Homer, Xenophon, Lucian, Plato, and Plutarch. Greek reading in the Latin school in Reykjavík was also quite extensive. The most popular authors were Homer, Herodotus, Xenophon, Plato, and Lucian.<sup>9</sup>

Generations of Icelanders were thus moulded through an education that relied heavily on reading both Greek and Latin classical texts. The classical ideals of the schools opened up the door for new

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<sup>6</sup> Bishop Sveinsson was the first to attempt such a translation; he only completed the Gospel of Matthew. That translation is lost. The translation of the whole New Testament by Páll in Selárdal (1620–1706) has survived (JS 51, 8vo.), as well as the translations of the Pauline epistles by Jón Vídalín (Lbs. 11–12, 4to. ca. 1710; Lbs. 189, fol.), of the whole New Testament by Eyjólfur Jónsson (Lbs. 4, 4to. ca. 1750), and parts of the New Testament by Bishop Hannes Finnsson (Lbs 9, 4to.).

<sup>7</sup> See ÍB. 50, fol.

<sup>8</sup> Magnús Stephensen studied Greek in Copenhagen and then under the tutelage of Bishop Hannes Finnsson, where he read several books of Homer’s *Iliad*, Herodotus, and Epictetus. Lbs. 852, 8vo. (from 1780) contains material with Greek remarks by Stephensen on the first section of the *Iliad* and several writings of Epictetus and by Sveinbjörn Egilsson on several texts from the New Testament as well as Epictetus. See Guðmundsson 1960: 16–18.

<sup>9</sup> The information below is based on the author’s investigation of unpublished school manuals from 1805–1840 preserved in the National Archives in Iceland (Biskupsskjalasafn Þjóðskjalasafns Íslands) and published school manuals from 1840 to 1904.



cultural activities. The many classical translations, in both verse and prose, made possible the combination of classical and Nordic themes in poetry and helped to shape the worldview of many Icelanders with regard to the relationship between classical and Nordic cultures and to the purported contribution of the classical heritage to world history: among the Greeks and Romans they discovered the ethical and aesthetical standards for imitation in poetry and moral conduct.

The impact of classical education is also apparent in the political domain. The Greek heritage and the Greek war of independence made possible a comparison between Iceland and Greece. This comparison was developed to show the comparable status of Greece in the South and Iceland in the North, the former as the foundation of Western civilization and the latter as the foundation of Nordic-Germanic culture. These comparisons did, apparently, not have any tangible impact in the political domain initially; however, a Hellenic discourse comparing the golden age of Icelandic history with the golden age of Greek history began to take shape when Icelandic cultural nationalism was in the making and was later used to support political nationalism and the cause for an autonomous Icelandic nation.

Although teachers claimed to have chosen texts that would elevate the moral standing of the students, it is difficult to ascertain what criteria were applied in the selection process. But since most educated Icelanders throughout the 19th century attended the schools, they were well acquainted with the above classical authors. However, no comprehensive scholarly investigation has attempted to document the ramifications of the impact of the form and content of Greco-Roman literature in Iceland. The evidence introduced in this essay allows us to claim that the classical heritage, together with political changes in Europe, opened up the door for a new discourse in Iceland in which the Icelandic language and literary heritage could be compared favourably to the Greek language and cultural heritage and to the history of a nation that was believed to have laid the foundation of Western civilization.

## The Educational Ideals of Neo-Humanism

Two of the main representatives of neo-humanism in 19th-century Iceland were Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1791–1852), a teacher at Bessastaðir in 1819–1845 and the first principal of the Latin school in Reykjavík (1845–1851), and his successor Bjarni Johnsen (1851–1868). Their discourse helped to consolidate the educational aims of the schools and lent authority to a classical worldview among the elite members of Icelandic society. The educational institutions can be viewed as receptacles of traditions that reflect different trajectories and selective borrowing from those traditions, and unevenly distributed receptiveness influenced by the receivers' horizon of expectations.<sup>10</sup> International traditions were assimilated and expanded the horizons of the receivers' expectations. This is evident in 19th-century Iceland due to the cultural influx of many international ideological currents. In this regard one cannot exclude the educational ideals of neo-humanism and the impact of the classical heritage in various fields.

The ideals of neo-humanism dominated in the schools, emphasizing the ethical implications of all education. The purpose of education was to open up for young boys Greco-Roman texts that had preserved a classical humanistic perspective. Instead of a limited focus on the rational aspects of the mind, education was to be a conscious moulding of character. The purpose of learning was not to become learned but well prepared for life—*non scholae, sed vitae discimus*. The aim of education was not to produce rational human beings but good, decent, and well-informed persons. To be virtuous entailed speaking well and thinking respectable and clear thoughts. Texts that could kindle and mature feelings for the true, beautiful, and sublime should be read because these would become the source of wisdom within which virtue and human dignity can best thrive. True knowledge is not possible without virtue and a humane spirit and virtue cannot grow in impure souls with contaminated thoughts, uncontrolled temperament, and unbridled passions.

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<sup>10</sup> Thompson 1993: 248–272. For comparison, see Bowen 1989: 161–186, who documents the impact of neo-humanism and Hellenism in public schools in England in the 19th century. See also Stray 1993, 1998.

The above ideals are clearly expressed in Sveinbjörn Egilsson’s school addresses delivered throughout the years 1819–1851; these had also a distinct biblical underpinning. True virtue is not possible without the fear and knowledge of God. Students should be diligent and remember that worldly things pass away; they should thus aspire towards friendship with God and good men, together with faith and faithfulness, peace, brotherly love, virtuous living, and humbleness. Without virtue and faithfulness all knowledge is vanity and man is not even half a man. In connection with these theological motives Egilsson emphasized that the classical languages secure true understanding not only of Greco-Roman masterpieces but also of “holy scriptures.”<sup>11</sup>

Most of Egilsson’s ideals are found reverberating in the writings of his successors with two important exceptions: namely, the theological viewpoint diminishes and classical education is now explicitly connected with increased *national awareness*. The former is easy to understand in view of the separation of classical and theological studies, but the claim that classical education contributes to the growth of the national spirit calls for explanation. In support of that claim rector Bjarni Johnsen refers to the “best known historian” of modern times, Friedrich Wilhelm Thiersch (1784–1860), as he notes:

Greek and Latin should be the foundation in the education of young boys. If this were to be changed, the national spirit would decline. The classical age is the most beautiful of all things in the world [...] But we do not teach the young simply words when they learn Greek and Latin; no, they learn great and sublime thoughts.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> My overview is based on the school manuals and regulations of the schools at Bessastaðir and in Reykjavík, and the school addresses of the rectors (see Sigurðsson 1968: 9–21, 24–26, 28–33, 48, 55–56, 79–80). For neo-humanism in Germany, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, see Skovgaard-Petersen 1976, Lindberg 1987: 13–91; 1999: 63–76; and Lambropoulos 1993: 78–86, 130–145.

<sup>12</sup> “Gríska og latína eiga að vera grundvöllur menntunar hinna ungu manna. Ef á þessu væri breyting gjör, þá mundi þjóðarandanum fara aptur. Fornöldin er hið fegursta, sem til er í heiminum. [...] Það eru eigi orðin ein, sem ungum eru kennd, þegar þeir eru látnir læra grísku og latínu; það eru veglegar og háleitar hugsanir.” Johnsen 1863: 72 (my translation).

The neo-humanism of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Thiersch revitalized some of the old humanistic perspectives within the context of a new theory of language and nationality. Thiersch had a great impact on new humanistic educational ideals through his three-volume book *Über gelehrte Schulen*, published in 1826–1831.<sup>13</sup> The “human spirit” was described as an unformed mass; current linguistic theory taught that language expressed ideas of the human spirit that were moulded differently by different languages. Which language one learns matters since the history of the human mind reveals periods of decadence and great cultural achievement. The classical languages are unique since they represent a period during which the human spirit was at its peak, and by learning them the human soul can attain its full potential. This ideal was tied to the Greek notion of *pedeia*, which the Germans called *Bildung zur Humanität*. The underlying premise was that the civilizing classical heritage could counter the barbaric elements of a Nordic demeanour. Principal Johnsen makes Thiersch’s words his own and claims:

Would we not hasten the ethical decline of the young man if we thwarted his access to the fountain of the beautiful and simple classical age at this time when people are occupied with profit and mundane jobs [...] ? Let the young men live in the classical world, in this serene, peaceful and healthy haven which preserves them pure and unspoiled. The time of selfishness and egotism will come quickly enough and there is no need to hasten it through the education of the youth.<sup>14</sup>

Earthly concerns and worldly goods should thus give way to a search for true beauty. The classical age is seen as a secure rural haven far away from the disturbing demands of urban life. Instead of teaching “profitable subjects” one should teach subjects that make students qualified to adjust to the manifold situations life offers and train them

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<sup>13</sup> Thiersch 1866; von Humboldt 1793, 1806, 1807; von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1982: 111, 113–114.

<sup>14</sup> “Mundu menn ekki flýta hinni siðferðislegu apturför hins unga manns, ef menn leiddu hann burt frá brunni hinnar fögru og óbrotnu fornaldar á þessum tímum, er hugur manna hangir við hagnaðinn og hin hversdagslegu störf [...] ? Látum hina ungu menn lifa í fornöldinni, þessum kyrrláta, friðsamlega og holla gríðastað, sem á að varðveita þá hreina og óspillta. Tími eigingirninnar og sjerplægninnar mun koma nógu snemma, þó vjer flýtum eigi fyrir honum með uppeldi æskumannsins.” Johnsen 1863: 72 (my translation).

to put into practice the knowledge they have acquired in school. Greek and Latin offer this flexibility since they help students to think clearly and in an organized manner. These languages also contribute to Icelandic language reform and nationalism as they assist a small nation to keep its characteristic thought patterns by moulding its thinking on Latin and Greek expressions. Also, the aesthetic of the sublime teased out of the texts supports self-cultivation, which is the logical premise of national unity, social cohesiveness, and cultural identity.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Iceland's connection with European culture is guaranteed if Icelanders hold onto classical education as a foundational subject, as do schools in Europe. It is also important for Icelandic students to be well prepared when they go abroad for further studies. If not, people might conclude that

the old common Nordic education was too much shaped by the peculiarities of a small nation. [...] Classical education is the best protection against such a tendency since it is—second only to our religion—the most forceful spiritual link between the educated nations.<sup>16</sup>

There is a remarkable conformity in the discourse of Icelandic classicists throughout the 19th century. Since grammar is the key to the right understanding of religious and classical works, knowledge of the original languages is crucial. Knowledge is virtue and what makes one virtuous is knowledge of the morally edifying Greco-Roman heritage. Elite civic morality based on both classical and Christian authors helps consolidate true friendship and piety among students, which would impact popular morality. Educating students in many subjects will not cultivate their minds, but focusing on few subjects helps them to think in a scientific, correct, and sharp manner. Latin especially was considered to train abstract thought since its grammatical rules were as precise as mathematical formulations! It was also an important introduction to many modern languages and a

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<sup>15</sup> The pedagogical project envisaged by Bjarni Johnsen is in tune with Wilhelm von Humboldt's ideas although he does not refer to him by name. Compare with Lambropoulos 1993: 78. See also Weisweiler 1891.

<sup>16</sup> “að hin forna almenna norðurálfu-menntun fengi of mikinn keim af sjerstaklegum smálandabrag. [...] En gegn þessu er fornmenntun sannlega hin bezta vörn, og er hún næst trúarbrögðum vorum hin öflugasta andlega samtenging millum hinna menntuðu þjóða.” Johnsen 1863: 72 (my translation).

key to international dialogue between civilized men. In the latter part of the 19th century the focus shifts to Greco-Roman culture as the foundation of Western civilization.<sup>17</sup> Greek and Latin are crucial for understanding these roots and for a small nation to partake on an equal footing with other civilized nations.

The classicists' discourse moulded idealized images of a cultured person and of the educational properties of languages as culture bearers that shaped the human mind and character each in its own unique way. Classical culture was seen as the supreme standard for imitation where one could discover true virtue and true knowledge, which counter all decadence and cultural decline. Here the seed has been sown for viewing a certain era in the history of humankind as a unified whole, indeed the “golden age” that all nations should strive to imitate. Icelandic cultural nationalism with its revitalization of the country's literary heritage and language had now been provided with a corresponding prefiguration that it could pattern itself on.

### The Blending of Cultures—“Hybridity”

Early in the 19th century scholars became interested in the development of languages and the relative age of apparently related languages. The Danish linguist Rasmus Christian Rask (1787–1832) was fascinated by the Icelandic language, which he saw as the original common language of the Scandinavian peoples.<sup>18</sup> When Rask visited Iceland in the 1810s he discovered that the language spoken in Reykjavík was seriously threatened by Danish influence. To resist this trend, Rask instigated in 1816 the establishment of the Icelandic Literary Society, mainly for the purpose of publishing books in Icelandic.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It was often claimed that Greek education and culture is the “spiritual foundation” of “Western civilization and of all European nations”; however, both Greek and Latin were seen to have laid bricks in that foundation. See Gröndal 1870: 54; Gröndal 1871: 29; and Guttormsson 1907: 5.

<sup>18</sup> A fierce debate took place between Rask and the Grimm brothers with regard to this hypothesis. See Gomard 2007: 195–217. The same idea was already put forward by Arngrímur Jónsson in his *Crymogæa*, published in Latin in Hamborg in 1609. See Jónsson 1985: 96, 103.

<sup>19</sup> Karlsson 2000a: 200.

There are reasons to believe that Rask influenced Sveinbjörn Egilsson. Danish was the official language of the school at Bessastaðir. However, most of the work of students and teachers was reading and studying classical—and biblical—literature and translating these texts into Icelandic. The teachers instilled veneration for Icelandic among the students by their manner of teaching, by reading in class their own translations of classical texts into Icelandic that the students were then expected to translate themselves.<sup>20</sup> Students also began to imitate Greek and Roman poets as well as translating their poems.

Egilsson’s productivity in the fields of classical, biblical, and Old Icelandic scholarship is impressive. He is best known for his translations of Homer and for the *Lexicon Poeticum*, a dictionary of the old skaldic poetic diction of the poems in *Snorra Edda*,<sup>21</sup> and he also contributed to the translation of biblical texts.<sup>22</sup> Although Egilsson taught Greek and history in school, Latin was part of his daily life throughout his career, especially with his translations into Latin of Old Norse literature. These translations were published in Denmark in both Danish and Latin and helped to create interest in Norse antiquity, language, and literature.<sup>23</sup> Egilsson had translated the *Odyssey*

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<sup>20</sup> This teaching method was also used by the Latin teacher Hallgrímur Scheving (1781–1861), who also greatly influenced students. Grímur Thomsen says: “Dr. Scheving was a true Roman, a sort of Icelandic Cato, strict and fair both towards himself and others; certainly the most learned person in Latin in his time and one of the most learned person in our old language and literature; strict and serious in class but mellow and willing to discuss with his students and others outside the schoolroom” (“Dr. Scheving var sannur Rómverji, einskonar íslenzkur Cató, strangur og rjettlátur bæði við sig og aðra; sjálfsagt einn hinn latínulærðasti maður á sinni tíð, og með þeim lærðustu í forn máli voru og bókmenntum; strangur og alvörugefinn í kennslutímunum, en ljúfur og ræðinn þar fyrir utan við skólalærisveinana sem aðra”). Thomsen 1921: 88 (my translation).

<sup>21</sup> This 900-page-long dictionary with Latin translations, *Lexicon poeticum antiqua lingua septentrionalis* (published 1854–1860), was groundbreaking and helped all subsequent scientific investigation of the old skaldic poetic diction.

<sup>22</sup> In the Bible translations of 1841 he was responsible for translating Exodus, Isaiah, Ezekiel, the Book of Daniel, and all the minor Prophets from the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation from the New Testament.

<sup>23</sup> The Latin translations *Scripta historica Islandorum de rebus gestis veterum Borealiū, latine reddita et apparatu critico instructa, opera et studio Sveinbjörnís Egilssonii* were published in 1828–1842.

based on the hexameter but decided to publish it in prose.<sup>24</sup> Then he had been working for ten years on a prose translation of the *Iliad*, which was much appreciated by his students. The Icelandic sagas influenced his translations of Homer, not only in individual words and phrases but also in syntax, style, and rhyme. The many neologisms describing birds, plants, mountains, fjords, and the weather were shaped by Icelandic landscape but cast in the events of the Aegean Sea. The students could easily relate to the scenery depicted in the Homeric poems about Odysseus's adventures. The Icelandic translations of the Homeric poems became one of the most widely read books of classical culture in Iceland.<sup>25</sup> The translations are usually seen as marking a turning point in Icelandic prose style.<sup>26</sup>

Egilsson's use of classical, Nordic, and biblical sources influenced his students greatly. We gain a glimpse of the life of students at Bessastaðir in 1828–1834 through an illuminating description by one of the students, Páll Melsteð, an influential historian in 19th-century Iceland. Latin was, Melsteð says, our “alpha and omega,” but Greek occupied a great deal of the curriculum as well. The impact of the latter language can be seen from Melsteð's illuminating use of Greek terms for the centrality of Latin. Besides intensive learning throughout the day, students spent the evening hours reading additional classical texts. They also attempted to imitate their teachers in writing poetry based on both classical and Icelandic models. Students also swam, played ball, and wrestled. Everything was in strict order, even the seating arrangements in church, in the classroom, and at dinner. The function of students within the student body was also clearly defined and official titles were all in Latin. Rules of conduct and ritualized school costumes were introduced at this time but everything, says Melsteð,

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<sup>24</sup> The *Odyssey* was printed in the promotional letters of Bessastaðir in 1829–1840 but the *Iliad* not until 1855.

<sup>25</sup> Guðmundsson 1960: 248–280, 204–300, 305. Egilsson translated many other classical works which he read for his students, such as the tragedy *Seven Generals against Thebe* by Aeschylus; *Memorabilia Socratis* and the *Anabasis* by Xenophon; the *Apology*, *Criton*, *Faidon*, *Menon*, and *Alcibiades Second* by Plato; and several dialogues of Lucian and some of Plutarch's biographies.

<sup>26</sup> Óttósson 1990: 63–64.



was simple and austere, and there were, one might say, many things reminiscent of Sparta in Greece. [...] Here the body became strong and healthy, thanks to a good and plentiful diet and to Icelandic wrestling, ball games, and swimming, and the soul became antiquarian and half-classical; we thought of little else than the heroic age of the Greeks and Romans, and the antiquity of the Nordic countries. We read Plato, Xenophon, Homer, Virgil, Horace, Julius Caesar, and Cicero. During the evening hours before going to bed we read *Njal's saga*, *Grettir's saga*, and *Egil's saga*. I did not see Snorri's *Heimskringla* while in school.<sup>27</sup>

The daily singing of songs combined the classical and national focus of the school. Tunes of foreign texts were sung and new texts were produced in Icelandic with these songs. Tunes with older Icelandic texts were as well applied to both Latin and Icelandic poems. Horace was often translated and sung to a variety of Icelandic folk musical tunes.<sup>28</sup> Sveinbjörn Egilsson translated for example a text by Lucian to the old Icelandic tune of “Oh, my beautiful bottle!” The beginning of the *Aeneid*, *Arma virumque cano*, was sung to the same old tune as Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845), the most influential Romantic in Iceland, used later for the poem “Ísland, farsældafrón” (Iceland, Fortunate Isle!, 1835). There is clearly a connection—although not fully investigated—between Icelandic folk tunes and the song tradition at Bessastaðir, which was imbued with classical models.<sup>29</sup>

The mixture of classical and Nordic heritage can be seen in the poetic writings of students who read both Horace and the Eddas. In his poems, Jónas Hallgrímsson combined, both in form and content, Nordic and Greco-Roman mythology. He gave Latin titles to some of

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<sup>27</sup> “Allt var mjög einfalt og óbrotið, mér liggur við að segja, þar var margt, sem minnti á Spörtu hjá Grikkjum. [...] Líkaminn varð þar harður og hraustur, það gjörðu glímurnar, knattleikurinn og sundið, ásamt kröftugri og nógrri fæðu, sálin varð fornesckjuleg og hálfklassisk, lítið var um annað hugsað en hetjuöld Grikkja og Rómverja, og fornöld norðurlanda; lesnir: Plató, Xenófon og Hómer, Virgilíus, Hóratíus, Júlíus Cæsar og Ciceró; höfundar Njálu, Grettlu, Eglu í svefnloftunum; Heimskringlu Snorra sá eg ekki í skóla.” Melsted 1912: 35 (my translation).

<sup>28</sup> Much translated material from Horace exists in manuscripts before the days of Bessastaðir; some, such as Jón Ólafsson from Svefneyjar, had even tried to imitate the Roman poetical forms of Sappho in Icelandic.

<sup>29</sup> Gíslason 1980: 42; 27–34.

his poems, such as “In aqvilonem nocturnum,” “Occidente sole,” and “Ad amicum.” In his eulogy of friendship he relies heavily on Horace but refers also to the creation myth of the Bible and to the Eddic poem of “Hávamál” (The Sayings of the High One), where friendship is an important theme. Hallgrímsson twice attempted to translate Maecenas’s “Cur me querelis.” The shorter one, “Occidente sole” (At the Setting of the Sun), has the same subtitle as his poem to his friend, “Ad amicum.” Here the friendship of two men is supreme and in addition to details from the poetic traditions of Horace and Hávamál, Hallgrímsson adds a theological interpretation by having God the almighty Father protect their friendship. Another example of the mixture of sources is the poem “Hulduljóð,” the form of which is based on classical pastoral elegy. Hallgrímsson was acquainted with these examples from an author such as Virgil (70–19 BC), and his pastoral elegies were read at Bessastaðir. He was probably also acquainted with younger pastoral elegies with Christian influences.<sup>30</sup>

Jónas Hallgrímsson had spoken of the “delightful South” that could benefit the North, and similar descriptions of the benefits of the South are found in the writings of Benedikt Gröndal (1826–1907). In his memoirs, *Dagradvöl*, or Pastimes, written in 1893–1894, Benedikt Gröndal discusses the deterioration of the knowledge of Greek among Icelanders and reflects on the value of classical education.<sup>31</sup> Benedikt Gröndal expresses his hope that he would never—the spirit of the age notwithstanding—be so behind the times that he could live without them as some of the “so-called intellectuals” were advocating. Such people have forgotten that all major poets have been learned men, well versed in the classics and recognized the truth of Goethe’s remark: “Might the study of Greek and Roman literature always remain the basis of higher education.”<sup>32</sup>

By referring to this motto of European classicists, Benedikt Gröndal has situated himself within a hotly debated issue among European intellectuals. J. G. Herder (1744–1803) believed that Nordic

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<sup>30</sup> Egilsson 1999: 93–94, 103, 109.

<sup>31</sup> Gröndal 1983: 260 refers here to his prize essay in Latin—*De studiis classicis*—on the value of classical authors submitted to the University of Strasburg in 1869–1870 (see Lbs. 4043, 8vo.).

<sup>32</sup> “Möge das Studium der Griechischen und Römischen Literature immerfort die Basis der höhern Bildung bleiben.” Gröndal 1983: 259 (my translation).

mythology could revitalize German poetry since it contained a common Germanic heritage much closer to the German mind than Greek mythology. A lively debate ensued over the matter in Europe. The influential Danish poet Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850) reiterated Herder’s ideas: Nordic poetry should mainly utilize Nordic mythology instead of Greek.<sup>33</sup> Benedikt Gröndal, a true heir to the educational ideals at Bessastaðir, emphasized the importance of connecting the two. He was convinced that the so-called *Hyperboreans*, or those people whom some ancient Greeks and Romans believed to live in the far North, were the original *Nordbors* and attempted to show that “some interaction was between Greece and the North from ages long forgotten.”<sup>34</sup> This “historical” argument is important because in his writings Benedikt Gröndal connects Southern myths in various ways to Northern ones. Thus, instead of rejecting Greek mythology, he mixes together mythologies of southern and northern countries in a creative manner, as for example in the poem “Venus and Freyja” where Freyja, the Aphrodite of the North, has succeeded the southern one.<sup>35</sup>

Another example can be seen in the poem “Brísingamen” (Freyja’s Necklace), where Óður, Freyja’s husband, plays a major role as a link between the South and the North, between Apollo and Freyja. The following myth appears: Óður travels towards countries in the south where he meets the sun god, Apollo, who encourages him to look for rare types of roses that will bring great love. Having found a rose, he brings it to his wife Freyja and a new time of love begins in the north. The poem describes the eternal summer of southern countries where the sun god sits and looks to the north. And behold, the southern god sees a great light coming from the north. Apollo’s reaction is compared to the rays of the moon, which fly through the night over a snow-covered valley. The intermingling of Greek and Nordic aspects can be seen both in the mythological references and the poetic presentation, but here Gröndal uses an old southern form of rhyme, the tersina. *Óður* is connected to a southern and sensuous spirit which brings gifts of nature to the northern

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<sup>33</sup> Povlsen 2007: 102–103, 144–147.

<sup>34</sup> Gröndal 1892: 149; Gröndal 1871: 19–91.

<sup>35</sup> Egilsson 1999: 182–184; Egilsson 2008.

hemisphere.<sup>36</sup> The influence on both Benedikt Gröndal and Jónas Hallgrímsson in this regard was Sveinbjörn Egilsson, the father of the former and the teacher of the latter.

The above examples of the blending of elements from different cultural sources draws attention to the condition of hybridity, or the intertwining of identity and otherness, which is seen by many as a fundamental property of human culture in general. All culture is in a sense creolized, a result and conglomerate of different traditions of selfhood and otherness. Auto- and hetero-image mirror each other: each determines the profile of the other, and is in turn determined by it. The moral or cultural profile of persons and cultures is thus a mix of different influences so that otherness is not only resisted or marked off, but also incorporated and becomes a part of the self.<sup>37</sup>

The educational ideals at Bessastaðir challenged students to mix elements from Greco-Roman, Christian, and Nordic sources. This “blending of cultures” helped to shape the worldview of many Icelanders with regard to the relationship between the North and the South, between classical and Nordic cultures, and to the purported contribution of the classical heritage to world history. This led to discussions about the historical relationship of Iceland and Greece, the value of classical education, and the impact of Hellenic culture in Iceland. The remainder of this paper documents the formation of a Hellenic discourse in Iceland, which culminated in a description late in the 19th century of Iceland as the Hellas of the North.

## The Formation of a Hellenic Discourse

In the first half of the 19th century Icelanders participated in what has been described as the “invention of tradition,” that is, the deliberate cultivation of historical continuity in an attempt to establish a group’s collective distinctiveness. An integral part of such deliberations is a process of stereotyping and “othering” in the shaping of alterity and identity. Imagologists speak of two dimensions of identity, diachronic and synchronic, a sense of permanence and continuity over time on

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<sup>36</sup> Egilsson 1999: 189–192, 194, 197.

<sup>37</sup> Beller & Leerssen 2007: 335–342; see also 26–29.

the one hand and a sense of a separate and unique individuality in the world on the other hand. The former is basically a self-image, while the latter addresses the distinction between Self and Other.<sup>38</sup> The comparison of Iceland and Greece contributed to the formation of Icelandic self-image as Icelanders participated in the discourse of many northern nations, which looked towards Greece and other southern European countries to express their status and to facilitate political developments in their own countries.

At the beginning of the 19th century Iceland was part of the Danish absolute monarchy. After its abolition in 1848–1849, the degree of self-government enjoyed by Icelanders increased little by little. In 1845 the Althing was re-established as an advisory assembly and in 1874 it obtained legislative powers with the introduction of a new constitution. During the governor period (1874–1904) the topic of increased autonomy dominated political discussions. In 1904 Icelanders obtained home rule with a minister residing in Reykjavík, and in 1918 Iceland became a sovereign state in a personal union with Denmark. Some scholars believe that by the early 19th century educated Icelanders shared a certain sense of ethnic identity but that expressions of political nationalism did not appear until 1830s as a result of developments in the two duchies of the king of Denmark, Slesvig and Holstein. In 1831 King Frederik VI decided to establish four diets in the realm, one of which was for the Danish islands, including Iceland.

When the king announced his intentions, Baldvin Einarsson (1801–1833) revealed his interest in restoring the Icelandic Althing, which had been abolished in 1800. Einarsson believed that the aim of the diets—to awaken *the spirit of the nation*—would not be reached by the representation of a few men in a Danish assembly, but it might be attained with a separate assembly in Iceland, to be held at the sacred site Þingvellir.<sup>39</sup> Einarsson launched the periodical *Árman á Alþingi*, and by using the name “Árman,” the Guardian of Althing, in the title he tied its message for a revived Althing to Icelandic folklore. Regardless of how consciously political the choice of the title was, Einarsson expressed concerns with the dangers facing a small nation

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<sup>38</sup> Beller & Leerssen 2007: 336, 342–344.

<sup>39</sup> Karlson 2000a: 195, 198–203; Sigurdsson 2003: 81.

and the importance of kindling feelings of nationality among its people.<sup>40</sup> In this regard it is illuminating to see how he compares Iceland and Greece:

Greece was in many ways comparable to Iceland, and in some ways it filled the same function for the southern countries as Iceland was for the Nordic countries. In antiquity all types of sciences flourished in Greece and spread from there to other countries, but later they were forgotten by all, but only temporarily, until they woke again and are now much appreciated everywhere. During the Middle Ages many sciences flourished in Iceland more than elsewhere, but later they were largely forgotten; now they are coming to life again and they are becoming increasingly appreciated abroad.<sup>41</sup>

The comparison continues by focusing on the respective languages, that is, Icelandic and Greek:

The Greek language was very perfect and the mother of other languages, but was itself not derived from any other tongue. Icelandic is also a very perfect language; it is the mother of other languages, such as Danish, Swedish, German, and English, but is itself not derived from any other language.<sup>42</sup>

The gist of the comparison is the representative status of Iceland and Greece for the South and the North and the comparable isolation of both countries, which has preserved their respective cultures and languages. Traces of Rask's ideas are clearly evident and the quotation reveals that Icelanders participated in a discussion relating to the

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<sup>40</sup> Ólafsdóttir 1961: 14.

<sup>41</sup> “Grikkland líktist Íslandi í mörgu; það var að nokkru leiti það sama fyrir Suðurlöndin, sem Ísland var fyrir Norðurlöndin. Í Grikklandi blómstruðu öll vísindi í fyrndinni, og breiddust út til annara landa, en eptir það fóru þau í gleysku hjá öllum, um tíma, þar eptir vöknudu þau á ný, og eru þau nú hvarvetna í miklum metum. Á Íslandi blómstruðu mörg vísindi framar enn annarstaðar, á miðöldunum, en þar eptir gleymdust þau að mestu, nú eru þau farin að lifna aptur, og fer álit þeirra meir og meir í útlöndum.” Einarsson 1830: 51–52 (my translation).

<sup>42</sup> “Gríska túngan var mikið fullkomin og var hún móðir til annara tungumála, en sjálf var hún eigi komin af öðrum tungum. Íslenskan er einnig mikið fullkomið tungumál; er hún móðir annara tungumála, svo sem dönsku, svensku, þýðsku og engelsku, en sjálf veit hún eigi af ætterni að segja.” Einarsson 1830: 52 (my translation).

construction of language history by German and Danish scholars, from the encyclopaedic endeavours in the 18th century to attempts at establishing a connection between language, ethnicity, and nationality as a means of creating national myths of origin in the 19th century.<sup>43</sup> After a comparison of the glorious past of Iceland and Greece and their inhabitants, science, and language, Einarson notes that both countries were initially independent but were later ruled by foreign powers. A eulogy follows of the unity and good national spirit of both, which not only guarantees the independence of both nations but also increases their valour and encourages their people bravely to fight adverse circumstances under duress. Finally, the author encourages his Icelandic readers: “Since we are so much like the Greeks in so many ways, let us follow their example and rebel against the cold and against miseries and snatch their power from them!”<sup>44</sup>

Both ancient Greece and the battle of modern Greeks became the template for the inhabitants of the isolated island in the north. This mirror reading encourages readers of *Ármann á Alþingi* bravely to fight adverse circumstances. Interestingly, the Greek war of independence—with which Baldvin Einarson sympathized<sup>45</sup>—is not used to encourage Icelanders to fight foreign domination, except perhaps obliquely if the author was speaking metaphorically in the light of perceived negative reactions from the political powers.

Interest in a separate Icelandic assembly had no effect and the Crown appointed two representatives for the dependency to the diet of the Danish Islands. Four Icelandic students in Copenhagen, later known as the Men of Fjölnir, took up the fight for the restoration of the Althing in the annual *Fjölnir* (1835–1847). What earned *Fjölnir* its reputation in Iceland was the patriotism of the poems of Jónas Hallgrímsson and their emphasis on love for the country, as previously referred to in the poem “Iceland.”<sup>46</sup> Although *Fjölnir* hardly raised any new political demands,<sup>47</sup> it played a role in Iceland’s

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<sup>43</sup> Gomard 2007: 195–217.

<sup>44</sup> “Látum oss fylgja dæmi Grikkja, fyrst vér líkjumst þeim í svo mörgu, gerum uppreisn móti kuldalum og hallærunum, og sviptum þau sínu veldi!” Einarsson 1830: 52 (my translation).

<sup>45</sup> Einarsson 1830: 164–166.

<sup>46</sup> Karlsson, 2000: 204; Gíslason 1980: 93–95.

<sup>47</sup> Kristjánsdóttir 1996: 153–61.

nationalist movement by its emphasis on the national spirit, which was possibly influenced by Herder's idea of *Volksggeist*.<sup>48</sup>

Like Baldvin Einarson,<sup>49</sup> some of the Men of Fjölnir referred as well to the impact of the Greek national spirit in their struggle against the Turks, although an explicit application of the political struggle of the Greeks to the Icelandic political situation is lacking. This can be seen in an article in *Fjölnir* in 1838 where the liberation war of the Greeks is indirectly applied to conditions in Iceland. The author reflects on the way in which Icelanders should imitate their forefathers by learning from them in obliterating indifference towards work and diligence. The “great history of Iceland” shows that Icelanders as a nation are no less important than other nations. Also patriotism is kindled by meditating on one's antiquity, as is clear from the fact that the Greeks were successful in their fight against the Turks because they remembered the battle of the ancient Greeks against the Persians at Marathon and Salamis. It is indeed difficult to understand how any “Icelander could truly be fond of his country” if he thinks nothing of the “antiquity we possess or is completely indifferent towards our sagas and language and the books which history has bequeathed to us.”<sup>50</sup>

A more direct application to the Icelandic situation might be seen in an article by one of the Men of Fjölnir who claims that all history is like a personal biography and that the story of nations is like a family story. The author refers to the nations of Spain, Portugal, and Greece and their quest for liberty. Political undertones dominate the discussion:

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<sup>48</sup> Karlsson 2000a: 204; Matthíasdóttir 2004: 47.

<sup>49</sup> Referring to the Greek war of independence, Einarson said: “From this you can see what unity and good national spirit can accomplish” (“Þarna sjáið þér nú hvörju eining og góður þjóðarandi fær orkað”). Einarsson 1830: 53 (my translation).

<sup>50</sup> “Varlega er það fortakandi, að ættjarðarástin glæðist við það, að hugleiða fornöldina sína. Naumast hefðu Grikkjir núna í frelsisstríðinu staðið so leingi í Tirkjum, ef þeir hefðu ekkji munað til þess, að þeir voru komnir af þeim mönnum, sem firir meir enn 2000 árum síðan fjellu eða báru sigurinn úr bitum við Maraþón og Salamis. Og bág er að skilja í því, hvurnig nokkrum Íslendingji fer að þikja vænt um landið sitt til hlítar, án þess honum finnist neitt til fornaldarinnar, sem við eigum, nje hirði neitt um sögurnar okkar og málið og bókleifarnar.” “Íslenzkji flokkurinn” [The Icelandic Section] 1838: 3–19 (my translation).



The Greeks have still one more request, namely, that the power of the king be curtailed and that the nation at large may choose its representatives in the legislative assembly as is the rule in restricted monarchies, and, finally, that all rules and regulations of the assembly be written in the language spoken by the nations; this will hopefully materialize!<sup>51</sup>

There is an obvious connection between these reflections and Icelandic matters, where Danish was still the language of official communication, but the explicit application of the Greek war of independence to a more autonomous Icelandic nation is lacking. The liberation wars of the Greeks became known in Iceland through the translations of the poems of Lord Byron, the best-known European philhellene. Icelanders became acquainted with Byron's call for nations to follow the lead of the Greeks and fight against all foreign domination.<sup>52</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson was convinced that all subjugation was disgusting. However, the political overtones of his poetical references to the “delightful South” that could benefit the North, or of the southern sun melting the icy country in the north, are vague. The freedom of the nation had to be based on good moral conduct, on Christian faith and morality.<sup>53</sup> Also, trust in God and the fight for freedom go hand in hand. As such, Jónas Hallgrímsson's poetical words were politically innocent: as a good Christian one should honour those in power, such as the king! The educational ideals at Bessastaðir that had moulded the Men of Fjölnir were thus politically conservative. The applications of the Greco-Roman classical and Christian traditions were restricted to personal edification and to the cultivation of inherently conservative civic virtues.

Nothing became of the ideas of a national assembly at Þingvellir. Around 1840 the Icelandic group of nationalists in Copenhagen

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<sup>51</sup> “Þá hafa Grikkir eins hlutar enn að beiðast, og er von, að þeim sje um hann annt; enn það er sú bæn, að vald konungsins verði takmarkað, og meígi þjóðin velja sér fulltrúa, að sitja í löggjafar-ráðinu, eins og siður er til í hinum takmörkuðu einvalzdæmum; og allar þingbækur og embættisbrjef verði ritin á því máli, er þjóðin talar;—og er vonandi, að þessu verðir framgeíngt hvuruteggju.” “Frjettir” [News] 1836: 19 (my translation).

<sup>52</sup> Grímur Thomsen (1820–1896) wrote a master's thesis in Danish on Lord Byron in 1845 in which he discussed the connection of literature with national characteristics and the history of ideas (Egilsson 1999: 113, 124).

<sup>53</sup> Gíslason 1980: 255.

acquired a new leader, Jón Sigurðsson, who wanted the Althing to form the nucleus of an Icelandic capital in Reykjavík. The first Althing session convened in Reykjavík on 1 July 1845. Although Sigurðsson believed that the Latin school had its rightful place, the classical education offered in the school appeared to stand for opposite ideas to those which he was seen to represent, namely, modernization, democracy, economic progress, and school reform.

Although politically ineffective, the Men of Fjölnir helped Icelanders to express their feelings about their language, country, and cultural heritage with mixed elements of enlightened patriotism and romantic nationalism.<sup>54</sup> Also, a Hellenic discourse began to take shape that referred to the glorious past of Iceland and the revitalization of its national spirit in conjunction with reflections on the experience of the Greeks. Iceland, although under foreign domination as Greece had been for centuries, had a heroic past, unique language, and literary heritage comparable to that of Greece. We find a reference to the Greek war of independence as early as 1827: here nations in the north that have assisted the Greeks are referred to as “private friends” or “true friends of the Greeks.”<sup>55</sup> In subsequent references to the Greeks, their “renowned war of independence,” and rebellions against the king after their independence, a cluster of concepts recurs: patriotism and patriots, the will and holy rights of nation, national spirit, nationality, education, freedom and progress, and finally heroism and the glorious past of the nation. Positive examples of the heroic deeds of the Greeks are given with a reference to the battle of Marathon and the defence of Leonidas, the Spartan king of Thermopylae, against the attack of Xerxes, the Persian king, against Greece.<sup>56</sup>

These references became standard parlance. In an article on the “Battle at Marathon” (1861) the author begins by referring to a poem by Byron on the “Free Greek Nation.”<sup>57</sup> The themes of freedom vs.

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<sup>54</sup> Hálfðanarson 2003: 60.

<sup>55</sup> “Fréttir” [News] 1827: 35–36 (“einkavinir Grikkja”; “sannir Grikklands-vinir”).

<sup>56</sup> “Fréttir” [News] 1836: 38; “Fréttir” [News] 1837: 32; “Íslenzkji flokkurinn” [The Icelandic Section] 1838: 9; “Fréttir” [News] 1844: 82–83; “Ræðan í Tröllakirkju” [The Speech in the Church of Giants] 1852: 301–302; “Fréttir” [News] 1854: 125 (“hið nafnfræga frelsisstríð”); “Fréttir” [News] 1861: 92–93.

<sup>57</sup> “Marapóns bardagi” [Battle at Marathon] 1861: 26–40.

slavery and education vs. moral decadence dominate. The brightest light shines from Marathon, where the Greeks were victorious over the Persian fire of slavery and where “education was victorious over moral decadence and freedom over slavery.”<sup>58</sup> Through their heroic deeds the Greeks sacrificed their lives for “freedom and human dignity.” What united the ancient Greek city-states, each with its own constitution and nationality, was that they were of the same faith, spoke the same language, and shared artistic and educational values. Greeks were also conscious of the fact that they were more spiritual and more perfect than other nations and considered themselves, correctly, the author claims, superior to others. Continuous progress characterized the free Greeks. History has kept alive the memory of the heroic deeds of the forefathers of the Greeks so that future generations can see what free men can achieve with courage and strength in adverse circumstances.

In these discussions on nationality and freedom a distinct religious motif appears. It is the Christian nation, the Greeks, that has gained freedom from the Islamic Turks, whose yoke they have been under since the Turks won Constantinople.<sup>59</sup> The Christian nation is clearly superior to the Islamic nation. Although the population in Greece was mixed, they had been able to stand against the Turks because “what has united them is their religious and national hatred of the Turks.”<sup>60</sup> Finally, dystopian descriptions of modern Greeks compared to the ancient Greeks are common.<sup>61</sup> However, what mattered most were the utopian images of ancient Greeks. Nordic admirers of Greece in the 19th century were aware that much had changed in Greece since antiquity. Their quest was “to discover *classical* antiquity, not modern Greece,” as the former “was thought to hold value for illuminating

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<sup>58</sup> “Marabons bardagi” [Battle at Marathon] 1861: 26–28, 39.

<sup>59</sup> Melsteð 1845: 1–21; “Fréttir” [News] 1854: 125–126 (“hin kristna þjóð, Grikkir”); Ussing 1898: 181; “Píslavættisdauði Hypatíu” [The Martyrdom of Hypatia] 1906: 159–164.

<sup>60</sup> “Fréttir” [News] 1861: 92–93, “þá hefir trúarhatr og þjóðar hatr til Tyrkja samlagað þá.”

<sup>61</sup> Brynjúlfsson 1849: 49; “Fréttir” [News] 1861: 92–93. From an Icelandic point of view the remark of Holland, after having met two priests at Delphi, is illuminating: “Who in wretchedness I could well compare with the priests of Iceland, but who entirely wanted the knowledge which is often so remarkable in the latter” (Holland 1815: 393).

Western values.” In the classical past they found a source to support “national claims to superiority.”<sup>62</sup>

Perhaps the most unique Icelandic contribution to the discourse on nationality that included a comparison between Iceland and Greece occurs in the article “On Nationality” in 1845. The author, Sigurður Melsted, a theologian and subsequently a teacher at the Latin school and the theological seminary, draws attention to classical, Nordic, and Christian elements. Nationality, he claims, is not confined by language and literature but is contained in all of the spiritual life of a nation. The purpose of nations is progress and the perfection of humanity. First among the nations that have determined the process of world history are the Greeks and Romans, who have excelled above all nations and gained the most maturity that could be expected of a heathen culture. However, it was Christianity that created afresh all spiritual life, both in belief and ethics and also in the sciences. Christian nations can therefore be on par with and even surpass the Greeks and the Romans. The religious superiority motif is clear in the article: “it is the Christian faith that has first awakened a true understanding of nationality”<sup>63</sup> since it taught that the rights of all men were originally equal and thus removed all ideas of subjugation, abolished slavery, and threw light on the previously unknown truth that all nations initially had equal rights and that there was no difference between Jews and Greeks.<sup>64</sup> Heathenism, on the other hand, did not acknowledge the right of nations.<sup>65</sup>

Sigurður Melsted’s main point is, though, to emphasize the importance of international relations for nationhood. In order for nations to thrive, international relations are crucial. It is in this light that one should view the author’s reflections on Greco-Roman history, literature, and national characteristics and his attempt to tie Icelandic nationality and culture with classical Greco-Roman culture. Each nation must remember that invisible bonds tie all nations

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<sup>62</sup> Dolan 2000: 126, 179.

<sup>63</sup> “Kristin trú hefði fyrst vakið sanna skoðun á þjóðerninu.” Melsted 1845: 16 (my translation).

<sup>64</sup> Melsted 1845: 16. Here the author refers to Saint Paul’s baptismal formula in Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

<sup>65</sup> Melsted 1845: 20–21.

together and that humanity at large is the Great Nation. Nationality thus does not require a nation to fight against everything foreign, but nations become truly self-centred if they focus solely on their traditions. Just as interaction is important for the development of the human spirit so does interaction between nations guarantee that the national spirit thrives. In a detailed article published a few years later, “Liberation Movements among the Nations,” the template for true nationhood is also seen in the willingness to participate in the commonality of nations in the light of the original unity of mankind.<sup>66</sup>

Melsteð does not compare the spirit of present day Greek and Icelandic aspirations for freedom. Neither does he compare the spirit in the tale of Herodotus about the courageous deeds of Leonidas at Thermopylae and the tales of *Njála* about the defence of Gunnar at Hlíðarenda and his return. Both became living emblems in the nationalistic feelings of both nations.<sup>67</sup> Instead he connects nationality with Christianity, with ideas of liberty and freedom, with the good and beautiful, with old national literature and language, drawing a link between Icelandic nationality in the making and the Greco-Roman heritage.

Scholars have correctly drawn attention to Melsteð’s connection of language and literature with the national spirit.<sup>68</sup> They have, however, not duly recognized the significance of the author’s emphasis on the importance of open contact between nations for national prosperity. Such openness rejects the exclusive focus on one’s national heritage. It is in this light that one should view the author’s connection of the Icelandic heritage with the Greco-Roman one; it connects Icelanders to other civilized European nations. This combination of national and international elements contributes to the development of Icelandic nationality, helping Icelanders to thrive as an independent nation proud of their national heritage and securing at the same time their free and open interaction with other civilized nations.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Brynjúlfsson 1849: 37–166. Icelanders also compared themselves with other nations, such as the Hungarians. However, references to Greece are relatively more frequent than references to other nations.

<sup>67</sup> Gíslason 1980: 254.

<sup>68</sup> See Eiríksson 1994: 327–30.

<sup>69</sup> Melsteð 1845: 20–21.

It appears that we have found here the “missing link” that allowed classicists such as Bjarni Johnsen to maintain that classical education contributed to Icelandic nationality. The European classical heritage allowed the national heritage to have a fixed point of reference for comparisons, contrasts, mirroring, or for selective borrowings and rejections. An “international culture” is thus crucial for the restoration of a national one and made possible the definition of an “Icelandic national self-identity” in the process of both marking off and incorporating desirable and undesirable elements. The motto of Icelandic classicists was not only that the classical heritage was to form the foundation of all education but also that it provided a fixed standard of reference against which the national heritage should be measured. Scholars who have discussed nascent Icelandic nationality have ignored or been oblivious to this connection with the neo-humanistic classical perspective in the educational ideals of the schools.<sup>70</sup>

## Hellas of the North

In the first decades of the 19th century comparisons of Iceland and Greece become quite common in the writing of foreign authors. As an example we might refer to Henry Wheaton’s description, which draws attention to the similarity of Icelanders and the Greeks at a time when the *Odyssey* had just appeared in print in Icelandic:

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<sup>70</sup> This is true of the two scholars who have discussed in detail various aspects of Icelandic nationalism, namely, Hálfðanarson (1996: 15–18; 2003, 2007a) and Karlsson (1995: 33–62, 1999, 2000a, 2000b). Hálfðanarson, though, has noted the selective borrowing of international values and the rejection of some “barbaric national” forms, for example, in the field of poetry, which took place when Icelandic cultural nationalism was in the making. See his discussion of Jónas Hallgrímsson’s rejection of *rímur* by Sigurður Breiðfjörð (Hálfðanarson 2007b). “*Rímur* are long rhymed narratives, similar to the metrical romances of England and Germany in the High and late Middle Ages” (Neijmann 2006: 56). Egilsson 1999 has also duly recognized the mixture of classical and Nordic elements in Icelandic poetry of the 19th century; the issue of nationality is, however, not important in his book. Scholars have also drawn attention to the comparable views of Fichte in early 19th-century Prussia and the ideas of Jón Aðils in early 20th-century Iceland but have not recognized the impact of von Humboldt’s views on classicists and with issues of nationality in Iceland (see Mattíasdóttir 1995: 36–64). On the difference between von Humboldt and Fichte, see Sorkin 1983: 55–73.

The natural divisions of the country by ice-bergs and lava streams, insulated the people from each other, and the inhabitants of each valley and each hamlet formed, as it were, an independent community. [...] Their pastoral life was diversified by the occupation of fishing. Like the Greeks, too, the sea was their element, but even their shortest voyages bore them much farther from their native shores than the boasted expedition of the Argonauts. Their familiarity with the perils of the ocean, and with the diversified manners and customs of foreign lands, stamped their national character with bold and original features, which distinguished them from every other people.<sup>71</sup>

This comparison was wholeheartedly endorsed by Icelanders. In the previous section we saw examples of comparisons between Iceland and Greece in the writings of Icelandic authors. Such comparisons were, however, relatively few in Iceland during the governor period, although the topic of increased autonomy dominated political discussions. The reasons might have been diminished interest in the Greek cause in Europe and increased criticism of classical education in the last quarter of the 19th century. A change occurs in the final decade of the 19th century when translated articles begin to appear in which foreign authors develop the comparison between Iceland and Greece, and Icelandic authors follow up on the comparison both in scholarly articles and in poetry. However, a curious shift in vocabulary has occurred: instead of speaking about *Greece*, the word *Hellas* becomes more frequently used, even in comparisons of the two countries where Greece is now called *Hellas of the South* and Iceland *Hellas of the North*.<sup>72</sup> This conceptual change is significant. It shows that the main thrust of the comparison has changed, and the focus is no longer on political developments in modern Greece but on the purported value of the classical heritage and its contribution to Western civilization in general and Icelandic culture in particular.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Wheaton 1831: 54–55.

<sup>72</sup> See Ísleifsson 2007: 111–128.

<sup>73</sup> In England a new journal was launched in 1880 with the name *Journal of Hellenic Studies*. As Stray says (1993: 216), “The choice of ‘Hellenic’ is significant, in that it was surely intended to mark an area of interest wider than ‘Greek’ [...] ‘Hellenic’ of course invoked the most powerful symbol of cultural authority in 19th century England: classical Greece.”

Icelanders became acquainted with this linguistic change through foreign books connecting Iceland and Greece, such as *Aus Hellas, Rom und Thule* (1887) by Joseph Calasanz Poestion and *Island und Hellas* (1892) by August Boltz.<sup>74</sup> These titles show the inclination of German authors to connect Iceland with Hellas. Evidence suggests a greater awareness of this connection in Iceland even among the common people. In an article from 1894 the author refers to a Dane who had written many novels set in ancient Greece and whose best-known work in Iceland is a collection of stories entitled *From Hellas*.<sup>75</sup> Although it is impossible to assess the readership of these stories, they indicate increased usage in Iceland of the term *Hellas*.

The poem “Ísland til Hellas” (Iceland to Hellas) by Steingrímur Thorsteinsson (1831–1913) displays characteristic views of Icelandic philhellenes.<sup>76</sup> The isolated cold island in the North, its golden historical past, the mountain Hekla, and the poems of the Edda have a counterpart in the Hellas of the South, the Olympic mountain, and Homer. Hellas of the South has touched the consciousness of the inhabitants of the cold island of the North with its warm sunny rays. There is a reference to the rebirth of “young Hellas,” modern Greece, and the glorious education of international Hellenic culture, a most beautiful and completely free one, which used to be a defence against all decadence but has now made nations younger. The nation in the island of the North that is most akin to young Hellas has inherited its culture. The poem ends with the expressed hope that the native country of Iceland will prosper and with the help of Zeus and Nike enjoy a continuous day of freedom. The poem is written as a reminder to Icelanders who had forgotten the great benefits of Hellenic culture in the North.

Two translated articles are illuminating for the comparison of Iceland as Hellas of the North with Greece as Hellas of the South. In the article “The Study of Latin” (1901), its Norwegian author argues for increased teaching of Greek, although he claims that one cannot dispense completely with Latin because of the remarkable history of

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<sup>74</sup> Bjarnason 1905: 155–158; H. M. (1905): 34–35; H. J. (1906): 17–18; Finnbogason 1913: 235.

<sup>75</sup> “Útlendar fréttir” [Foreign News] 1894: 126.

<sup>76</sup> Thorsteinsson 1948: 214–15. Thorsteinsson translated, as did both Grímur Thomsen (1969: 281–313) and Benedikt Gröndal, many classical Greek poems into Icelandic.



the Roman people and because of the influence of Latin throughout the ages.<sup>77</sup> But, as members of Gothic nations, descendents of Thor and Óðinn, *we*—the Norwegian author and the Icelandic translator—should not make Latin and Roman history the foundation for all education but should rather free students from the Roman yoke and make the works of our own forefathers the groundwork of our education. If *we* are to understand ourselves as a nation, *we* need to attend to our own antiquity and totally immerse ourselves in the imaginative prophetic youth of the Teutonic race. After English and Anglo-Saxon we should study German, middle Gothic, and the languages of the Nordic countries, especially Icelandic, the only language that is for the most part spoken unchanged since the Middle Ages and as such the only living key to Old Norse literature. When we have given our own Teutonic race its rightful dues we can direct our attention towards the ancient nations around the Mediterranean Sea. As Icelandic in the Nordic part of Europe is the living key to the Middle Ages and the famous ancient Eddas and sagas, so is modern Greek in the most southern part of Europe the living language that can acquaint us with the spirit of Homer, Herodotus, Demosthenes, and Plato. In this way fate has woven us together with the Greeks. The more we study the maturation and progress of nations and their cultures, the brighter shines the truth that Greek and Icelandic are two silver-haired old men who hold in their hands two golden keys, one to the treasures of the ancient age, the other to the treasures of the Middle Ages; one to the treasures of southern Europe, the other to the treasures of northern Europe.<sup>78</sup>

At the request of an Icelandic publisher, a Danish author wrote an article in 1898 in which he compares the Nordic antiquities with the national treasures of old Hellas. The comparison is as before imbued with religious overtones:

Far in the East one could see how old Hellas rose afresh, how beauty and the idealism of correct faith were victorious against

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<sup>77</sup> Andersen 1901: 152–154.

<sup>78</sup> I have drawn together the thrust of the article by Andersen 1901: 152–154. I have not been able to locate the original article. The author, Rasmus B. Andersen, was a Norwegian who moved to United States and became a professor in Wisconsin. He wrote *Norse Mythology* (1875), which was claimed in the preface to be “the first complete and systematic presentation of the Norse mythology in the English language.” See Haugen 1937: 259.

the dreadful state and the wearisome disbelief. We ourselves have—or rather the honourable Thorvaldsen on our behalf—helped to recover the fallen state of beauty. But we ourselves have—and that is our greatest ambition—dug from the dark a new, national world which most people considered no less endowed with beauty and richness than the Hellenic one, i.e., our antiquity, the most beautiful and famous age in the history of the Northern nations before hatred and rivalries split that state, which was so closely related by blood, into two opposite parts.<sup>79</sup>

These ideas were easily applied to the Icelandic situation; indeed, they form the backbone of Jón Aðils's comparisons of Iceland and Greece in his public lectures on Icelandic nationality in 1903, which made a lasting impact on the historical consciousness of Icelanders. Jón Aðils emphasizes the organic connection of the individual and the nation, the heroic deeds of the forefathers, the superiority of Icelandic demeanour, the primal duty of the individual to devote himself to the welfare of the nation, the purity of the Icelandic tongue, and the moral imperative to protect it. All these points became an integral part of the framework of the agreement between Iceland and Denmark that secured Iceland autonomy in 1918.<sup>80</sup>

As Jón Aðils focuses on the development of Icelandic nationality, the story of the history of Iceland falls neatly into periods of a glorious antiquity, the dark Middle Ages, and an age of restoration.<sup>81</sup> In the Golden age of the Commonwealth period (930–1262) people enjoyed a period of prosperity and the great literature of the Icelandic sagas was produced. The concentration of power and personal rivalries led to the loss of national freedom in the 13th century.

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<sup>79</sup> “Langt í austri gat að líta, hversu gamla Hellas reisti við að nýju, hversu fegurðin og hugsjón hinnar rjettu trúar vann sigur á hroðanum og hinni hvumleiðu vantrú. Við höfum líka sjálfir,—eða rjettara sagt ágætismaðurinn Thorvaldsen fyrir vora hönd,—stutt að því að endurreisa hið fallna ríki fegurðarinnar. En við höfðum sjálfir—og það var okkar mesti metnaður—grafið fram úr myrkrunum nýjan, þjóðlegan heim, sem allflestum þótti ekki minna í varið að fegurð og auðgi en hinn hellenska; það var fornöld vor, fegursti og frægasti tími í sögu norrænna þjóða, áður en fjandskapur og flokkadrættir skiptu því ríki, er tengt var svo nánnum sífjum, í tvo andstæða hluta.” Ussing 1898: 181 (my translation).

<sup>80</sup> Mattíasdóttir 2004: 50–53.

<sup>81</sup> Aðils 1903: 1, 213–214; Karlsson 2001: 186–198, 217–218.

Matters became even worse after the Reformation due to the influence of foreign kings and the representatives of the absolutist state. Things began to improve in the middle of the 18th century, which led to a period of restoration in the 19th century, a rebirth of national feelings and the rebirth of a nation. Icelandic antiquity was discovered by foreigners who recognized it as a breeding ground both of old Nordic and Germanic culture.

Jón Aðils's comparison of the Golden age of Iceland with the glorious past of the Greeks could only have had its desired effect if the recipients were acquainted with the “idealized Other” with which Icelandic history was compared. In this light one can claim that the history of ancient Greece provided the discourse of Icelandic nationalism with an effective arsenal in its battle for autonomy. Thus, although the idealized discourse of Icelandic philhellenes could not delay the inevitable defeat of Greek classical education in Iceland, their discourse made an indelible impact on the self-image and historical conscience of Icelanders. The auto-images of Iceland and its inhabitants as the heirs of Hellenic culture are clearly shaped by a hetero-image of Hellas of the South. The discourse compares Icelandic language and literary heritage in utopian terms reminiscent of the golden past of Greece.

Although the use of the term *Hellas* was debated in early 20th-century Iceland,<sup>82</sup> the term is now well established as is the imported slogan of Iceland as Hellas of the North.<sup>83</sup> The view that Greece had laid the foundation of Western civilization is well expressed in the first detailed history of Greece in Icelandic with the title *Hellas* (1910), one volume of many giving an “overview of the history of the human

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<sup>82</sup> A reviewer of Bjarnason 1916 complains about the use of the words *Hellas* and *Hellenes* in an Icelandic textbook, claiming that these should be reserved for poetical use; one should rather use the terms *Greece* and *Greek*, which are common in Icelandic, based on the Latin terms *Graecus* and *Graecia* (Blöndal 1917: 178–80).

<sup>83</sup> We also find the terms *Hellas* and *Greece* used interchangeably in the same context, as in a poem by Thorsteinsson (1903: 163–166) called “The Hellenistic Dream” (*Hellenzkur draumur*). The author uses the word *Greece* as he refers to Sappho and the old Golden age of song; in the same verse the author describes how his mind wanders from the darkness and treacherous weather in “ultima Thule” to the “hellenistic bliz.”

spirit.”<sup>84</sup> The book is remarkable for its precise discussion of classical sources. Standard views of the greatness of the Greek spirit appear in the epilogue where the author discusses “the heritage of the ancient Greeks.” That heritage has affected all dimensions of human life in Western nations, especially though in philosophy and critical thinking. The nations of the North are also in most cultural fields its inheritors. The book became quite popular and contributed to greater knowledge in Iceland about Greece and its purported contribution to Western civilization.

However, speaking of Iceland as the Hellas of the North was still more prevalent abroad or in Icelandic periodicals discussing foreign works. In the opinion of an Icelander who refers to the German article “Island und Hellas” (1921), the author had made

a very interesting comparison of ancient culture of Greeks and Icelanders, especially with regard to their literature and shown by many examples that there can be no doubt of the historical connection of these two cultural nations, in spite of distance, completely different life conditions and disposition.<sup>85</sup>

The author bases his argument partly on an older German work in which the Icelander, Snorri, is called the “Nordic Herodotus” but in the author’s own view might perhaps in some sense be called the “Father of History.”<sup>86</sup> Iceland and Hellas are comparable since both have a pre-Christian antiquity. Friendship with Iceland (Islandfreundschaft) has thus the same cultural-historical foundation as Philhellenism.<sup>87</sup> Although the idea of a Hellas of the North is not found here, the ideological framework is the same. In a German

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<sup>84</sup> Bjarnason 1910b: 12–13, 326–330. See the review of Pálsson 1911: 87–88. At the beginning of the book four stanzas of the poem “Iceland to Hellas” by Thorsteinsson are printed. For a critical discussion of the contribution of the Greeks to various fields of Western culture, see Finley, ed., 1981.

<sup>85</sup> “Hann gerir þar mjög merkilegan samanburð á fornaldarmenningu Grikkja og Íslendinga, sérstaklega á bókmentunum og sýnir fram á með ýmsum dæmum, er hann kemur með, að enginn efi geti leikið á sögulegu sambandi þessara menningarþjóða, þrátt fyrir fjarlægð og gerólík lífskjör og lyndiseinkunn.” K. I. (1922): 7 (my translation). One is reminded of the arguments of Benedikt Gröndal discussed above.

<sup>86</sup> Neckel 1922: 35–44; Wachter 1835: cxlvii.

<sup>87</sup> Neckel 1922: 35.

article published in 1923 discussing the Icelandic musician Jón Leifs, Iceland is called “Hellas of the Nordic countries.”<sup>88</sup>

A possible clue to the origin of the slogan of Iceland as Hellas of the North might be found in a book published in England in 1916 by an Icelandic lecturer at King’s College. The author, Jón Stefánsson, refers to Iceland’s efforts to modify her constitutional relations with Denmark with a reference to her historical rights. The “intense national feeling” of Icelanders has behind it the common heritage of all the Scandinavian nations preserved in the Icelandic sagas. As the “treasure-house” of their common past Iceland deserves to have a unique status and Denmark should be proud to assist “the little nation in the North Atlantic [...] on the verge of the Arctic Circle.”<sup>89</sup> The new University of Iceland established in 1911 “will again lift the torch of culture and learning which burnt so brightly in republican Iceland.”<sup>90</sup> Stefánsson claims that none of the Scandinavian nations have such strong English sympathies as Icelanders and notes that it was an Englishman, William Morris, the “late Victorian Britain’s most celebrated Icelandophile,” who said that “as Hellas is holy ground to the nations of the South, so should Iceland be a Hellas to Northern Europe.”<sup>91</sup> These reflections are then used by Stefánsson to express a hope for “a united, free, and federated Scandinavia.”<sup>92</sup> In the preface of the book Viscount Bryce wrote what had by then become standard parlance:

Now Iceland is a country of quite exceptional and peculiar interest, not only in its physical but also in its historical aspects. The Icelanders are the smallest in number of the civilized nations of the world. [...] the island [...] is a Nation, with a language, a national character, a body of traditions that are all its own. Of all the civilized countries it is the most wild and barren. [...] Yet the people of this remote isle, placed in

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<sup>88</sup> An Icelandic author refers to the German article (published in *Rheinische Musik- und Theater-Zeitung* in Cologne) in “Hitt og þetta” [Miscellaneous] 1923: 3. “Er þar Ísland nefnt Hellas Norðurlanda.”

<sup>89</sup> Stefánsson 1916: xxviii–xxix.

<sup>90</sup> Stefánsson 1916: xxix.

<sup>91</sup> I have not been able to locate this quote by William Morris. The reference to him as the “most celebrated Icelandophile” is that of Wawn 2000: 34.

<sup>92</sup> Stefánsson 1916: xxx.

an inhospitable Arctic wilderness, [...] has been from the beginning of its national life more than thousand years ago, an intellectually cultivated people which has produced a literature both in prose and in poetry that stands among the primitive literatures next after that of ancient Greece if one regards both its quantity and quality. Nowhere else, except in Greece, was so much produced that attained, in times of primitive simplicity, so high a level of excellence both in imaginative power and in brilliance of expression.<sup>93</sup>

Icelanders readily accepted the idea that their medieval literary heritage could be favourably compared to ancient Greek literature, although many of them could not subscribe to Stefansson's use of the comparison to put forward a pan-Scandinavian political ideal. Indeed, after having gained full sovereignty in 1918 and especially after the foundation of the Republic of Iceland on 17 June 1944, the nationalization of medieval culture came into open conflict with other Nordic countries, especially in the so-called manuscript debates between the Icelandic and Danish authorities and in related disputes over the national origins of the saga literature.<sup>94</sup> To which nation did the glorious "Icelandic" or "Nordic" medieval past really belong?

### A Postscript

At the end of the 19th century criticism against the Latin school became intense. Critics claimed that the school offered only education to a selected few clergymen, lawyers, and medical doctors, and that it focused on impractical subjects. The demand of the day was a common education for all members of society. The classics lost the battle and a new regulation in 1904 dropped Greek as a compulsory subject. Sensing a defeat a few years earlier the principal of the Latin school, Björn M. Ólsen, delivered one of the last attempts to answer the charges against the uselessness of classical languages, in a speech that includes a eulogy of Sveinbjörn Egilsson. According to the principal, Egilsson's main influence on Icelandic national life, education, and language can be attributed to his work as a teacher of the Icelandic youth for over thirty years. His translations and impact

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<sup>93</sup> Stefansson 1916: x–xi.

<sup>94</sup> Hálfðanarson 2010: 52–71.

on several Icelandic cultural leaders made a great contribution to the restoration of the Icelandic language. “With this,” Björn M. Ólsen concludes, “he has made an invaluable contribution to our nationality, because language is the foundation of national feeling.”<sup>95</sup>

To the best of my knowledge Egilsson did not think that his translations would increase the national feeling of his students. However, he paved the way for his successors to make an explicit connection between Icelandic national culture and classical heritage. Egilsson also indirectly laid one of the foundational stones in the construction of Icelandic cultural nationalism. This he did by helping to unveil both the Old Icelandic sagas and Greco-Roman literature, which allowed others later to build up an argument for the privileged position of Old Icelandic literature as compared to classical literature. In this process the educational ideals at Bessastaðir contributed to the “blending of cultures” in 19th-century Iceland, which has not received adequate attention among scholars. Neither has it been satisfactorily explained why Egilsson, a doctor in theology, started to translate classical Greek literature into Icelandic.<sup>96</sup> In so doing, however, he introduced the neo-humanistic perspective in Iceland. Although the Hellenistic perspective was valued in the schools for a century we do not find a sentimental philhellenism in Iceland characterized by a rallying cry for active participation in the Greek cause kindled by Shelley’s claim, “We are all Greeks!”<sup>97</sup> Icelandic classicists were more intellectual as they reflected on the interconnectedness of Iceland and Greece.

However, the idealized discourse of the positive impact of Hellas of the South in the North could not thwart the inevitable defeat of Greek classical education in Iceland. Educational and societal values had changed drastically and a new societal image connected with democratization, urbanization, and new technological advances had developed, emphasizing the need of a general education for all. Instead of teaching “dead” languages the schools should teach natural sciences and mathematics, which were thought much better suited to

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<sup>95</sup> “Með þessu hefur hann unnið þjóðerni voru ómetanlegt gagn, því að málið er undirstaða þjóðernistilfinningarinnar.” Ólsen 1898: 41 (my translation).

<sup>96</sup> This is lacking in Guðmundsson’s doctoral dissertation (1960), which deals with Sveinbjörn Egilsson’s translations of Homer. See Þorsteinsson 1961: 227.

<sup>97</sup> Borza 1973: 5–25.

facilitate a scientific way of thinking than the declensions and conjugations of Latin and Greek nouns and verbs.<sup>98</sup> But in spite of their defeat in the educational sphere, classicists had firmly put in place the framework for a discourse that allowed for a direct comparison of Iceland and Hellas that could be used for political purposes.

Although classicists lost the battle their defeat was not complete. Greek was introduced at the university level when a chair in classical studies was established at the University of Iceland in 1914.<sup>99</sup> Members of the Althing discussed the proposal for the establishment of the chair in detail.<sup>100</sup> It was claimed that the classical languages, especially Latin, had been the foundation of “our” education since the advent of Christianity and that it was difficult to understand Icelandic history before 1800 since until then Latin had been “the scientific language of the northern hemisphere.” Most of the languages in the northern hemisphere had been so much influenced by both Latin and Greek that it would be detrimental for “our” understanding of them if we are not well versed in them. The New Testament would also be a closed book for theological students unless they learnt Greek. Then there would soon be a shortage of both teachers in Latin at the gymnasium school in Reykjavík and in Greek at the university if teaching in these languages were not to continue at the university. Finally, it would “not at all be healthy for Icelandic culture” if the classical language were completely expelled from the country. The chair in classical studies (1915–1926) secured the teaching of Greek at the university level, albeit mainly for theological students.<sup>101</sup>

By the middle of the 20th century it had become a standard view among Icelandic intellectuals that the sources of Western civilizations are fundamentally three, namely, Greco-Roman, Christian, and Nordic, precisely those that Sveinbjörn Egilsson had identified. Icelandic medieval literature should be viewed “as one of three illuminating beacons in the spiritual life of humankind. It has been placed alongside the Bible and the classical literature of Greece and

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<sup>98</sup> Bain 1899: 131.

<sup>99</sup> *Alþingistíðindi 1914*, vol. A: 193–94; *Alþingistíðindi 1914*, vol. A: 311–313.

<sup>100</sup> See *Alþingistíðindi 1914*, vol. B: 274–311, 523–551.

<sup>101</sup> Glad 2003: 42–64.



Rome,” as principal Ólafur Lárússon remarked in a speech welcoming the Norwegian crown prince in his visit to the University of Iceland in 1947.<sup>102</sup> By placing the Icelandic sagas alongside the greatest cultural achievements of the world, Icelandic intellectuals thrust Iceland from the periphery towards the centre as one of the main sources of Western culture.<sup>103</sup> The issue by now was not only the relative status of Nordic medieval literature as part of Western civilization but to whom the Nordic past belonged, and whether the sagas were Norwegian and pan-Scandinavian or exclusively Icelandic.

Several Icelandic authors have continued to uphold the value of the classical heritage by translating Greek and Latin texts into Icelandic, and sporadic comparisons of the Nordic heritage with the classical one have occurred among these.<sup>104</sup> In tune with the insights of 19th-century classicists, some of them have continued to connect their discussions to issues of nationality, claiming that it is detrimental to “our personal maturity as a nation” if Icelanders neglect their relationship with their “spiritual beginnings,” although the situation is not as bad in Iceland as in some other European countries since Icelanders possess a glorious national past and their culture is based on a common European heritage that goes back to Athens and Rome, and a Nordic one which is indelibly rooted in the minds of Icelanders.<sup>105</sup> This connection of the classical heritage to Icelandic nationality is still to be found in Iceland around the middle of the 20th century but has since disappeared from the discourse of classicists and other intellectuals. At the same time the impact of Greece and Hellenism in Iceland has become a closed book, indeed a *terra incognita*, not only for politicians and the general public, but also for many scholars.

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<sup>102</sup> “eitt hinna þriggja skæru ljósa í andlegu lífi mannkynsins. Þeim hefur verið skipað við hlið Bibliúnnar og hinna klassísku bókmennta Grikkja og Rómverja.” Lárússon 1947: 92 (my translation).

<sup>103</sup> Nordal 1993: 195 and Sveinsson 1953: 46–47 refer to a foreign authority to support this claim, namely, to the Swedish scholar Henrik Schuck.

<sup>104</sup> Finnbogason 1929: 84–103; Benediktsson 1930: 85–101; Gíslason 1945: 36–67; Thorsteinsson 1947: 112–147; and Sveinsson 1956: 91–114. The Icelandic Literary Society has since 1975 published translations of Learned Literature, among which are Greco-Roman authors, such as Theophrastos, Aristoteles, Plato, et al. Virgil’s *Enead* (1999) and Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (2009) have also appeared in Icelandic.

<sup>105</sup> Gíslason 1952: 53–54; see also Árnason 1973: 111–124.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have described and evaluated the impact of the classical heritage, especially the Greek one, in 19th-century Iceland. It is safe to conclude that this heritage introduced a framework within which Icelanders could favourably place their historical writings in an international and cultural context and thus push it from the periphery towards the centre of Western civilization. The classical heritage, together with political changes in Europe, allowed a new discourse to form in Iceland in which the Icelandic language and cultural heritage was compared favourably with the Greek language and cultural heritage. The blending of cultural elements from Greco-Roman, Christian, and Nordic sources helped to shape the worldview of educated Icelanders with regard to the relationship between classical and Nordic culture, the possible historical relationship between Iceland and Greece, the impact of Hellenic culture in Iceland, and the privileged position of Old Icelandic literature.

As Icelandic cultural nationalism began to take shape a Hellenic discourse developed in which the golden age of Icelandic history was compared to the golden age of Greek history. Later the same comparison was used to support political nationalism. Classicists emphasized that Icelanders should proudly put forward their national heritage as part and parcel of the history of the civilized nations. As the classical heritage provided the standard of reference against which the national heritage could be compared, it helped to revitalize Icelandic national culture and contributed to the process of defining Icelandic national self-identity. Modern scholars who have discussed nascent Icelandic nationality have not duly recognized this connection with the neo-humanistic classical perspective in the educational ideals of the schools. In spite of their defeat in the educational sphere early in the 20th century, classicists had firmly put in place the framework for a discourse that directly influenced the way in which many influential Icelandic intellectuals voiced their views of Iceland's political and cultural status in an international context.

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# Old Norse Poetry and New Beginnings in Late 18th- and Early 19th- Century Literature<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – This article first examines the image of northern antiquity conveyed in the productive reception of Old Norse literature by European writers and poets in the later 18th century, when this heritage at last attracted a non-scholarly international readership. Initially, European writers were impressed especially by the primitive and the sublime in Old Norse literature. This is partly attributable to the unusual character of the small selection of Old Norse poetry that had been translated into Latin. Secondly, the reception was informed by growing dissent against classicism in the European literary world and the consequent search for alternatives. The main part of the article then considers whether a similar emphasis may be discerned in Icelanders' reception of Old Norse literature a little later. The focus is on the resurrection of eddic metres, at first most evident in scholarly writings and in translations of lengthy epic poems, and later manifested in original poetry by Bjarni Thorarensen and other poets. Further aspects of Thorarensen's creative reception of Old Norse literature are also examined in light of the reception in other countries; and his ideas about the North in a broad sense, and Iceland's place in it, are discussed. Subsequently Thorarensen's views on Iceland's status within the kingdom of Denmark are analyzed. Finally the point is elaborated that Thorarensen approaches Old Norse literature primarily as the common heritage of a supranational North.

**Keywords** – Northern antiquity, image, Old Norse literature, reception, Bjarni Thorarensen, North vs. South, cultural identity

## Introduction

European writers and poets discovered northern antiquity, and first realized the significance of the Old Norse cultural heritage, in the mid-18th century. Outside Iceland, Old Norse literature had prior to

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Icelandic by Anna Yates.

that time been largely the preserve of antiquarians, most of them Danish and Swedish, who generally published their findings about them in Latin along with translated examples. These poems and prose narratives had primarily attracted their attention as historical sources, not as literature. In the 1750s and 1760s, translation of Old Norse myths and poetry into the major European languages began in earnest. Among the translators were some of the leading pioneers of new ideas in European literary life, trends later termed pre-Romantic. Few of them had any knowledge of Icelandic, and in fact only in exceptional cases did they know any Nordic language. Hence their access to Old Norse literature was confined, in the main, to what had been translated into Latin. But the kernel of this small selection was clearly in harmony with the zeitgeist, and not only was it translated many times, in the conventional sense, it was also used as a basis for freer rewriting. This literary reworking presented a certain image of northern antiquity, and that in turn shaped European ideas about the Nordic peoples in general.

Swedish scholar Anton Blanck demonstrated in his *Den nordiska renässansen i sjuttonhundratalets litteratur* (1911) that the literary reworking of Old Norse literature in the 18th century may be seen as a consistent movement originating in the large northern European nations, which then spread to Scandinavia. It was under influence from abroad that Nordic poets first started to work regularly with elements of their own ancient literature, and their view of this heritage was initially informed by the European reception. Later research has confirmed Blanck's conclusion.<sup>2</sup> Blanck terms this movement the *Nordic Renaissance*, and other scholars have adopted the concept for this phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Some of them have traced this reception history into the 19th century, while Blanck's study is confined to the period prior to Romanticism as such.<sup>4</sup> Hitherto no study has been made of whether the features of the literary movement Blanck describes have

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<sup>2</sup> Springer 1936; Jansson 1996; Clunies Ross & Lönnroth 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Medievalists sometimes apply this concept to writings of Icelanders and other Nordic people in the 12th and 13th centuries. See Johansson 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Blanck himself assigns the concept of the Romantic a broader meaning than is used here and generally applied in literary discourse in recent decades: he extends it to cover pre-Romantic phenomena. The present consensus is that the features of the Romantic movement did not emerge clearly until the last years of the 18th century. See for example Furst 1976: 93.

any parallel in the Icelandic literature of the 18th and 19th centuries. An attempt will be made here to contribute to that issue.

It is undisputed that a clear turning point occurred in Icelandic literary history at the end of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th. This turning point has sometimes been called the *Icelandic Renaissance*.<sup>5</sup> This reflects, firstly, a judgement of the quality of the literature: the view that Icelandic literary life flourished for the first time since the Middle Ages. But the concept also entails that Old Icelandic writings were in some sense a springboard. Unlike other nations, Icelanders had never lost their connection with Old Norse literature, and they could still read it in the original. On the other hand, cultural resurgence in Iceland would have been impossible without a rethink of the traditional reception of the heritage. The leading poets of the period were Bjarni Thorarensen (1786–1841) and Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–45). While the two are often mentioned in the same breath, they were not of the same generation: Thorarensen was more than twenty years older than Hallgrímsson. The latter has received much more academic attention in recent times, partly due to his role in the periodical *Fjölnir*, which has been seen as an important precursor to the Icelandic campaign for independence from Denmark. But in literary writings of the 19th century both poets are afforded similar status, and by the end of the century the scholarly consensus appears to be that most younger Icelandic poets are following in their footsteps.<sup>6</sup> In a well-known essay published in 1924, “Samhengið í íslenskum bókmentum” (Continuity in Icelandic Literature), Professor Sigurður Nordal voices his objections to the idea that Thorarensen and Hallgrímsson (and other members of the *Fjölnir* coterie) “had sprung in full armour out of the ancient past.” He is of the view that there has been a tendency to exaggerate the suddenness of the change attributed to them. Nordal points out that they built upon the work of the generations before them: “In effect they split between them the heritage of the 18th century, and it stood them in good stead.”<sup>7</sup> The focus will here be upon Bjarni Thorarensen. His writing will be considered with respect to the

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<sup>5</sup> Gíslason 1923; Valsson 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Melsteð 1891: xiii; Poestion 1897: 320.

<sup>7</sup> “hefði stokkið albrynjaðir handan úr forneskju. Í raun og veru skiftu þeir arfi 18. aldarinnar með sér, og voru vel sæmdir af.” Nordal 1924: xxv.

productive reception of Old Norse literature that took place farther south in Europe in the latter half of the 18th century. Particular attention will be paid to the main features of the image of the Norse heritage entailed and disseminated by this reception farther south, and an effort will be made to explain its genesis. Parallels in Thorarensen's verse are considered, leaving questions of direct influence open. Several earlier Icelandic literary figures will also be examined in this context, while about Hallgrímsson's poetry a few comments must, alas, suffice.

### Old Norse Culture Enters the European Literary World

The genres of Old Norse literature most respected today are undoubtedly the eddic poems and two categories of sagas that combine sophisticated storytelling with a fair degree of realism: sagas of kings and sagas of Icelanders. In the mid-18th century very little of this material had been translated into Latin: only a handful of eddic poems and one of the classic sagas, *Heimskringla*. In addition a few skaldic<sup>8</sup> poems had been translated, as had the myths from the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson and a large number of legendary sagas—fantastical tales of Scandinavian heroes and kings of olden times. Outside Scandinavia, the mythology and the poems were the focus of attention. About a dozen poems, which gained currency in European literary circles in the 18th century, formed the canon of Old Norse literature there.<sup>9</sup>

The first two examples of Old Norse poetry that became accessible to the international scholarly world were printed in the original language (in runic letters!) together with a Latin translation in a treatise on runes, *Runer seu Danica literatura antiquissima* (often abbreviated to *Literatura runica*), published in Copenhagen in 1636. The body of the text was by Ole Worm, a professor of medicine at the University of Copenhagen and a self-taught antiquarian, who was well connected to learned Icelanders. The main text is followed by an appendix, which includes two short essays by Icelanders of the time,

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<sup>8</sup> It is an old established tradition to divide Old Norse verse into two principal types, eddic and skaldic poetry, but this classification is debatable; see Ólason 1992a: 52.

<sup>9</sup> Most of these poems are enumerated in Heinrichs 1991; see also Amanda J. Collins's appendix to Clunies Ross 1998.



Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason of Hólar and the Rev. Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás, who write about the ancient poetry to be found in Icelandic manuscripts. The essays are followed by the poems they had acquired in Iceland for Worm: *Höfuðlausn* (Head Ransom) and *Krákumál* (the Lay of Kráka). The translations of the poems and the notes are mostly derived from Icelanders. *Höfuðlausn* is by one of Iceland's most significant poets of pagan times, Egill Skallagrímsson (who lived in the 10th century). In content it is a conventional paean of praise to a king. The title is a reference to Egill composing the verses when held captive by the king whom he praises the night before he could expect to be beheaded; the poem contributed to saving his life. *Krákumál* was believed to have been composed in even more dramatic circumstances by Ragnar Loðbrók, one of the most famous of ancient Danish kings (reputed to have lived in the 9th century). He is supposed to speak the verses as he awaits death in the snake pit of his enemy. In the poem, trapped with no hope of escape, he looks back over his life, entirely unbowed, and looks forward to reaching Valhalla. The final words are provocative: "laughing shall I die."<sup>10</sup> *Höfuðlausn* was initially overshadowed by *Krákumál*, since that poem was believed to be by a more important person than a mere Icelandic poet. But another important aspect of the popularity of *Krákumál* was the impressive portrayal of an individual's stoicism in the face of death. *Krákumál* was the best-known Old Norse poem in Europe well into the 19th century.<sup>11</sup> Today, however, experts maintain that it dates from no earlier than the 12th century, and dismiss it as mediocre and uninteresting verse.

*Literatura runica* was republished in 1651. In the intervening period the principal manuscript of eddic poetry, the *Codex Regius*, had been discovered, and the importance of this branch of poetry was beginning to be understood. In the revision of his original text, Worm was able to take account of this discovery. Two eddic poems, *Völuspá* (Prophecy of the Seeress) and *Hávamál* (Words of the High One), were published, in separate volumes, in Copenhagen in 1665, with Latin translations. The edda volumes were "appendices" to a trilingual (Icelandic–Danish–Latin) edition of the *Prose Edda*. *Völuspá* presents supernatural visions of an overview of the history of the world and

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<sup>10</sup> "lægiandi skal ek deya." Jónsson 1912: 649.

<sup>11</sup> Accounts of the reception of *Krákumál* are given in Heinrichs 1978 and Shippey 1998.

the gods; the poem culminates in their defeat by Giants, and the end of the world, followed by its rebirth. The best-known part of *Hávamál* in the present day is the first section, with its commonsensical maxims. In the 17th and 18th centuries the final part was generally regarded as more interesting: *Runa Capitule*, as it is called in this first published edition. Here Óðinn recounts how he attained wisdom and found runes; he also lists eighteen magical verses and explains their effects. Not until 1787–1828 was a complete edition of eddic poetry published, together with Latin translations, in three volumes by the Árni Magnússon Committee in Copenhagen.

The richest resource used by those who translated Old Norse poetry from Latin into major languages in the latter half of the 18th century was a treatise on the fearlessness of the ancient Norse in the face of death: *Antiquitatum Danicarum de causis contemptæ a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis libri tres*, published in Copenhagen in 1689. Thomas Bartholin, antiquarian to the King of Denmark, is credited as sole author, but an important contribution had also been made by his young assistant, the Icelander Árni Magnússon, subsequently a professor at the University of Copenhagen. Magnússon collected examples from Old Icelandic writings for the book, and assisted in translating them into Latin; the book consists to a large extent of direct quotations. Most are in prose, drawn from the sagas, but some poetry is also quoted. The most complete examples represent six poems, which are translated in their entirety, or much of them. As one might expect, the subject matter of all relates to death, often in the context of supernatural powers or a particularly gruesome death. *Gamanvísur Haralds harðráða* (Comic Verses of Haraldur harðráði, pp. 155–57) are an exception, as the tone is humorous, and the subjects of the verses include a romantic theme. Haraldur expresses his surprise at being spurned by a certain Russian woman, although he is expert in eight skills and has won many military victories. *Ævikviða Ásbjörns þrúða* (Ballad of the Life of Ásbjörn the Gentle, pp. 158–162) is strongly reminiscent of *Krákumál*. The hero Ásbjörn, captured by enemies, looks back over his life as he awaits execution. Ahead of him lies an even crueller fate than in Ragnar's case: Ásbjörn's enemies will force him to disembowel himself. *Bjarkamál hin fornu* (the Ancient Lay of Bjarki, pp. 178–182) is a call to arms, a pep talk to warriors before they venture onto the battlefield. The first stanza of *Hákonarmál* (Lay of Hákon) by Eyvindur skáldaspillir is included, and also the section which describes the fall of King Hákon the Good, his interaction with

Valkyries and his warm reception at Valhalla (pp. 520–528). *Darraðarljóð* (Poem of Dörruður, pp. 617–624) as it appears in *Njáls saga* is part of a vision or revelation, which proves to be a portent of a bloody battle: norns weave a blood-soaked tapestry of fate. *Baldurs draumar* (Baldr’s Dreams, otherwise known as *Vegtamskviða*, pp. 632–640) are usually classified with eddic poetry, although they are not included in the *Codex Regius*. The poem recounts Óðinn’s journey to Hel, where he awakens a seeress and asks her to interpret Baldr’s dreams: she predicts the end of the world. In addition to the ten poems enumerated here, *Hervararkviða* (The Ballad of Hervör) should be mentioned; the major part of it was translated into English, from a Swedish translation, around 1700. It contains a dialogue between the militant Hervör and her father, whom she has awakened from the dead in order to retrieve a magical sword that was buried with him. These were the poems that comprised the canon of Old Norse literature in the European literary world in the 18th century. Not all are regarded as particularly interesting today. The majority are composed in eddic metre, although only three are classified as eddic poems.

In the mid-18th century a fundamental change took place in the attitude of Europeans in general vis-à-vis the North, due not least to the influence of *De l’esprit des lois* (1748) by Baron de Montesquieu.<sup>12</sup> One of Montesquieu’s aims with the book is to demonstrate the influence of climate on legislation, religion, and national character. The crucial point is that different environments call for different lifestyles, and this in turn leads to diversity in legislation. Montesquieu puts forward the theory, which can be traced back as far as the Ancient Greeks, that a cold climate is conducive to diligence and resourcefulness, while a warm climate encourages sloth and feebleness. Montesquieu attributes one particular virtue to the Scandinavian peoples: love of freedom. He even calls them “the source of the liberties of Europe—that is, of almost all the freedom which at the present subsists amongst mankind.”<sup>13</sup>

Paul-Henri Mallet, a Swiss, was inspired by Montesquieu’s ideas in his overview of the ancient culture of the Norse, written in French:

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Fink 2004: 80.

<sup>13</sup> Montesquieu 1949: 268.

*Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc, où l'on traite de la religion, des loix, des mœurs & des usages des anciens Danois* (1755). This publication became highly influential. It is conceived, as witness the title, as an introduction to Danish history, which Mallet had been commissioned to write, and which was published in due course. The *Introduction* deals with the period of history too remote in time to permit a chronological account. The book is a general description of Old Norse culture and customs, based for the most part on research by leading scholars. Mallet takes sources on the Germani (such as Tacitus' *Germania*) as valid for Nordic peoples. He also subscribes to the theory of older scholars that Celtic culture had sprung from the same root as the Nordic. A small anthology of Old Norse literature, selected and translated by Mallet, was published the following year: *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes, et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves* (1756). Both books enjoyed great popularity. Not only were they reprinted several times in French, they were also translated into several languages: Danish, English, German, Polish, Russian, and perhaps others. Mallet's publications were the principal European source on northern antiquity in the 18th century, and even well into the 19th. As late as 1847 a revised version of the *Introduction* was published in England as part of a popular series.<sup>14</sup>

In his preface to the *Introduction* Mallet discusses ancient migrations in Europe. He concludes that the vast majority of Europeans are the descendants of Scythians, who gradually expanded westwards, then southwards and northwards. They brought with them, he says, a simple but martial religion, a liberal form of government based on commonsense, and unshakeable courage fortified by harsh living conditions. Those who migrated southwards lost their vigour, and in addition they became mixed with other nations (mainly Egyptians and Phoenicians). This amalgam reached its cultural zenith in Rome. As the power of the Romans increased, the farther they departed from their ancient manners; they also suppressed the original spirit of the nations they conquered. But the Scythian spirit survived in the North, because people could live there without interference from other nations, and because the climate was conducive to the Scythian virtues. It was from the Nordic region in

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<sup>14</sup> Editor's note: On Mallet, see also Julia Zernack in this volume.

turn, according to Mallet, that the Goths set off, ultimately to destroy the Roman Empire and free the subjugated peoples of Europe.<sup>15</sup>

The *Introduction* is very readable, but this alone does not explain its popularity; it also had to fall into fertile soil. Mallet seeks to correct European misconceptions about the Old Norse nations, and he is full of admiration for many of their qualities, but he makes no secret of his view that much in their culture was barbaric. He is especially critical of the strong martial element in their mentality. Some scholars claim to detect the influence of Rousseau in the revised edition of 1763, but here too Mallet is far from idealizing primitive culture.<sup>16</sup> Even the Nordic people of his own time are in Mallet's view rather backward. The translations in *Monumens* are refined, literary rather than scholarly translations. The anthology includes a large selection of mythological stories from the *Prose Edda*, selected stanzas of *Völuspá* and *Hávamál*, and three "odes" as Mallet calls them, complete or nearly so: *Krákumál*, *Gamanvísur Haralds harðráða*, and *Hákonarmál*. Mallet concludes with a rendering of a little-known rime, but this was clearly less well-received than the remainder of the book.

At that time, dissent was growing in Europe against the aesthetic dominion of classicism. This was manifested in a search for other models than the Greek and Roman, often in other ancient cultures. At the same time, the literary reception of Greco-Roman classics changed; broadly speaking, the focal point was transferred from the Roman poets to Homer's epics.<sup>17</sup> Shortly after Mallet's presentation of Old Norse culture, the poetry of Ossian, said to be a Celtic poet of around 300 AD, made its appearance. Scepticism about the authenticity of the poems did not prevent their becoming hugely popular throughout Europe in the last decades of the 18th century. In Denmark they enjoyed renewed success when Steen Steensen

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<sup>15</sup> Mallet 1755: 4–6. This theory of the origin of the Goths, which stems from a 6th-century Gothic historian, Jordanes, is not accepted by modern scholars.

<sup>16</sup> In the writing of this article I did not have access to this edition, but in the English translation (Mallet 1770), which is mostly based upon it, p. 140 reads: "They must therefore be very little acquainted with human nature, and still less so with history, who place the golden age of any people in the age of its poverty and ignorance." The same sentence appears on p. 74 of the German edition (Mallet 1765), which was based solely on the 1763 edition.

<sup>17</sup> Riedel 2000: 111–112.

Blicher's translations were published in 1807–1809.<sup>18</sup> The poems of Ossian are mainly set in the Scottish highlands, which from the perspective of continental Europe were seen as part of the remote and exotic North. Ossian was known as the “Homer of the North.”<sup>19</sup> The popularity of Ossian was in many ways beneficial for the Norse cultural heritage. Even well-informed scholars did not necessarily draw a clear distinction between Old Norse and Celtic culture, as stated above. The distinction is, in fact, quite clear in the poems of Ossian themselves, which depict interaction between Celts and Norsemen, and some scholars placed emphasis on this. One of these was Scottish academic Hugh Blair, author of an essay often published with the poems of Ossian. He compares the ancient Celtic poems with *Krákumál*, which he sees as evidence of a less advanced culture: “This is such poetry as we might expect from a barbarous nation.” Ossian's poetry is more sophisticated in Blair's view: “We find tenderness, and even delicacy of sentiment, greatly predominant over fierceness and barbarity.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the fundamental cultural difference, the poetry of Ossian long coloured the image of northern antiquity held by people outside the Nordic region, and even by Nordic people themselves. They saw Ossian's verse as a product of Old Norse culture, or at least closely related to it.<sup>21</sup>

The word *sublime* was often applied to the poems of Ossian and the landscape in which they take place. This was an aesthetic concept that admittedly originated in ancient Greek philosophy, but was at this time keenly espoused by critics of classicism. The sublime was a beauty which provoked a powerful emotional response. The concept was regarded as appropriate to such natural phenomena as pounding surf, deep canyons, lofty mountain peaks, or thunder and lightning, to name but a few examples of new themes in art and literature. The sublime often had frightening overtones. Edmund Burke writes in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757):

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<sup>18</sup> Harwell Celenza 1998: 367–368.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Singer 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Blair 1996: 349.

<sup>21</sup> Jansson 1996.

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror is a source of the sublime.<sup>22</sup>

Bjarni Thorarensen puts the same idea in a typically understated Icelandic manner in a letter: “Not everything that can be harmful is aesthetically ugly.”<sup>23</sup> All ancient poetry was presumed to be sublime, but the role of the macabre was particularly noticeable in the poems that had come to form the canon of Old Norse literature in Europe in the latter half of the 18th century.

One of the translators of Old Norse poetry into English was Thomas Percy. Best known for the collection of ballads *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), he also published a volume of his own translations of Old Norse poems, *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763). His foreword throws an interesting light on the mindset regarding Old Norse poetry at that time. Percy clearly depicts the accepted image of the Old Norse in England—and probably throughout Europe—at the period: “Their valour, their ferocity, their contempt of death, and passion for liberty, form the outlines of the picture we commonly draw of them.”<sup>24</sup> The book contains five poems: *Hervararkviða*, *Krákumál*, *Höfuðlausn*, *Hákonarmál*, and *Gamanvísur Haralds harðráða*. Percy had very limited knowledge of Icelandic, but claimed to translate direct from that language; in fact his perspective on Old Norse poetry was largely confined to that which had been translated into Latin.<sup>25</sup> He thus regards the poems he translates as more typical than they are in reality: “From the following specimens it will be found, that the poetry of the Scalds chiefly displays itself in images of terror.”<sup>26</sup> With this emphasis on terror, Percy is, of course, not trying to put readers off, but to enhance the appeal of the poems by reference to the discourse on the sublime. Percy is not only captivated by the terrifying aspects of the poems, but also by the primitive in them. He sees them as showing “the workings of the human mind in

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<sup>22</sup> Burke 1998: 36.

<sup>23</sup> “Það er ecki ætíð æsthetisk líótt sem gétur giört Skada.” Thorarensen 1986: 97.

<sup>24</sup> Percy 1763: A6.

<sup>25</sup> Clunies Ross 1998: 61.

<sup>26</sup> Percy 1763: A6.

its almost original state of nature.”<sup>27</sup> This observation must be viewed in the context of Rousseau’s writings on the need for the civilized peoples to rediscover a more natural lifestyle.

Percy’s renowned fellow countryman, the poet Thomas Gray, set out at about the same time to rework two Old Norse poems in English: *Darraðarljóð* as *The Fatal Sisters* and *Baldurs draumar* as *The Descent of Odin*. In Gray’s version the fearsome ambiance of the poems is magnified by his vivid descriptions. But the external presentation, the form and register, are consistent with the aesthetic conventions of the age. The resulting poems are relatively independent works of art vis-à-vis the original poems. Gray’s poems inspired innumerable imitators in English verse; while that poetry is mediocre, illustrations to Gray’s verse by leading artists are still highly regarded.<sup>28</sup>

The most important translator of Old Norse verse into German in the 18th century was undoubtedly Johann Gottfried Herder, who included some examples in his anthology of folk songs, *Volkslieder* (1778–1779).<sup>29</sup> At the end of the century he published an important paper in the form of a dialogue, “Iduna oder der Apfel der Verjüngung” (1796), in which he urged German poets to make use in their writings of Norse mythology rather than Greek, as some were indeed already doing.<sup>30</sup> His main argument is that Norse mythology is closer to German language and culture. Herder believes that this could lead to a renewal in German literature. The “apple of rejuvenation” in the paper’s title refers not only to this possibility, but also to Herder’s view that Norse mythology requires considerable “cleaning up” in order to be of use. He felt that the more barbaric elements must be eliminated, and that it was natural to continue to uphold the aesthetic rules of the Ancient Greeks. This quest to embellish and civilize northern antiquity became the predominant approach in the creative reception of Old Norse literature in the

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<sup>27</sup> Percy 1763: A8.

<sup>28</sup> O’Donoghue 2007: 118–120.

<sup>29</sup> This comprises *Hervararkviða*, *Hákonarmál*, *Bjarkamál hin fornu*, *Völuspá*, *Baldurs draumar*, *Runa Capitulæ* from *Hávamál*, *Darraðarljóð*, *Gamanvísur Haralds harðráða*, *Ævikviða Ásbjörns þrúða*, and four stanzas translated under the title *Das Hagelwetter*. They originated from Bartholin (pp. 233–234); the first and the last are from *Jómsvíkinga drápa*, the other two from *Búadrápa*.

<sup>30</sup> Editor’s note: See also Julia Zernack in this volume.



following decades, not least in Scandinavia. In the literary reworking, the Old Norse world came increasingly to resemble Greco-Roman antiquity on the one hand, and the Christian central Europe of the Middle Ages on the other.

### The Other Eddic Tradition

Bjarni Thorarensen was in no doubt about which Icelanders had paved his way by their literary contributions: Benedikt Jónsson Gröndal (1760/1762–1825) and the Rev. Jón Þorláksson (1744–1819). The former, he says in a letter, was “the first renewer of better literary taste in this country, by his translation of the Temple of Fame and the foreword to it.” The bulk of Gröndal’s translation of this poem by Alexander Pope was first published in 1790 and 1791 in the annual *Rit Lærdómslistafélagsins*.<sup>31</sup> Thorarensen adds: “This paved the way for the Rev. Jón Þorláksson’s translation of Milton’s Paradise Lost.”<sup>32</sup> Publication of the latter began in 1794, but a complete edition was not published until 1828. Both Gröndal and Þorláksson had also written their own original poetry, but Thorarensen clearly does not regard this as worthy of mention in this context. The resurgence of Icelandic literature begins, in his view, with the translations made by these two men. Thorarensen’s opinion entails, of course, a criticism of the poetry that had been common in Iceland in previous generations: hymns, rimes, and various poems for special occasions. Rimes had been the most prominent poetic genre. Originating in the Middle Ages, rimes were a unique Icelandic phenomenon, partly rooted in the skaldic tradition. Their content usually comprised a retelling of some Icelandic saga or foreign tale. Both rimes and skaldic verse are characterized by the use of their own poetic language, *heiti* and *kenningar*. The special vocabulary was useful when composing poetry under the complex rules of rimes or skaldic verse. Composers of rimes made liberal use of the *Prose Edda*, the 13th-century textbook for poets, when seeking words and phrases to

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<sup>31</sup> Vols. 10 and 11 of the annual. The final part was published in the last volume, no. 15, whose precise publication date is uncertain, although it is known to have been delayed for many years. See Björnsson 1976: 69–70, 73.

<sup>32</sup> “fyrsti Endurnýari betri Skáldskaparsmecks hér í Landi, með Utleggingu sinni á Musteri Mannordsins og Formálanum fyrir henni. Þetta ruddi Veg fyrir Utleggingu Sr. Jóns Þorlákssonar á Miltons töpudu Paradís.” Thorarensen 1943: 166.

use in their long poetic works. The most important innovation introduced by Benedikt Jónsson Gröndal and the Rev. Jón Þorláksson was that they chose to base their above-mentioned translations on the *other* eddic tradition; they used the free eddic metre, *fornyrðislag*, for the translations.<sup>33</sup> After *Paradise Lost*, Þorláksson also translated Klopstock's magnum opus *Der Messias* using the same metre. *Fornyrðislag* was later used by others for complete translations into Icelandic of Homer's epics and the poems of Ossian, some of which have never been published.<sup>34</sup> Bjarni Thorarensen went in the same direction with his own verse, using *fornyrðislag* more than any other metre. He even went a step further, using imagery derived from eddic verse in some of his most memorable poems. This new reworking of eddic poems has long been interpreted as a sign of growing national consciousness among Icelandic literati. I am of the view that aesthetic objectives were the most important factor; no doubt all these writers were conscious of using a cultural heritage that dated back to long before the settlement of Iceland, a heritage common to the North in general. This is certainly the case, at least, with respect to Bjarni Thorarensen.

In 1782 the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters held an essay competition on the characteristics of Old Norse poetry, in comparison with the Greco-Roman heritage on the one hand and Germanic/Anglo-Saxon verse on the other. The prize went to

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<sup>33</sup> The basic form of *fornyrðislag* is a stanza of eight lines, each with two lifts, but with a variable number of unstressed syllables; the rhythm need not be regular. No rhyme is used, only alliteration; odd lines have one or two alliterations, while even lines alliterate the first lift in the line. The quotations below from the poems *Veturinn*, *Íslands riddari*, *Friðriksljóð*, and *Um apturfarir Fljótsblíðar* by Bjarni Thorarensen illustrate this metre. In contrast, the characteristic metre of skaldic verse, *dróttkvætt*, has one more lift in each line, and a regular rhythm, with two alliterations in odd lines. The form is also typified by a regular pattern of internal rhyme, either of consonants only (in odd lines) or of whole syllables (in even lines).

<sup>34</sup> Jón Espólín (d. 1836) translated all Ossian's poems in the *fornyrðislag* metre. Shortly after Espólín's death, Bjarni Thorarensen discussed in a letter the possible publication of the translation (Thorarensen 1986: 328; Wawn 1994), but it remains unpublished to this day. At his death in 1852, Sveinbjörn Egilsson had translated much of the *Odyssey* in *fornyrðislag* metre. (He had previously made prose translations of both the Homeric epics.) His son, Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal, was commissioned to complete the translation, which was published in 1854. He also undertook to translate the *Iliad* in the same metre. The first half of this translation was published in 1856, but the second half still remains unpublished.

Icelander Jón Ólafsson (the elder) from the Svefneyjar isles (1731–1811). His essay was published in 1786 as *Om Nordens gamle Digtekonst, dens Grundregler, Versarter, Sprog og Foredragsmaade*. It comprises mainly a prosodic study of the ancient metres and a discussion of the poetic language. Ólafsson’s work draws heavily upon the *Prose Edda*, especially the last part, *Háttatal*. Unlike Snorri Sturluson, however, Ólafsson gives much greater prominence to eddic poetry than skaldic verse. Ólafsson gives a detailed explanation of *fornyrðislag* (extending the term to include the *ljóðabáttur* and *málabáttur* variants). He regards *fornyrðislag* as a relic of the first poetry of the Norse peoples: by this he does not only mean the nation which, according to ancient sources, settled Scandinavia under the leadership of King Óðinn, but also the aboriginal inhabitants there. Ólafsson even implies that *fornyrðislag* closely resembles mankind’s oldest poetic form.<sup>35</sup> The metre was, in Ólafsson’s view, not confined to strictly poetic usage, but was applied by the Old Norse whenever they wished to express themselves in a formal or high-flown manner: “They also used it instead of commonplace non-poetic speech.”<sup>36</sup> Ólafsson envisages some kind of chanting, and thus he calls this form of expression *song-speech* (Syngesproget). He sees this direct connection between eddic poetry and that primitive form of expression as giving the verse special significance. The poems of the *Poetic Edda*, he says, “should thus be seen as precious relics of song-speech.”<sup>37</sup> In accord with these views, he places special emphasis on the frequency with which variations on the main rules of the metre occur in eddic poetry: lines are often extended by additional syllables, leading to an uneven rhythm; a stanza may be longer or shorter than eight lines; alliteration is sometimes more-or-less random, and so on. But it is the freedom and “the noble simplicity,”<sup>38</sup> together with unusual vocabulary, that lend the poems their special charm.

According to Ólafsson, the skaldic metre, *dróttkvætt*, evolved from *fornyrðislag* around 800 AD and gradually more or less supplanted it.<sup>39</sup> He judges poems composed in *háttleysa* (literally “metreless”) to be

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<sup>35</sup> Ólafsson 1786: 1–18.

<sup>36</sup> “De betiente sig ogsaa deraf istedenfor daglig ubunden Tale.” Ólafsson 1786: 3.

<sup>37</sup> “ere da at ansee som kostbare Levninger af Syngesproget.” Ólafsson 1786: 10.

<sup>38</sup> “hin ædle Enfoldighed.” Ólafsson 1786: 14.

<sup>39</sup> Ólafsson 1786: x, 15, 57–58.

indications of the intermediate stage. In *háttleysa* the lines are of the same length as in conventional skaldic verse, with regular alliteration and rhythm; internal rhyme is either none or irregular. Snorri mentions this metre only briefly in an aside; indeed, few Old Norse poems survive in the metre. One of the principal examples is *Krákumál*. Its real author was undoubtedly striving to make the poem sound old by using this metre.

Jón Ólafsson of Svefneyjar completed a theology degree from the University of Copenhagen, having also studied Nordic philology, and spent his entire career in that city, publishing Old Icelandic literature and in other scholarly pursuits. He was long a recipient of grants from the Professor Árni Magnússon memorial fund, which also funded the first complete edition of the eddic poems.<sup>40</sup> As mentioned above, the first volume was published in 1787, a year after the publication of Ólafsson's essay. In spite of the two publications, and despite the fact that *fornyrðislag* had never completely died out in Iceland (it persisted mainly in folk ballads, where it had taken on a more regular form<sup>41</sup>), it seems that the commentator who presented the translation of the *Temple of Fame* in *Rit Lærdómslistafélagsins* in 1790 did not recognize the form. His comments may even be understood to reveal that he had not noticed the alliteration. He is impressed, however, and he is clearly familiar with something similar in foreign poetry:

We are so far from disapproving that Mr. Grøndahl does not bind himself by alliteration or complex metre, that we would desire, on the contrary, that our future poets would, instead of stifling meaning and inspiration in a Gothic jingle-jangle of similar-sounding repeated syllables, throw off all wretched or superfluous fetters which the versifiers of the Middle Ages placed upon themselves in compensation, so to speak, for exempting themselves from that which may be naturally expected of a poet: to compose with inspiration and eloquence.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kristjánsson 2008: 20–21, 84.

<sup>41</sup> Ólafsson 1786: 56; Egilsson 1999: 67. In this context it was known as *ljúflingslag* (“elf metre”).

<sup>42</sup> “Svo langt er frá því að oð mislíki, þó Hr. Grøndahl hafi ei bundit sig til studla edr dýrs bragarháts, at vér þvert ímót óskum, at vor tilkomandi Skáld vildu, ístadinn fyrir at kœfa meining og andakraft í gautsku klíngklangi af einshliódandi ítrekudum

Bjarni Thorarensen writes in a letter that some people were unhappy with the Rev. Jón Þorláksson's use of *fornyrðislag* in *Paradise Lost*.

May Phoebus forgive the churlish critics of Paradise Lost!  
They do not like that which is not rhythmic [...] and they have  
no idea of poetry which is not for singing or chanting.<sup>43</sup>

The Rev. Gunnar Pálsson (1714–1791) was one of those who contributed to the first volume of the edition of eddic poetry published by the Árni Magnússon Committee. He was for a time principal of the cathedral school at Hólar, a learned man and a well-known poet in his time, in both Icelandic and Latin. His poems have, however, never been published as a whole, nor systematically studied. They include an excellent imitation of an eddic poem, *Gunnars slagur* (Gunnar's Harp Song); a decision was made to publish it, together with a Latin version, in an appendix to volume two of the eddic poems, which contained the heroic poems. The volume was not published, however, until 1818. The content of *Gunnars slagur* draws on several heroic poems, while the events are also recounted in the *Prose Edda* and *Völsunga saga*. Old engravings have been discovered in Norway and elsewhere that may indicate that a real eddic poem on the subject once existed.<sup>44</sup> Snorri's version of the events recounted in *Gunnars slagur* is as follows:

King Atli invited Gunnar and Hogni [sons of Gjúki] to visit him, and they complied with the invitation. But before they left home they hid the gold, Fafnir's legacy, in the Rhine, and this gold has never again been found. But King Atli met them with an armed force and fought Gunnar and Hogni and they were captured. King Atli had Hogni's heart cut out while he was alive. This brought about his death. He had Gunnar

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adqvæðum, slíta af sér öll dárlic, edr óþarflig bönd, er midaldursins vísnasmidir hafa á sig lagt, svo at segja til uppbótar fyrir þat þeir vildu hafa sig undan því er náttúrliga heimtaz má af einu Skáldi: at yrkia með andagipt og ordheppni." *Rit þess Konúngliga Íslenska Lærdóms-ListaFélags*, 10, xvi.

<sup>43</sup> "Phoebus fyrirgæfi Dónunum Critiken yfir Paradísar Missir! enn, þad smackar þeim ecki, sem ecki er rhythmskt [...] og þeir géta ei giört sér Hugmind um Skáldskap sem ecki er til ad syngia eda qveda." Thorarensen 1986: 130.

<sup>44</sup> Helgason 1962: 93, 95. In *Norna-Gests þáttur* (*The Tale of Norna-Gestur*), which survives in the medieval manuscript *Flateyjarbók*, the protagonist performs "Gunnarslagur" on a harp, but it is not clear from the story whether a poem was also recited or sung.

thrown into a snake-pit, but he was secretly provided with a harp, and he plucked it with his toes, as his hands were tied. He played the harp in such a way that all the snakes went to sleep except for the one adder that darted at him and struck at the bottom of his breastbone, burying its head in the hollow and hanging on to his liver until he died.<sup>45</sup>

*Gunnars slagur* is supposed to be the farewell of Gunnar Gjúkason, spoken as he plays his harp in the snake pit. The similarity with the circumstances of the speaker of *Krákumál* is obvious. Many 19th-century translators of eddic poetry chose to include this poem by Gunnar Pálsson, as the editors had not absolutely dismissed the possibility that it was truly an ancient poem. The Austrian scholar Poestion claims in his history of Icelandic literature that in numerous cases this resulted in the poem being discussed as if it were indisputably an authentic eddic poem.<sup>46</sup>

### Bjarni Thorarensen, Iceland, and the Wider North

Bjarni Thorarensen was fifteen when he set sail for Copenhagen in the autumn of 1802, having resolved to study law. He enrolled at the university the following spring, after which his studies progressed normally. He completed his legal studies in 1807, then remained in Copenhagen doing a variety of work until 1811, when he was appointed to his first post in Iceland. Almost all his correspondence from his time in Copenhagen is lost, and thus few details are known of his life during this important formative stage. Scholars do not agree, for instance, on whether he attended the famous lectures given by Henrich Steffens in the winter of 1802–1803, often regarded as heralding the dawn of the Romantic era in Scandinavia.<sup>47</sup> This is not of any great importance, as Thorarensen could have familiarized himself with what was said at a later time, when he was better equipped to understand it; the bulk of the lectures was published in 1803. One can only speculate as to the latter-day poets Thorarensen may have read when in Copenhagen. However, it is clear that he soon

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<sup>45</sup> Sturluson 1987: 103–104.

<sup>46</sup> Poestion 1897: 241–242.

<sup>47</sup> Óskarsson 2007.

gained a good command of both German and French, in addition to Danish. In later life he also learned English. His translations made during his time in Copenhagen are mostly of Roman poetry; he also translated, with the help of a friend, parts of a poem they believed to be by Ossian; it was in fact a German imitation. From comments in letters and other documents from Thorarensen's later years, it is clear that he was well-read in the contemporary literature of other countries. But the literature he is known with the greatest certainty to have studied in Copenhagen is eddic poetry: his financial resources when he lived in the city after graduation included a grant from the Árni Magnússon Committee, which he devoted partly to work on volume two of the *Edda*. Two complete copies of the heroic eddic poems are extant in Thorarensen's hand.<sup>48</sup>

All indications are that Bjarni Thorarensen's perception of eddic poetry was similar to that of Jón Ólafsson. We do not know how well they knew each other in Copenhagen, but the inference of Thorarensen's later comments on Ólafsson is that they were at least acquaintances.<sup>49</sup> When Thorarensen uses eddic metres in his verse, he unhesitatingly makes use of the freedom of variation on which Ólafsson had placed such emphasis in his essay. In other words, Thorarensen focuses on those features of *fornyrðislag* (and its variants) which Ólafsson regarded as proving that the metre was ancient and primordial. Jónas Hallgrímsson too used *fornyrðislag* similarly in his juvenilia, when he was still strongly influenced by Thorarensen; but as he matured as a poet this changed. He then used *fornyrðislag* like any other regular metre—but admittedly without rhyme. Hallgrímsson also frequently adds to the lifts in each line; that is, he extends them.<sup>50</sup> Thorarensen is likewise in agreement with Jón Ólafsson in giving much weight to *háttleysa*. This metre is most readily recognizable in his work where in some of the lines he uses internal rhyme typical of *dróttkvætt*. But Thorarensen also uses *háttleysa* completely without rhyme, though with all the other features of *dróttkvætt*. Both Thorarensen and Hallgrímsson make some use of conventional *dróttkvætt*, but the published poetry of the latter includes only two examples of *háttleysa*. One is a eulogy to Thorarensen, and the content

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<sup>48</sup> Ólafsdóttir 1986.

<sup>49</sup> Thorarensen 1847b: 78; Thorarensen 1943: 174.

<sup>50</sup> Egilsson 1999: 64–68.

of the other relates directly to a poem by him.<sup>51</sup> This indicates that Thorarensen's contemporaries identified *báttleysa* with him.

Spectacular imagery, with clear links to the heroic world of the eddic poems, sustains two of Thorarensen's best-known poems, *Sigrúnarljóð* (Sigrún's Verses) and *Veturinn* (Winter). Both testify to Thorarensen's taste for the sublime combination of beauty and terror, while his humour and irony prevent them from becoming too high-flown.

The relationship of *Sigrúnarljóð* with *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* has often been pointed out. In the eddic poem, the Valkyrie Sigrún, said to be Svava reborn,<sup>52</sup> marries the hero Helgi, and has sons by him. Helgi is slain at an early age, and Sigrún mourns him deeply. But one day he is seen riding out of the sky with his retinue and vanishing into his burial mound. Sigrún happily rushes to be reunited with him there, and she stays in his arms overnight. In the morning Helgi and his men ride off back into the sky. This tale of the lover who returns from the realm of the dead "clearly relates to pagan notions that some kind of life remains in the body initially after death, and that the dead can walk around in tangible form."<sup>53</sup> At the beginning of *Sigrúnarljóð* the speaker, a man, refers to the conversation he has just had with his beloved Sigrún. He had mentioned the possibility that she might die before him. She reacted badly to the subject, but in the poem he continues to imagine how they could go on being lovers, even if that were to happen. She is to return to him as a ghost, when the weather and other circumstances are appropriate:

Komdu þegar á köldu  
kólgur ganga hausti  
og um miðnætti máni  
í mökkva sig hylur.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Egilsson 1999: 337–338. This is a variant of *báttleysa*, with two lifts instead of three in every other line, which Thorarensen had used primarily in eulogies.

<sup>52</sup> The woman who is the subject of Thorarensen's love poetry is called Sigrún or Svava, if she is named at all.

<sup>53</sup> "tengist bersýnilega heiðnum hugmyndum um að eins konar líf sé í líkamanum fyrst eftir dauðann og dauðir geti gengið um í efnislegri mynd." Ólason 1992b: 142.

<sup>54</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:76.



[Come in cold autumn  
when the sky is louring  
and at midnight the moon  
veils itself in cloud.]

She is to touch him, then embrace him so tightly that he dies; thus he assumes that her body is still at her disposal. And the speaker himself assumes that he will still have his body after death. He imagines himself with Sigrún, speeding around space in perpetual lovemaking: “Glöð skulum bæði við brott síðan halda | brennandi í faðmlögum loptvegu kalda | í gullreiðum norðljósa þjóta um þá!”<sup>55</sup> [Joyful then we shall depart, in burning embraces along the cold paths of space in a golden chariot of Northern Lights we shall speed!] The knowledge given in advance, that this is simply playing with an idea, makes the entire poem more down-to-earth. *Sigrúnarljóð* soon gained popularity, but Thorarensen seems not to have taken it very seriously. The title is apparently not Thorarensen’s; he originally called the poem *Apturgönguvísur* (Ghost Verses) in a manuscript, and later *Til Sigrúnar* (To Sigrún).<sup>56</sup> The first editors of the collected poems of Bjarni Thorarensen, who included Jón Sigurðsson (leader of the Icelanders’ campaign for independence in the 19th century), classified *Sigrúnarljóð* and Thorarensen’s other love poems with his drinking verses, and not with his “serious poetry.”<sup>57</sup> In his introduction to the next edition, Realist writer Einar H. Kvaran read the poem, on the other hand, as a high-flown (and rather naïve) paean to spiritual love. This view appears to have been accepted ever since.<sup>58</sup>

Winter is personified as a mighty ancient king in Thorarensen’s poem of that title (*Veturinn*). He appears as a godlike Norse warrior, wearing a grey coat of mail, with a shield of ice hanging on his shoulders; he brandishes his sword, giving off a chilly wind, and on his helmet is a crest of Northern Lights. This being is as old as god, and older than creation, and will outlive all worlds. This is to some extent a manifestation of one of the primal forces of existence. His true home is the Arctic:

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<sup>55</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:77.

<sup>56</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 2:90.

<sup>57</sup> Thorarensen 1847a: ii, 144–146.

<sup>58</sup> Thorarensen 1884: xliii.

Hann er riðinn frá  
heimum miðnáttar,  
aflbrunni alheims  
ok ótta munaðar –  
mun ei Vor una  
né Vellyst þar aldri,  
í Segulheimum,  
á Segulfjöllum.<sup>59</sup>

[He has ridden from  
midnight's realm,  
from the cosmic wellspring of power,  
foe to hedonism—  
where neither the Spring  
nor Voluptuousness can thrive,  
in the Magnet Realm,  
on the Magnet Mountains.]

This stanza states a theme that recurs frequently in Thorarensen's verse: the North as the antithesis of indulgence and luxury. His ideas on this are clearly in accord with the climatic theories of Montesquieu and Mallet. But here they may be combined with the natural philosophy of Steffens. In light of his theories (the idea that is crucial here had been made public by Steffens before his lectures in Copenhagen), the third line of the stanza may be interpreted literally. For Steffens maintained that the magnetic poles of the earth were power centres that directly influenced the evolution of life on earth.<sup>60</sup> He based this idea upon Friedrich Schelling's *Identitätsphilosophie*, which includes the theory that light, heat, magnetism, and electricity are different manifestations of the same fundamental energy.<sup>61</sup> These theories attracted renewed attention shortly before the composition of *Veturinn*, when Danish scientist H. C. Ørsted discovered electromagnetism.<sup>62</sup> Two lines in another of Thorarensen's poems,

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<sup>59</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:119.

<sup>60</sup> Rerup 1991: 332.

<sup>61</sup> Steffens discussed this theory of Schelling in his sixth lecture in Copenhagen in the winter of 1802–1803. See Steffens 1968: 90–108.

<sup>62</sup> Ørsted made his discovery in 1820. *Veturinn* was composed in the summer of 1823; see Thorarensen 1935: 2:129. In 1831 James Clark Ross located the position of the magnetic north pole on Boothia Peninsula in northern Canada.

*Brúðkaupsvísa til Tómasar Sæmundssonar* (Epithalamium to Tómas Sæmundsson, 1834), can scarcely be interpreted otherwise than as a reference to Steffens's ideas on the magnetic poles of the earth: "Frá norðrinu streymir um mannheima magnið – | Mjöllnis er segull í hendi á Þór".<sup>63</sup> [From the North flows the power through the world of men – the hammer Mjöllnir's magnet is in Þór's hand.] No conclusion will be drawn here on whether Thorarensen subscribed to the theory, or whether he simply found it a useful source of metaphor.

As *Veturinn* progresses, the impressive images of the poem also tend towards the grotesque. Winter has the quality of reinforcing that which is strong. Hence the earth grows hard in Winter's embrace, her blood is turned to diamonds, and the green pile of her mantle withers and turns grey. Winter returns and crushes the earth in his embrace, and she is impregnated—presumably with the new year's vegetation. The Earth chooses Spring as her midwife. But Winter does not flee Spring; he moves upwards, leaving her below. Winter never leaves entirely: he never relinquishes his hold on the poles, or the land closest to heaven. This is why the snow remains in the high mountains—and now the narrator makes a great, illogical leap, which suddenly robs the poem of its harshness:

því vill ei heldur  
þiðna á vori  
himinhrími  
á höfði öldunga.<sup>64</sup>

[therefore also  
the rime-frost  
on old men's pates  
will not thaw in spring.]

This abrupt twist in the poem is an example of Romantic irony, undermining the ideas that have been presented.

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<sup>63</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:166.

<sup>64</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:121.

The Norse gods rarely appear in Bjarni Thorarensen's verse. In *Freyjukettirnir* (Freyja's Cats), however, his starting point is in Norse mythology, but treated with freedom. It even acquires a somewhat classical character in his version. The Norse goddess Freyja is called in the poem "kvöldstjörnu drottning"<sup>65</sup> [Queen of the Evening Star]. The role of her cats is similar to that of Eros/Amor/Cupid in the reception of Greco-Roman mythology: their job is to make people fall in love. In Old Norse literature Freyja's cats are simply draught animals who pull her coach.

Thorarensen's belief in the improving influence of the northern climate is expressed most clearly in the poem *Suðurlönd og Norðurlönd* (Lands of South and North). The first stanzas state the same historical theory as Mallet, in his foreword to the *Introduction* (see above). The first stanza is:

Áður en afi Skjaldar  
og Óðins faðir lifðu,  
stálbúnir fóru firar  
að finna Suðurheima.  
Hrímið þá hittir sólu  
hjaðnar það og eyðist,  
allt eins hreystin harra  
hlánaði af kulda ráni.<sup>66</sup>

[Before Skjöldur's grandfather  
and Óðinn's father lived,  
men went armed  
in search of the Southern World.  
When frost meets the sun,  
it shrinks and vanishes,  
just as the men's vigour  
thawed when the cold was gone.]

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<sup>65</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:179.

<sup>66</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:81. The stanza is a good example of *báttleysa*, in which internal rhyme occurs of the kind typical of *dróttkvætt*.

The Óðinn in question here is clearly the earthly king of that name, who led the ancestors of the Nordic people to Scandinavia; his son was named Skjöldur. But the stanza is primarily concerned with other, southwards, migrations, which took place long before: the robustness of those who ventured south melted away in the heat. The second stanza reports the fate of the others, who travelled northwards. King Winter weeded out the “ónýta seggi”<sup>67</sup> [weaklings] among them. In the third stanza southern peoples and cultures are symbolized by flowers, while in the fourth stars and the Northern Lights are symbols of the Nordic peoples and their culture. The final stanza asks, should we nurture better “rós en norðurljósín? | Eða virða meir vísir | vellystar eður hreysti?” [the rose than the Northern Lights? Or value more highly the monarch of voluptuousness or fortitude?] The poet does not answer the question directly, but reminds us that fortitude “oss heldur í gildi” [maintains our worth], while voluptuousness “oss linar til bana.”<sup>68</sup> [will weaken us to death.]

The poem *Nóttin* (Night) contains a variation on the imagery of the fourth and fifth stanzas. The stars in the sky symbolize great men of the past in general, while the Northern Lights stand for the honour of outstanding men of the North who, according to this, are by far the most excellent of the earth. It is hard to tell how seriously Thorarensen meant this comparison.

Iceland has no specific importance in any of Thorarensen’s poems whose content has been discussed hitherto. Where the North is mentioned, this is a far more extensive area, contrasted with a distant South. The energy centre of the North lies far to the north of Iceland. In his poem *Ísland* (Iceland), on the other hand, Thorarensen specifically connects the fortifying nature of a cold climate with his native land. Other attributes of Iceland, long seen as negative by Icelanders, are here presented in a positive light: volcanic eruptions, the uninhabitable and near-impassable uplands, the island’s isolation. Thorarensen points out that some of the factors over which Icelanders traditionally complain may also be a source of incentive:

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<sup>67</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:81.

<sup>68</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:82.

Fjör kenni? oss eldurinn, frostið oss herði,  
 fjöll sýni torsóktum gæðum að ná;  
 bægi sem kerúb með sveipanda sverði  
 silfurblár Ægir oss kveifarskap frá.<sup>69</sup>

[May the fire teach us vitality, and the ice fortify us,  
 the mountains show us how to reach difficult ends;  
 like a cherub with a flaming sword  
 may silver-blue Ægir deliver us from weakness.]

While the poem has sometimes been placed in the context of the embryonic stage of the campaign for independence from Danish rule, it entails no comparison with Denmark. Anti-Danish prejudice is, however, a striking aspect of Thorarensen's best-known patriotic poem *Íslands minni* (In Honour of Iceland)—though admittedly in stanzas which are rarely, if ever, sung in modern times. The second stanza expresses the longing of Icelanders in Copenhagen to go home to Iceland, mainly due to the insalubrity of the city (the majority were students, who intended from the outset to return home on completion of their studies). This poem, one of the earliest extant poems by the poet, is said to have been composed for singing at an Icelandic gathering (or gatherings) in Copenhagen.<sup>70</sup> There is undeniably some humour in the image of tipsy Icelandic students in Denmark singing:

glepur oss glaumurinn  
 ginnir oss sollurinn  
 hlær að oss heimskinginn  
 Hafnarlóð á.<sup>71</sup>

[the rumpus confuses us  
 the profligacy seduces us  
 the fool laughs at us  
 in Copenhagen.]

The third stanza belittles the Danish landscape, which is likened to a face without nose or eyes (as it lacks mountains and lakes). Both these

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<sup>69</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:56.

<sup>70</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 2:40.

<sup>71</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:27.

stanzas exist in far less extreme versions vis-à-vis the Danes. Thorarensen himself composed a more moderate version of stanza II, while Professor Finnur Magnússon adjusted stanza III. It was in this bowdlerized version that the two stanzas were first published, in 1819 in a Danish anthology of student songs in various languages. The song was reprinted, unchanged, in *Íslenskt sagnablöð* 1824–1825.<sup>72</sup> Thorarensen specifically stated in a letter to Magnússon shortly after the initial publication that he was happy with the alterations he had made to the poem:

I have nothing against the changes you made to my “Eldgamla Ísafold” [the first words of the poem]—for I am of your view, that it should contain nothing offensive, least of all to Copenhagen people, for we have no complaint to make against them.<sup>73</sup>

It was probably Jón Sigurðsson’s decision to print the more nationalistic version of the stanzas in the first collected edition of Thorarensen’s verse in 1847.<sup>74</sup> His example has been followed in later publications.<sup>75</sup>

The first literary survey of Thorarensen’s verse was published in the Danish annual *Gaa* in 1845. It was written by Icelander Grímur Thomsen, who graduated at about that time as a magister of aesthetics; he later became a renowned and prolific poet. Thomsen never uses the word *Romanticism* in his article; he defines the cultural ambiance of Copenhagen during Thorarensen’s time in a different way, stating that he had arrived at the university “in the turbulent age of Napoleon,” and that this had given him “new nourishment for his poetic inspiration.”<sup>76</sup> The Napoleonic wars twice impinged upon

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<sup>72</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 2:36–38.

<sup>73</sup> “eckért hefi eg ámóti Umbreiting þeirri sem þú giördir í mínu „eldgamla Isafold“—því samrar Meiningar er eg með þér að í slíku á eckért meidandi að vera síst við Khafnar Menn því yfir þeim höfum við eckért að klaga.” Thorarensen 1943: 157.

<sup>74</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 2:39.

<sup>75</sup> But Jón Helgason includes all the variants on the “official” version in his notes to his edition; see Thorarensen 1935: 2:36–38.

<sup>76</sup> “i den bevægede napoleonske Tid [...] en ny Næring for sin poetiske Aand.” Thomsen 1845: 192.

Copenhagen, in 1801 and 1807, far more dramatically on the latter occasion. At the beginning of September 1807, the English besieged and bombarded the city, causing great damage to property and considerable loss of civilian lives. Bjarni Thorarensen took part in the defence of Copenhagen as a member of Kronprindsens Livkorps (the Crown Prince's Life Guard). On the third night of the bombardment he is known to have been on guard duty at Amalienborg Palace; that morning, his home burned down.<sup>77</sup> The English were victorious in this confrontation, and as a consequence seized the entire Danish navy. These events gave rise to a strong wave of nationalist feeling among Danish poets. Adam Oehlenschläger and N. F. S. Grundtvig were among those who responded with fiery patriotic writings, although neither had been present at the time.<sup>78</sup> Two poems by Thorarensen appear to have been inspired by these events: *Herhvöt* (Battle Cry) and *Herganga (eptir Bjarkamálum)* (Military March—After the Lay of Bjarki). For a long time the consensus was that Thorarensen had composed the poems in Copenhagen, but Professor Jón Helgason believed he had evidence that at least one of them dated from no earlier than 1813.<sup>79</sup> Even if this is so, it is quite clear that both poems relate to the siege of 1807. Both are composed to well-known military marches, and are intended to urge soldiers on their way into battle. In both poems sacrificing one's life for one's country is glorified. In *Herhvöt* these lines appear twice:

Halur lifað hefir nóg  
 hvör sá föðurlandi dó,  
 minning hans hjá mönnum lifir  
 þá mold er komin bein hans yfir.<sup>80</sup>

[A man has lived enough  
 who has died for his fatherland,  
 his name will live among men,  
 when soil has covered his bones.]

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<sup>77</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 2:20.

<sup>78</sup> Kuhn 1976.

<sup>79</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 2:51–52, 2:54.

<sup>80</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:47, 1:49.



*Herganga* culminates in the words: “Heiður er fríður | bræður blíðir! | blóði föður- vernda land!”<sup>81</sup> [Fair is honour, blithe brothers! With blood our fatherland defend!] The poems were not composed as a call to arms for direct use in a real situation: they were composed in Icelandic, for a nation that has never been at war or had its own military forces. Only very rarely did an Icelander serve with the Danish military. On the other hand, it would be to go too far to conclude that Thorarensen had no specific “fatherland” in mind in these poems. He must be referring to the “fatherland” he himself had taken part in defending: Denmark. This is not to cast doubt on Thorarensen’s sincere Icelandic patriotism; but that does not mean that he could not also have seen himself, at the same time, as a Danish patriot. In fact, he says explicitly in a letter in 1813: “I must tell you that according to my political creed, no one is a true Icelandic patriot, who is not also a Danish one.”<sup>82</sup> In another letter he speaks of Denmark as his fatherland “sensu latiori.”<sup>83</sup> Thorarensen, a progressive in Icelandic affairs, supported Baldvin Einarsson and the *Fjölnir* group in their demands for greater autonomy for Iceland in its own affairs. But he was also always a convinced royalist, and highly sceptical of the liberal movement in Denmark.<sup>84</sup> Thorarensen was strongly in favour of the proposal for an Icelandic consultative assembly, and he felt that it should be held at Þingvellir. But he was far from seeing such an assembly as the first step towards greater democracy or independence. On the contrary, he clearly saw the consultative assembly as a long-term solution.<sup>85</sup>

In a lengthy paean to German poet Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, *Íslands riddari* (Knight of Iceland), Thorarensen sends the goddess Saga (History) to find Iceland, personified as a woman. The story surrounding the poem is a long one, and can only be briefly summarized here.<sup>86</sup> In 1820 Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag (the Icelandic Literary Society) decided to make Fouqué an honorary

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<sup>81</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:59.

<sup>82</sup> “Því vita skaltu að eftir minni politisku Creddu er sá enginn sannur Íslenskur Patriot sem ecki undireins er Danskur.” Thorarensen 1943: 3.

<sup>83</sup> Thorarensen 1986: 68.

<sup>84</sup> Thorarensen 1943: 99, 196, 227–228, 254.

<sup>85</sup> Thorarensen 1986: 246, 300.

<sup>86</sup> The most detailed account is in Poestion 1909.

member. He was at that time very popular in his home country; he had a wider appeal than other German poets of the Romantic school, and he was also the only one of them who made extensive use of Norse material. Fouqué expressed his thanks to the Society in a poem (partly translated by Thorarensen), while Thorarensen's poem is intended as a reply. The story goes on, for Fouqué in turn thanked Thorarensen for his praise in a personal poem, and in 1826 he dedicated his very long reworking of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* to the "Gelehrten-Gesellschaft Islands." On this occasion it was Finnur Magnússon who expressed the gratitude of the Literary Society with a poem. Fouqué "cleaned up" northern antiquity a good deal in his work, so that it resembles an idealized copy of the Age of Chivalry in central Europe.<sup>87</sup> Thorarensen's poem to Fouqué indicates that he was familiar with his life and work. But there is no trace of influence from Fouqué in Thorarensen's own verse. Now, when Saga meets Iceland in Thorarensen's poem of praise, gratitude is the main sensation.

Flutti hún svo þakkarljóð  
 fagur-geigvænni:  
 at sér um aldir  
 unnt hefði mest –  
 ok annars Volsunga  
 ok vera norrænna  
 minning myndi gleymd  
 miðgarðsdróttum.<sup>88</sup>

[Delivered she then a poem of thanks  
 to the sublime one:  
 that she had loved her the most  
 for many centuries—  
 and without her love  
 the memory of the Völsungs  
 and the Norse would be forgotten  
 by mankind.]

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<sup>87</sup> See for example Bödl 1996: 367.

<sup>88</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:114.

Iceland thanks Saga in her turn for having taken care of her, alone, for centuries; she complains that no (foreign) poem has been sung in her honour since the Norwegian Eyvindur skáldaspillir did so eight hundred years ago. Fouqué, who in the poem has overheard the dialogue (or seen everything in a vision), decides to rectify the matter. What is interesting here is that Thorarensen focuses on the Germanic and pan-Nordic in Old Icelandic literature, but makes no mention of the uniquely Icelandic contribution.

Bjarni Thorarensen's verse includes no major reworking of Old Icelandic literature recounting Icelandic events, and he never depicts an image of the Old Commonwealth period as a Golden Age, as the *Fjölnir* group did in their writing—notably Jónas Hallgrímsson in the poems *Ísland* (Iceland) and *Gunnarsbólmi* (Gunnar's Islet).<sup>89</sup> On occasion in his poetry Thorarensen may be interpreted as referring to Iceland's heroic age, but that era has no political connotations for him, and is sometimes conflated with more ancient times. In *Reiðvísa* (Riding Verse) Icelandic nature apparently wishes to tell of heroic deeds she has witnessed:

Brosir oss móti hin græna grund,  
 glymur í vötnum í sama mund,  
 er sem þau vilji  
 oss um þylja  
 aldnar sögur köppum frá.<sup>90</sup>

[The green land smiles upon us  
 and the waters roar  
 as if they would  
 tell us  
 ancient tales of heroes.]

An earlier version of the same stanza, however, indicates that Thorarensen also had other heroes in mind. In this case nature is identified with the poetic inspiration of Old Norse court poets:

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<sup>89</sup> The story has been told that Hallgrímsson composed *Gunnarsbólmi* at Thorarensen's suggestion, but this has an air of folklore rather than fact. See Hallgrímsson 1989: 4:130–131.

<sup>90</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:61.

Eyvindur, Egill, Hallfreður and Sighvatur. The following appeal is made to their spirit:

Færðu sóma Fróns um heim  
fjöllum hærra og kynntu þeim  
at frægir synir  
Íslands einir  
ólu minning Rögna hropts.<sup>91</sup>

[Bear the honour of Iceland about the world,  
higher than mountains, and tell  
that the famed sons  
of Iceland alone  
held aloft Óðinn's memory.]

The focus here is clearly the common heritage preserved by Icelanders on behalf of northern-European nations. In two other poems by Thorarensen, the spirit of the ancient court poets merges with Icelandic nature; both are paeans to (reigning or future) kings of Denmark and Iceland. In *Kvæði á fæðingardegi Friðriks kónigs 6ta* (Poem on the Birthday of King Frederik VI) an eruption under the Eyjafjallajökull glacier is interpreted as the glacier composing a lay of praise for the King “sem fornaldar-skáldin”<sup>92</sup> [as the ancient poets did]. In *Friðriksljóð* (Poem to Frederik), this wish is made:

Eyvindur, Sighvatur!  
Arnór, Hallfreður  
festið á Austfjarða  
fjöllum strengi!  
felið svo enda  
undir Horndröngum  
og Ossíans boga  
um þá farið.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 2:73.

<sup>92</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:118.

<sup>93</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:152–153.

[Eyvindur, Sighvatur!  
 Arnór, Hallfreður  
 fix strings to the mountains  
 of the East Fjords,  
 and the other end  
 under Horndrangar,  
 and play upon them  
 with Ossian's bow.]

Here again, no distinction is made between Norwegian and Icelandic poets; in addition, the Old Celtic poet Ossian is invited along, with more-or-less equal status.

In a few poems Thorarensen refers, directly or indirectly, to *Njáls saga*, in the context of description of nature and society in the Fljótshlíð district. Thorarensen's relationship with the saga was unusual: he grew up on the farm of Hlíðarendi in Fljótshlíð, the home of the main hero of the saga, Gunnar Hámundarson. In the poems Thorarensen is either looking back on his childhood or bemoaning the damage that has been caused to the estate of Hlíðarendi, and the entire region, by the Þverá river. One of the poems, *Um apturfarir Fljótshlíðar* (The Decline of Fljótshlíð)<sup>94</sup> from 1821, has often been read as an older (and inferior) equivalent to Jónas Hallgrímsson's *Gunnarsbólmi* (first published in 1838), and a harbinger of "the spirit that characterized the nation's campaign for freedom in the 19th century."<sup>95</sup> Hallgrímsson's poem compares flourishing Icelandic society at the time of Gunnar of Hlíðarendi with the degradation of his own time. The barren sands between Fljótshlíð and the Eyjafjöll mountains symbolize Iceland's decline since the days of the Old Commonwealth: "Þar sem að áður akrar huldu völl | ólgandi Þverá veltur yfir sanda"<sup>96</sup> [Where cornfields once flourished on the plain, billowing Þverá now tumbles over the sands.] Only the place where Gunnar demonstrated his love for his country in practice, by turning back when he was about to go into exile, has been spared by the

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<sup>94</sup> It is uncertain whether Thorarensen himself chose this title, as no autograph manuscript of the poem exists.

<sup>95</sup> "Þess anda sem einkenndi frelsisbaráttu þjóðarinnar á níttjándu öld." Helgason 1998: 37.

<sup>96</sup> Hallgrímsson 1989: 1:79.

destructive forces: and here grass still grows. In *Um apturfarir Fljótsblíðar* Gunnar's ghost stands upon his burial mound at Hlíðarendi, looking out over the devastation wrought by the Þverá river,

og iðrast nú  
að aptur hvarf  
að bera bein  
blá við hrjóstur.<sup>97</sup>

[and now regrets  
that he turned back  
to die  
in this barren place.]

It is unlikely that Thorarensen saw the destruction as a symbol of the general decline of the country since Gunnar's time; he knew, better than most, that it was a relatively recent phenomenon. This emerges clearly in an article commissioned from Thorarensen about Gunnar's burial mound. He described how branches of the Markarfljót river started to flow into the Þverá river in the early 18th century, so that it burst its old banks. He points out specifically that it is only about fifty years since the Þverá first caused damage on Hlíðarendi land.<sup>98</sup> In the poem, Thorarensen appears simply to be expressing his resentment at the way the forces of nature had treated a place of which he was fond.

In a brief poem from late in his career, *Ungum áður söngvar* (Songs in My Youth), Bjarni Thorarensen recalls his early delight in *Krákumál*; the poem "læstust mér hjarta ið næsta!"<sup>99</sup> [took hold, close to my very heart!]. The obvious inference is that in this declaration of love *Krákumál* stands for Old Norse poetry as a whole. But precisely in this choice of a representative of the literary heritage, central aspects of Thorarensen's reception of Old Norse literature are crystallized. It is obvious from the poem that he believes that *Krákumál* was truly composed by Ragnar Loðbrók, and by his consort Áslaug kráka; this appears to have been the accepted view among scholars at that

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<sup>97</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:102.

<sup>98</sup> Thorarensen 1847b: 80.

<sup>99</sup> Thorarensen 1935: 1:178.

time.<sup>100</sup> Thorarensen could, naturally, have picked a poem indisputably composed by an Icelandic poet. The nationalistic aspect (in a narrow sense) of the poem's origin was clearly a matter of indifference. Thorarensen's choice underlines his interest in the oldest parts of the literary heritage, the closest to its origins and at the same time the most sublime. Probably the fact that *Krákumál* was known internationally played a part in his choice; indeed, there is no indication that the poem had a high reputation in traditional Icelandic reception. Thorarensen's declaration of love is consistent with what has emerged from this survey: that his attitude to Old Norse literature has no specific features of Romanticism. It is more reminiscent of the way that poets and intellectuals abroad saw this heritage (shortly) before the Romantic age. But that does not preclude the presence of other qualities of the Romantic in Thorarensen's verse. However, that is another subject of study, which cannot be addressed within the bounds of this paper.

The characteristics of the pre-Romantic literary movement described by Anton Blanck, which he termed the Nordic Renaissance, have clear equivalents in Icelandic literature. These parallels are in fact of great importance for the renewal of Icelandic verse after a very long period of stagnation. Aesthetic gains were invariably paramount at this stage of the reception of Old Norse literature in new literary creation: the objective was to expand the horizons of poetry, to open up new possibilities for literature. The ideological content was unclear, in Iceland as elsewhere, but the reworkings reflected a distinctive image of the people of the European North and their cultural heritage. In the Icelandic context, that image was naturally somewhat alien, and it was very unlike the idealized view of Iceland's Saga Age which before long became such a striking aspect of the Icelandic reception of Old Norse literature. But by then a whole new stage of the nation's identity formation had begun.

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<sup>100</sup> Rafn 1826: 55–74.

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# Old Norse–Icelandic Literature and German Culture

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**Abstract** – The perception of Old Norse literature in post-medieval times moves between an aesthetically motivated international interest and its constriction initially by national and then nationalistic concerns. The article examines this development by analyzing how Old Norse material is used for the construction of a German national consciousness from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th. It compares the German reception of Old Norse mythology to that of the Icelandic sagas, focusing on the question of why the mythology was considered a common Germanic heritage and came to be viewed in Germany as German cultural property, whereas the sagas were regarded as Germanic as well as Icelandic. This paved the way for viewing Iceland as an antithesis of the modern world and therefore the ideal landscape of a Germanic antiquity regarded as classical.

**Keywords** – European reception of Old Norse–Icelandic Literature, German reception of Old Norse–Icelandic Literature, nation building, Germanic antiquity, Old Norse mythology, Icelandic sagas, Thule

## Introduction

It is well established that German national consciousness in the 19th and early 20th centuries was constituted with an eye towards the North and by reverting to the history of the Teutons.<sup>1</sup> Despite its remoteness, Iceland received its own place in this construct—if only temporarily—from the end of the 18th century up to the middle of the 20th century. Shortly after 1900 the notion of a Nordic Hellas<sup>2</sup> reveals the projected character inherent in this concept: it imagines an

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<sup>1</sup> See Bohrer 1961; von See 1994; Gollwitzer 1971; Hartwich 2000; Kipper 2002. For a discussion on “imagined communities” and nationalism, see Anderson 1983.

<sup>2</sup> This metaphor is circulated in German language publications as well as others and can for example be found in Niedner 1913: 10; see also Neckel 1922, as well as Ísleifsson 2007.

early bloom of Germanic culture located in the North that set the national origin of German history alongside the advanced civilization of the South—classical antiquity and later Christian culture as well—and placed it in Iceland. Admittedly though, the Icelandic medieval tradition had earlier gradually become a part of German culture in the form of the so-called Germanic mythology. Its figures are, to a large extent, taken from two Icelandic sources—namely, the collections of texts that became known in the modern age under the shared name of *Edda*: Snorra Edda (ca. 1225) on the one hand and the Poetic Edda (ca. 1270) on the other. Although constructions similar to those addressed here with the keywords “Nordic Hellas” and “Germanic mythology” are to be found in other cultural and national contexts, a specific German relationship to Icelandic culture is obvious. It is this aspect that I intend to focus on in this article. To begin with I shall discuss the European discovery of Old Norse mythology during the 18th century, as well as the particular relationship constructed between Old Norse and German mythology and heroic tale in the 19th century. I will then demonstrate how this interest in Old Norse mythology was temporarily sidelined in the beginning of the 20th century when the Germans favoured the world of the Old Icelandic sagas as the vanishing point of their supposed Germanic national identity. Thus, it will be shown that an idea of Old Norse–Icelandic culture had long been integrated into the predominant concept of German prehistory before the National Socialist Party seized power in the name of the so-called Nordic Race.

### The European Discovery of Old Norse Mythology in the 18th Century

Initially, it is necessary to consider briefly the broader context of the German interest in Iceland, i.e., the idea according to which the origins of German history are to be sought with the Teutons. This interest can be traced back to the 15th century and the rediscovery of Tacitus’s *Germania*. The ethnographic text from the first century AD opened the German humanists’ eyes to a world they identified as German antiquity.<sup>3</sup> Awareness of how few sources there were proving this antiquity first arose in the 18th century. At the time, western Europe was searching for an alternative to the dominating aesthetics

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<sup>3</sup> See Muhlack 1989.



of classicism, to the French rule-governed poetics and to their preference for the gods and heroes from classical mythology. Following Rousseau and Ossianism the “savage” and “primitive” was considered sublime and was set against the traditional ideal of beauty. In this context, it became obvious how incomplete the prehistoric sources were for those peoples who could not trace their origins to classical antiquity: there was almost no native material available for the new aesthetic programme in western Europe. If one preferred not just to (re)construct this material, as the Scot James Macpherson (1736–1796) did with the predominant part of his highly influential Ossian cycle of poems, one had to be on the lookout for a substitute. This is programmatically formulated by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), especially in his well-known and controversial treatise from 1796, *Iduna, Or the Apple of Rejuvenation*. From Herder’s perspective, German modern literature could not compete with the great European literatures, because it was “without imagination” and had no mythology of its own.

If the mythology of a neighbouring people, whose roots were also German, gave us a substitute that was so to speak born for our language—that followed it completely and remedied its lack of cultivated fictions—who would take exception to it?<sup>4</sup>

As a result of this rhetorical question a figure of thought was brought into play that seemed subsequently to allow the native deficit to be lifted with the help of foreign—Scandinavian and Icelandic—evidence.

Herder, as well as many of his contemporaries, knew that this possibility existed, thanks to a history of the Danish empire that was written in French in 1755/1756 by Paul Henri Mallet (1730–1807), a historian from Geneva, and commissioned by the Danish government. In this context Mallet made the tales from Snorra Edda, as well a few other texts, accessible for the first time in one of the

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<sup>4</sup> “Wenn aus der Mythologie eines benachbarten Volks, auch Deutschen Stammes, uns hierüber ein Ersatz käme, der für unsre Sprache gleichsam gebohren, sich ihr ganz anschliesse, und ihrer Dürftigkeit an ausgebildeten Fictionen abhülfe, wer würde ihn von sich stossen?” Herder [1796] 1883: 488 (translations from the German in this article are my own). The desire for a native mythology in German in the 18th and 19th centuries is discussed by Williamson 2004.

major modern European languages. The work was immediately translated from French to Danish and then to German, English, Russian, and Polish. It thus quickly spread among European intellectuals. Mallet's work allowed poets such as the British Thomas Gray (1716–1771) and the Germans Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724–1803) and Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg (1737–1823) to become aware of the Old Norse material.<sup>5</sup> In 1765, Herder wrote a review for the German translation of the book, enthusiastically recommending it as the “armoury of a new German genius”<sup>6</sup> (on Mallet, see also Gylfi Gunnlaugsson in this volume).

From the arsenal of Old Norse gods, the first goddess who particularly became an object of fascination was Iðunn. The myths related to this figure do not have extensive evidence; that which does exist is found exclusively in Icelandic sources. The goddess only appears around 900 with the poet Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni in the poem *Haustlǫng*, then in Snorra Edda (*Gylfaginning* 26 and *Skáldskaparmál* 2) and finally in the late Eddic poem *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*. In Mallet's work the goddess plays only a small role; nonetheless, in the *Edda Islandorum* from 1665, one could learn more about her.<sup>7</sup> This first printed edition of Eddic texts published by Peder Hansen Resen (1625–1688) was accompanied by translations in Latin and Danish and belonged to Mallet's sources. Out of all the myths that are linked to Iðunn, two aspects were particularly interesting: firstly, Iðunn is the custodian of the apples that, when eaten, guarantee the Aesir eternal youth. Secondly, she is considered the wife of Bragi, the god of poetry. She was thus welcomed by 18th-century recipients as a poetological allegory and as such embodied the call for aesthetic renewal—for poetry's “rejuvenation.” This is demonstrated both by Gerstenberg's “Iduna” poem (1767) and by Herder's *Iduna* treatise, which has already been quoted above. In the 19th century, the allegory lived on in Germany and Scandinavia in the names of poets' societies and journals until in the end it was even usurped by commercial

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<sup>5</sup> With regards to the English reception of Mallet, see Clunies Ross 1998; with regards to Mallet's influence on German poets and intellectuals, see Krömmelbein 1995.

<sup>6</sup> “Rüstkammer eines neuen Deutschen Genies,” reprinted in Herder 1877: 74.

<sup>7</sup> The goddess is briefly mentioned by Mallet in the summary of *Skáldskaparmál* (1756: 126); with Resen she is the object of “*Damesaga*” 52, (see Faulkes 1977). In both references Iðunn appears under her Latinized name Iduna, which was later quite common outside of Iceland.

advertising as a symbol of a modern lifestyle.<sup>8</sup> The tradition of reception that is recognizable here does not have its origins in the Middle Ages; rather it stems from the context of the European debates on aesthetics in the second half of the 18th century. Over time, this context fell into oblivion just as the fact that Iduna as Iðunn originally only has textual evidence in Icelandic sources.

Also Herder only takes up the already established idea according to which Iduna's apples could stand for aesthetic rejuvenation; he aims to "create poems that become eternal the moment Iduna's apple touches them."<sup>9</sup> With the title of his treatise he thus skilfully attaches himself to a smouldering debate, to which he then gives a new twist in that he declares it a fundamental right of German literature to appropriate Old Norse mythology. In order to do so, he stylizes the northerly located, prehistoric era that is responsible for producing these myths as the centre of identity and meaning for all those with Germanic roots: he extends the national antiquity of the Germans to Germanic culture, thus justifying the notion according to which the German past can be found with the Germanic peoples as well as the idea that Old Norse poetry is a predecessor of German national poetry. This construction must have been enormously persuasive: not only did it determine how Germans imagined the North—both the medieval Icelandic tradition and contemporary Nordic countries—far into the 20th century and even today in some circles,<sup>10</sup> it also formed the basis for the appropriation of the gods from the Old Norse myths as German gods.

### Old Norse and German Mythology and Heroic Tale in the 19th Century

There can, however, be no doubt that there are connections between Old Norse sources, especially the Poetic Edda, and the German *Lay of the Nibelungs* (also rediscovered in the 18th century). At the beginning of the 19th century these links gained the attention of the still new

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<sup>8</sup> See Zernack 2009b.

<sup>9</sup> "Dichtungen schöpfen, die unsterblich sind, sobald sie Idunens Apfel berührt," Herder [1796] 1883: 496.

<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Herder's influence is noticeable also outside Germany, for example in Scandinavia; see Henningsen 2007.

field of Germanic studies (*Germanistik*). The subject of this discipline was exactly the Germanic prehistoric era that Herder had moved onto the horizon of the German search for identity. For scholars such as Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen (1780–1856), the preoccupation with the Poetic Edda and other Old Norse sources was primarily motivated by their relationship to the *Lay of the Nibelungs*. This prompted Wilhelm Grimm (1786–1859) to declare the Eddic poems “half” German property.<sup>11</sup> The claim soon no longer applied only to the Nibelung material found in the heroic lays of the Edda, *Völsunga Saga* and a few other Old Norse sources. Rather it came to encompass all mythological references—that is, the entire Eddic literature and more—because without knowledge of them, barely any sense could be gained from the meagre continental Germanic records. An example of this is Jacob Grimm’s (1785–1863) highly influential *Teutonic Mythology* (*Deutsche Mythologie*) from 1835. In the introduction the author refrains from reasoning on the basis of Nordic references. Nevertheless, he subsequently uses them abundantly, because this is the only way he can give meaning to the continental sources.<sup>12</sup> This approach was raised to a principle in 1855 by Karl Simrock (1802–1876) who, right from the start, strived to reconstruct German mythology from what he thought to be the system of Old Norse mythology.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, scholars in the 19th century became increasingly aware that Old Norse and Teutonic mythology—for example, the Óðinn from the Poetic Edda or *Völsunga Saga* and the Wotan from German popular imagination—must not be set as one. But at the same time, knowledge of Old Norse myths gradually spread outside of academia, initially particularly in literature as well as in the visual arts, but later also in music and elsewhere. The differentiations offered by scholars could thus easily be subsumed to national considerations or the artistic will to create. Once more this can be clearly demonstrated for the Nibelung material with the example of Richard Wagner’s famous opera tetralogy, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, first performed in 1876. Wagner absorbed predominantly Old Norse material for his libretto, in particular *Völsunga Saga*, yet gave his

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<sup>11</sup> W. Grimm [1808] 1992: 142.

<sup>12</sup> J. Grimm [1835] 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Simrock [1855] 1887: 6.

protagonists names from the German Nibelung tradition, naming Oðinn Wotan, Sigurðr Siegfried, Brynhildr Brünnhilde, etc.<sup>14</sup> He thus contributed to the popularization of the Old Norse material as German cultural property, although in a different way from Jacob Grimm. It can be shown that the idea of a Teutonic–German mythology strongly fed from Wagner’s universe of myths far into the 20th century.

### Old Norse Myths in the Wilhelminian Empire

The development described above reached its peak during the Wilhelminian Empire (1888–1918). Motifs from Norse mythology and heroic tale now spread throughout German culture, or at least farther than ever before and farther than ever after, admittedly though without superseding the myths from classical antiquity. Other than in literature, the visual arts, music, and academia, Norse myths could now be found in everyday culture, in arts and crafts, journalism, religious discourse, commercial advertisements, and political propaganda. The many examples to be mentioned here document the astonishing ability of myths to adapt to the conditions of practically every medium. The Norse myths appear in texts, images, music, and especially combinations of these media: illustrated books, operas, musical plays, commercial advertisements, and political propaganda. As visual media increasingly dominated the culture of the 19th century, Norse myths also became the object of mass-circulated images. Popularized stereotypical representations of the gods appeared, for example, on postcards used for spreading advertisements and propaganda, or on so-called trading cards.<sup>15</sup> Such representations clearly contributed to consolidating the collective pictorial knowledge of the Norse myths. At the same time they require an existing, common horizon of understanding without which the Norse motifs would never have been able to unfold their commercial and propagandist functions. In the German Empire this horizon was shaped by the reception of Wagner, whereas in the Wilhelminian Empire it was supplemented by a widespread passion for the Nordic countries, as well as an enthusiasm for Vikings: a Germanophilia, which Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941) shared with

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<sup>14</sup> For details, see Björnsson 2003.

<sup>15</sup> See Zernack 2009b.

many of his subjects—including oppositional artists and intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> In this context allusions to allegedly Germanic myths connoted modernity and national identity.

Popularizing depictions like these may have contributed to the fact that Iðunn and Baldur, Loki, Ragnarök, or the Valkyrie were considered part of German—in the emphatic sense national—cultural heritage. As such, Felix Dahn (1834–1912), the tireless popularizer of all things Germanic, began in 1880 to insert Norse material into a German tradition in the countless editions of his book *Walhall. Germanische Götter- und Heldensagen*. In doing so, he tellingly links himself almost word for word to Herder:

This mythology is the mirror image of the magnificence of our own people, how this people presented itself in its simple, harsh, but powerful, pure character. In this sense the Germanic tales about gods and heroes are invaluable treasures, an eternal “fountain of youth” of our people’s heritage: Whoever immerses their selves in it with a noble heart, will be lifted from it, their souls rejuvenated and invigorated, because the greatest asset of Germans on earth remains the German people itself.<sup>17</sup>

The connection between national consciousness and modernity is more than clear in the metaphor of the “fountain of youth of our people’s heritage.” Against this backdrop, the book creates continuities again and again between the prehistoric gods and events occurring at the time of its printing: it identifies for example Odin/Wotan with Goethe’s Faust and allows Bismarck to enter Walhall as the last of the Einherjar.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Zernack 1996, 2009a.

<sup>17</sup> “Diese Götterlehre ist das Spiegelbild der Herrlichkeit unsres eignen Volks, wie dies Volk sich darstellte in seiner einfachen, rauhen, aber kraftvollen, reinen Eigenart; in diesem Sinn ist die germanische Götter- und Heldensage ein unschätzbarer Hort, ein unversiegender ‘Jungbrunnen’ unsres Volkstums: das heisst, wer in rechter Gesinnung darein niedertaucht, der wird die Seele verjüngt und gekräftigt daraus emporheben; denn es bleibt dabei: das höchste Gut des Deutschen auf Erden ist: - sein deutsches Volk selbst.” Dahn 1880: 213.

<sup>18</sup> Dahn 1880: 260–262, 308–309. Regarding Dahn’s idea of the Teutons, see Kipper 2002.

At the time, there were a large number of handbooks and surveys of Norse mythology written by scholars but for a lay public. Many of them were part of a debate on the reform of secondary education, which suppressed classical studies for the sake of national education—including “Germanic” mythology.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, stories about Norse gods that were considered Germanic or even German seem to have been quite common around the turn of the century, especially in the educated middle class.

There are more precise indications, however, that the reception of myths mostly occurred in specific milieus.<sup>20</sup> In addition to a few circles of poets, such as the so-called *Kosmische Runde* (cosmic circle) in Munich, the *Burschenschaften* (fraternities), and the Wagnerian Bayreuther Kreis, these included numerous groups that belonged to the so-called *Völkisch Movement*.<sup>21</sup> This movement, which could be defined as a type of religious nationalism, integrated the “Germanic” myths into its religious discourse while at the same time misappropriating them for political propaganda. Here, Wagner’s influence is often recognizable: he inspired not only numerous operas that had German, Norse, and Icelandic themes, but also—from around 1900—a noticeably large number of dramatic adaptations of relevant material.<sup>22</sup> To a large degree, these concerned so-called initiatory dramas (*Weihespiele*), neo-pagan religious cultic dramas, which were to help the new *völkisch* national religion—devoid of Judeo-Christian influence—become a ritual practice of its own. Inspired by Wagner’s concepts of the “total work of art” (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) and “art religion” (*Kunstreligion*), the initiatory dramas also derived their motifs from Norse mythology and sagas.<sup>23</sup> By far the most favoured was the god Baldur, who—like Siegfried alias Sigurd the Dragonslayer—was honoured as a type of Germanic messiah. As such, he carried traits of Apollo, Christ, Parzival, and Lucifer: a saviour, who was, at least symbolically, to bring light into the darkness of the national depression and help overcome the unease of the people with the “kleindeutsches Reich”—the “small German”

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<sup>19</sup> See Baden 2009.

<sup>20</sup> A number are identified in Zernack 1996: 496–504.

<sup>21</sup> See Puschner 2001.

<sup>22</sup> A list (which needs to be supplemented) with examples from Fischer 1986.

<sup>23</sup> See von Schnurbein 1994; Zernack 1997.

Empire without Austria—and with its internal contradictions. Here, we can turn to one of the *Baldur* plays by Ludwig Fahrenkrog (1867–1952) as an example. Fahrenkrog, a painter and writer, played his role in the *völkisch* milieu as the founder of the religious movement referred to as the Germanic Faith Community (*Germanische Glaubensgemeinschaft*).<sup>24</sup> Wayland the Blacksmith—the protagonist Völundr from the Eddic poem *Völundarkviða*—was another mythological figure with whose help the anticipation of a national rebirth in the near future was expressed. Before Wagner published a draft of the play *Wayland the Blacksmith* in 1872, he had already introduced a national interpretation of this figure when he identified Wayland with the German people in *The Artwork of the Future* (*Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*) in 1850.<sup>25</sup> Fahrenkrog also dedicated a play to the blacksmith published as *Wölund* in 1914.

For the adherents of the *Völkisch* movement, the figures from Norse mythology provided national role models and as such, they frequently had to serve as associations, political propaganda for the numerous *völkisch* alliances, associations and magazines. From 1896 to 1933, the mouthpiece of the *völkisch* collective movement was the *Mitteilungen des Allgemeinen Deutschen Schriftvereins* (Proceedings of the General German Language Association) under the title *Heimdall. Zeitschrift für reines Deutschtum und All-Deutschtum* (Journal for Pure Germanness and All-Germanness). In the name of the Norse god Heimdallr, the magazine represented a pan-German imperialism targeting, last but not least, Germans living outside the borders of the German Empire. Their numerous alliances and associations communicated their political claims, also with the help of Norse myths, primarily on propaganda stamps and postcards, which had their golden age as a new mass medium around 1900 and were ideally suited for advertising and propaganda. In addition to regional and Germanic motifs of all sorts, the propaganda postcards from the “Verein Südmark,” the “Bund der Deutschen in Niederösterreich,” as well as the “Alldeutscher Verband” and other so-called national protection unions (*Schutzvereine*) depicted numerous mythological motifs: again and again Odin/Wotan and the Valkyries, but also rather marginal figures such as the giant Þjazi (see Figure 1). It is a

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<sup>24</sup> Additional Baldur plays can be shown to some extent also after the end of the empire, among them Pannwitz 1919; Overhof 1927; Prellwitz 1924.

<sup>25</sup> See Dusse 2007: especially 60.



similar political actuality to Dahn's *Walhall*, where Bismark is represented as Wotan on one of the propaganda cards from the "Verein Südmark" during World War I (see Figure 2).

Within the context of the Bismarck cult, Norse myths are frequently found beyond the propaganda from national protection unions as well. The Prussian prime minister and later chancellor of the Reich, who was primarily associated with Odin/Wotan, but also with Baldur, Loki, and Siegfried/Sigurd, also knew how to use Norse mythology as a political instrument. This can be gleaned from the so-called "Hoedur speeches" (*Hoedurreden*) with which, in 1885, the chancellor promoted an offensive colonial policy for the German Empire in front of the German "Reichstag." He underlined this with allusions to the myth of Baldur's death, which stood for the endangering of the German "rejuvenation of the people" (*Völkerfrühling*).<sup>26</sup> Approximately ten years earlier, Dahn had celebrated German imperialism as the politics of Thor's hammer, with a similar effect, in order to give it the solemnity of an ancient national tradition.<sup>27</sup> The principle is always the same: the mythological embellishment heightens claims that are actually political to the metaphysical.<sup>28</sup> The world war created a further wave of mytho-political allusions which again moved Baldur to the foreground.<sup>29</sup>

In the German empire, the reception of Norse mythology was probably circulated most within commercial advertising.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, here too when considered from a social historical viewpoint, the references clearly indicate the bourgeois middle class as the milieu of origin. At the same time, the proportion of Nordic material in the huge treasure of motifs used in advertising was on the whole marginal, despite the fact that there is a surprisingly large amount of evidence for the commercial reception of Nordic myths. To cite some examples, there were magazines (*Iduna*, *Freyja*, etc.), publishers (*Baldur-Verlag*, *Asgard-Verlag*, *Edda-Verlag*, etc.), boats (the coastal battle cruiser *Aegir*, the imperial yacht *Iduna*, amongst others)

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<sup>26</sup> Kohl 1898: 278–280.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Zernack 1997: 150.

<sup>28</sup> Zernack 2009b.

<sup>29</sup> See Zernack 2007.

<sup>30</sup> For a more extensive discussion with a number of examples, see Zernack 2009b.

and houses (*Villa Aegir*, *Haus Iduna*, etc.), figures and motifs from Norse (or Norse–Germanic) mythology (and a few from heroic poetry) that advertised insurance companies (*Iduna*, *Freia*). There were also motorcycle vehicle factories (*Fafnir*, *Freya*), laundries (*Iduna*, *Aegir*), restaurants (*Freya*, *Café Asgard*, etc.) and producers of optical devices (*Baldur*) as well as bicycle manufacturers (*Freya*, *Aegir*, etc.), oven manufacturers (*Baldur*, *Wotan*, *Walküre*), sewing machines (*Freia*, *Frigga*, *Walküre*, etc.). In addition, there were light bulbs (*Thor*), cigarettes (*Walküre*, *Rheingold*, *Sleipner*), phonograph needles (*Aegir*), sparkling wines (*Baldur*, *Rheingold*), chocolate (*Edda-Schokolade*), cars (*Aegir*, *Freia*, *Fafnir*), medical instruments (*Iduna*), military equipment (*Thor*), and much more (see Figures 3–5). The advertising effect achieved by these mythological names obviously resulted from their assumed modernity—their ability to “rejuvenate”—and not from parallels between the mythological motifs and the products they were promoting. Few of these firms and products survived the times with these names; already before the middle of the 20th century the trend ebbed away. The motifs from Norse mythology could only temporarily compete with the gods of classical antiquity as advertising media.

Advertising is also instructive within our context since it not only spreads names but especially images of Norse gods. In addition to adverts, commercial poster stamps and trading cards are also informative because they show the stereotypical images of gods that dominated the contemporary pictorial knowledge. Between 1894 and 1934 there were at least ten series of trading cards with images from the Norse realm of the gods, which were usually passed off though as “German” or “Germanic” (see Figures 6–7).<sup>31</sup> There is evidence that commercial advertising was interested in motifs from Norse mythology beyond the Wilhelminian Empire (see Figure 8), nonetheless, obviously not with the same intensity.

In the Wilhelminian Empire, the reception of the Norse myths is characterized by their complete and utter acceptance as obviously Germanic or German: Although a substantial portion of the motifs and figures are known to be exclusively Icelandic or Norse references—in addition to the previously mentioned goddess Iðunn,

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<sup>31</sup> Zernack 2009b: 338.

there was Ægir, the personification and sometimes the giant of the ocean (but in postmedieval times he was usually considered a god); the god Heimdall; the motif of Ragnarök; and many others—yet Iceland did not play any role as a cultural geographic parameter. Its traditions were used—directly and indirectly—but only as incorporations into the canon of German culture as national property.

### Thule: The Anti-Modern World of the Icelandic Sagas

It was only at the dawn of the 20th century that Iceland as a place came into view. Once again, the island’s medieval traditions were of central importance—now, however, predominantly in the form of the Icelandic sagas. Unlike the tales of the Norse gods with their mythical staging, the sagas are set in the island’s actual topography, described in minute detail. Thus they cannot be linked to another culture. Nevertheless, a way was found in which the Icelandic sagas could also be assimilated into German nationalism.

Initially, as the Norse myths gained attention in the 18th century, Iceland was remote from the continent’s perspective: “a cold miserable island”<sup>32</sup> “at the end of the inhabited world.”<sup>33</sup> This perception was not at all grounded in experience, since travelling to Iceland was only made possible later. With the supposedly realistic descriptions in the Icelandic sagas, however, the cultural–geographical landscape of Iceland began to attract attention. At that point in time, northern Europe was generally perceived as a whole as one giant cultural region, without any differentiation between its inhabitants—Celtic, Germanic, and Slavonic.<sup>34</sup> Even Mallet considered the Poetic Edda as Celtic and hence his readers understood a direct relationship between the Norse material and the Gaelic poems by Ossian. This is evident, for example, in the German translation of Ossian by the Jesuit priest Michael Denis (1729–1800) published in Vienna in 1874. Amidst the reconstructions of the Ossian poems there are translations of *Völuspá*, *Baldur’s draumar*, *Hákonarmál*, and other Old Norse poems. In a similar way, in 1773 within the context of his discussion of Ossian (in *Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder der alten Völker*), Herder

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<sup>32</sup> “Eine kalte elende Insel,” Schlözer 1773: 3.

<sup>33</sup> “Am Ende der bewohnten Welt,” Herder [1784–1791] 1828: 285.

<sup>34</sup> See Kliemann-Geisinger 2007.

had published a translation of *Baldrs draumar*. The poem corresponded particularly well to the new aesthetic interest in the sombre and the sublime.<sup>35</sup> However, in 1796, in the treatise *Iduna*, Herder already saw differences between the Celtic and Northern Germanic; now he expressly kept the “Normans” at a distance from the “Gaelic” and grouped them with the Germans amongst the “Teutonic tribes”:<sup>36</sup> obviously Herder’s extension of the German prehistoric cultural space was accompanied by a change in his opinion of northern Europe, which was now “Germanized.” Nonetheless, it took another good century before first Scandinavia and then Iceland also became embodiments of this Germanic north, *germania germanicissima*, as Klaus von See has shown in a number of fundamental studies.<sup>37</sup>

During the entire 19th century, the question as to which role Iceland could actually play for Germanic antiquity arose at most occasionally among scholars. The scholarly dispute between Norwegians and Germans about the origins of the Eddic lays is one example of how highly charged this question was for the Germans. Their significance for German culture was dependent on the lays being understood as a common Germanic cultural expression. This in particular, however, was denied by the Norwegian Sophus Bugge (1833–1907): according to his—always disputed—“borrowing hypothesis,” the development of the Norse myths dates back only to the Viking age, when the Scandinavians on the British Isles came into contact with classical and Christian culture.<sup>38</sup> The reaction of the Germanist Karl Müllenhoff (1818–1884) bears witness to what was at risk: Germans’ entitlement as legitimate heirs to the Icelandic traditions and thus the possibility to reclaim them for German culture by constructing a common antiquity for all Germanic tribes. Furiously, Müllenhoff complains that the Norwegians deny the Germans’ right to the Icelandic treasures by contesting Germanic unity. In particular, he was outraged by German scholars who dared to take “the same Nordic point of view.” He accused these scholars, among them the Munich-based historian of law Konrad Maurer (1823–1902)—an “Icelander at heart”—of “not having their feet on

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<sup>35</sup> See von See et al. 2000: 386.

<sup>36</sup> Herder [1796] 1883: 497.

<sup>37</sup> Now collected in von See 1994.

<sup>38</sup> Bugge 1881–1889.

the ground of German academia created by Jacob Grimm.” Ultimately they observed “the Germanic realm and rest of the world from the Heckelberg,” the Icelandic Mount Hekla, and not “from their original unity.”<sup>39</sup> Everything depended on the correct, national German perspective: with its help, Old Germanic literature could be discovered in Iceland.

At the start of the 20th century, an outsider to academia, the former minister Arthur Bonus (1864–1941), indicated that this could be claimed not only for “the Edda,” but also for the Icelandic sagas. With his three-volume *Isländerbuch* he introduced a veritable change of era in the German reception of Old Norse–Icelandic literature:<sup>40</sup> motivated by a vehement critique of civilization he shifted the sagas into the foreground, accusing the Wagner-influenced reception of mythology of being “romantic.” In contrast, he construed the allegedly realistic descriptions of the Icelandic Family sagas as an alternative to modernity. With the Old Icelandic *mikilmenni* he set a heroic individual at the centre, who, through his own strength, shrugs off oppressive social conditions, without ever calling for them to be improved. This endeavour to cope with the problems of civilization through a cult of heroism already had a tradition at the time of Bonus, which is also noticeable in the reception of Norse mythology and goes back to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Julius Langbehn (1851–1907) amongst others. Thus, Bonus’s reading of the sagas complied with a need for identification, which was typical of the day, especially in the middle classes. Here the hero of the saga was met with interest as a paradigm of the autonomous personality, who manages to gain power and social esteem through his own will and not by being born into a privileged class. Scholars—usually Germanists—and teachers felt drawn primarily to this concept of the “strong-spirited” personality of the sagas (“Sagapersonlichkeit”).<sup>41</sup> Amongst those to be mentioned here is the influential Andreas Heusler (1865–1940) from Basel; Heusler was a professor in Berlin

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<sup>39</sup> Müllenhoff 1890–1920, vol. V: 62, 64, 66. Müllenhoff’s distrust of Maurer not least fed from Maurer’s support for the Icelanders’ political struggle for independence. In addition, the reproach against Maurer might include an allusion to his studies into the traditional idea of Mount Hekla being the place of hell.

<sup>40</sup> Bonus 1907. More extensively regarding the significance of Bonus for the German image of Iceland, see Zernack 1994: 215–223, 348–354.

<sup>41</sup> See Zernack 1994: 50–76.

for many years at the start of the century and, being especially interested in Germanic antiquity, he contributed a number of translations to Bonus's *Isländerbuch*. These translations were only a small part of Heusler's own systematic efforts to popularize the Icelandic sagas—and especially their style of speech—in German.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Bonus caught the attention of Eugen Diederichs (1867–1930), a publisher from Jena who, as a follower of the life reform movement (*Lebensreformbewegung*), was enthusiastic about everything that was (allegedly) originally Germanic. Since 1911, Diederichs had been publishing a large-scale book series—for which he prepared with a journey to Iceland. The series, consisting of translations of Old Icelandic literature, was the so-called *Sammlung Thule* (“Thule Collection”; see Figure 9).<sup>43</sup> The title alone reveals the project's impulse to update, which was underlined by the publisher's advertisement:

Ragnarök, the dawn of the peoples, overshadows the occident. If we are to avoid being annihilated by it, if we are to survive as a people, we will have to become aware of ourselves. We have to return to the deepest roots of our strength. Already in the last decade our instincts have led us to Norse Literature. However, the Ibsen, Björnson, Strindberg, whom we sought out have drawn upon deeper sources themselves. Today these sources lay in the ancient poems of the north. We need only find our way to them. “Thule” opens this way for us.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> These efforts are also demonstrated in his contributions to the Thule series (see footnote 43) as well as in a number of articles; see for example Heusler 1917, 1920, and 1934. Regarding Heusler's attitude towards Old Icelandic literature, see the essays in Glauser & Zernack 2005 and Zernack 2008: 252–255.

<sup>43</sup> Thule. Altnordische Dichtung und Prosa, 24 vols., ed. F. Niedner Jena: Diederichs 1911–1930. New edition 1963–1967.

<sup>44</sup> “Ragnarök, Völkerdämmerung liegt über dem Abendlande. Soll sie uns nicht vernichten, sollen wir als Volk nicht untergehen, müssen wir uns auf uns selbst besinnen. Wir müssen auf die tiefsten Wurzeln unserer Kraft zurückgehen. Der Instinkt dafür führte uns schon in den letzten Jahrzehnten zur nordischen Literatur. Aber die Ibsen, Björnson, Strindberg, zu denen wir als Suchende kamen, haben selbst aus tieferen Quellen geschöpft. Hier in der nordischen Urdichtung liegen diese Quellen zutage. Es gilt nur, daß wir selbst den Weg zu ihnen finden. Dieser Weg liegt durch ‘Thule’ offen.” Publisher's catalogue from 1922.

Diederichs obviously only had a vague idea of the dating and genesis of Old Norse literature. Nonetheless, for someone doubting the meaning of progress, it was above all a relic of a pre-modern world. The title of the introductory volume, which gives an impression of presenting “The Culture of Iceland in the Viking Age,”<sup>45</sup> confirms this perspective of interpretation. It hardly does justice to the medieval sources, but nonetheless it found support in the idea that the representations in the Icelandic sagas in particular were historically authentic—an idea that was held by some scholars, but that was even then highly disputed and that is obsolete today. As a consequence, the allegedly, genuinely transmitted “pagan” matter of the texts appeared as an autochthonous Icelandic creation, barely influenced by the Catholic Middle Ages. This Icelandic world of the sagas was thought to represent a culture free of the evils of civilization, thus directly leading to the supposed Germanic origins.

Similar to Bonus’s *Isländerbuch*, the *Sammlung Thule* thus subjects the Icelandic sagas (as well as the Eddic tradition and additional prose texts) to a general critique of civilization and to the national interest. The use of stereotypical metaphors, which is inherent in the reception of the sagas, shows that this way of updating the material was obviously plausible at that time. The metaphors are accompanied by the same topos of renewal that was already in place in the perception of Norse myths and indicated their modernity. In the context of the sagas it is found in a characteristic variation, namely in images of untainted “freshness” usually associated with water and air. Thus, reading the *Íslendingasögur* seemed like “diving into the sea” or “like the refreshing break of the waves.”<sup>46</sup> “Harsh sea air” that “should be able to harden us in order to stand upright in a world full of devils” was also mentioned.<sup>47</sup> One could gain the impression here that the reception of the sagas held a utopian potential. However, at least in the introductory volume for *Sammlung Thule* that was published in 1913, it can be seen that the popularization of Old Icelandic literature is aimed primarily at criticizing contemporary political conditions. Here, the “heroic men of Old Iceland” were again measured against

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<sup>45</sup> Niedner 1913.

<sup>46</sup> “Eintauchen in ein Meeresbad,” A[venarius] 1906: 587; “wie erfrischerender Wellenschlag,” Koppin 1911: 600.

<sup>47</sup> “Sollte uns stählen können zum Aufrechtstehn in einer Welt voll Teufel,” Heusler 1930: 93.

Bismarck, the “iron creator of our empire”: an obvious sign that in evoking the “genius of Germanic greatness” through the translations, less thought was given to the future than to a figurative restoration of a past epoch of German history.<sup>48</sup> The regressive character of this utopia is also revealed in that Iceland is identified with “Thule,” the name for *ultima Thule* handed down in classical literature that stands for a country on the northern edge of the world or a new world in the west, giving hope for renewal.<sup>49</sup> Its application to Iceland alludes to an early Germanic advanced civilization, which was supposed to be on the same cultural level as the known great civilizations, especially the Greek and Roman. As the title of the translation series at Diederichs’s publishing house, the name Thule stood for a Germanic continuity, promising something ancient and at the same time maintaining its unremitting validity, or, as announced in the publisher’s advertisement in its characteristic religious diction (1922): “Thule is not history; Thule is the eternal Germanic soul.”<sup>50</sup>

“Thule,” however, is primarily another name for the Nordic Hellas, the classical landscape of a non-classical people. It still resonates with the idea that had granted the Nordic material the interest of European intellectuals in the 18th century: the idea that the Nordic sources could help to overcome classicism and replace it as an ideal of art. This thought, however, was based on the assumption of having discovered non-classical material! The status as the alternative par excellence always remained attached to the Norse myths, whereas identifying Iceland with Thule implies the postulate of a new Germanic classical period. In the early 20th century, German Scandinavianists and Germanists, especially Gustav Neckel (1878–1940), worked on outlining this. In 1927, Neckel claimed that “nothing romantic can in truth be found in the land of Snorri, rather it is Norse Classicism.” Moreover he thought he could recognize “Winckelmann’s values in Old Icelandic literature”: “great contours,” “noble simplicity,” “not the quiet, but the powerful greatness.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Niedner 1913: vi. The text was reprinted in its original version in 1920.

<sup>49</sup> See von See 2006; Mund-Dopchie 2008; Romm 1994: 157–171, 207–211.

<sup>50</sup> “Thule ist nicht Vergangenheit, Thule ist die ewige germanische Seele.” Publisher’s catalogue from 1922.

<sup>51</sup> “Nichts Romantisches findet sich in Wahrheit im Lande Snorris, vielmehr die nordische Klassik,” “große Kontur,” “edle Einfalt,” “nicht die stille, aber die kräftige Größe,” Neckel 1928: 1–2. See also Neckel 1922 and 1933.



Admittedly, though, such speculations had even less appeal than the Old Norse myths that were considered Germanic or German; therefore they remained limited to the scholarly milieu and a few *völkisch* imitators. For everyone else—as long as they could not travel there—Iceland was at best “the land of the Edda,” and as such it surfaces sporadically in popular representations on trading cards: exotic and secluded (see Figure 10).

## Concluding Remarks

The German nationalistic abuse of “Nordic” culture and literature is often flatly attributed to National Socialist ideology. Of course there is evidence for a National Socialist glorification of Old Norse literature and mythology, mistaken for a Germanic or even a German tradition.<sup>52</sup> But it is obvious, though, that the reception of Old Icelandic literature after 1933 is only the epilogue of an earlier phase of interest in this subject. This article has shown that a huge amount of Germanic material already existed at the beginning of the 20th century that had been charged with “modern” and “national” meaning during the decades before, in particular—though not exclusively—in the Wilhelminian Empire. A good example of this is a deluxe edition of the Poetic Edda published by the Askanischer Verlag in Berlin as late as 1943. Imitating a medieval manuscript, the book contains an almost fifty-year-old translation of the Eddic lays by Hugo Gering (1847–1925), illustrated with black-and-white reproductions of watercolours by the *völkisch* artist Franz Stassen (1869–1949), who had already begun to depict Eddic motifs at the end of the 19th century.<sup>53</sup> What the Nazis meant by “nordisch” were primarily their racist ideas with which Old Norse–Icelandic motifs could easily be assimilated in their philosophy, having been treated as an epitome of the “Germanic” past for more than one hundred years. Needless to say, the material itself is not to be blamed for this. All the same, it may still be necessary to come to its defence, whether against the suspicion of being ideological in itself or against a new misunderstanding.

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<sup>52</sup> See for example Bollason 1990.

<sup>53</sup> *Edda. Götterlieder/Heldenlieder* 1943.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

To sum up, the attention given to Old Norse literature in the modern age moves between an aesthetically motivated international interest during the second half of the 18th century and its initially national and then nationalistic constriction later on. This development can also be observed beyond German-speaking areas; also in the Scandinavian countries (and occasionally elsewhere) Norse materials serve as components of foundational discourses of identity which, not inevitably but nonetheless frequently, serve nationalist ideologies.<sup>54</sup> Here, however, unlike with the German reception, there is no need for a detour through the construction of a common Germanic history. German national consciousness is dependent upon the claim of a Germanic antiquity. As an ideal landscape it allocates this epoch first a romantic and then a classical image of Iceland that gains its contours just as much from the German present as from the island's medieval literature.



Figure 1. Postcard, edited by “Bund der Deutschen in Böhmen” around 1900. The postcard is part of a series of twelve “Monats-Karten” designed by the artist Hans Kaufmann. Instead of the usual Latin names of the months German names are used (in this example “Nebelmond” instead of “November”). The cards are illustrated with motifs from “Germanic” mythology, in this case the giant Þjassi. Typically there is no hint that this character is only known from Icelandic sources: in the context of the series it is presented as an element of Germanic mythology epitomizing German national identity.

<sup>54</sup> See Clunies Ross & Lönnroth 1999.



Figure 2. Propaganda postcard edited by “Verein Südmark” during World War I: *Two soldiers see the apparition of Bismarck in the guise of Wodan. (Zwei Soldaten erscheint Wodan in Gestalt Bismarcks.)* © Pictura Paedagogica.



Figure 3. Advertisement for Edda-Chocolate produced by the Saxonian chocolate manufacturer Petzold & Aulhorn from *Die Woche* 20, 1904. The advertisement not only refers to the Old Norse “Edda,” it also depicts a valkyrie, one of the most favorite motifs from Norse mythology in German culture after Richard Wagner’s opera *Die Walküre* (1876). Everything in this advertisement suggests modernity, as it was in fact new and “modern” to eat chocolate in a raw state instead of drinking it with milk.

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Figure 4. Poster stamp (between 1900 and 1918) of Geka-Werke in Offenbach am Main, a manufacturer producing flashlights. For once a Norse god, Thor, is shown without any explanatory text. 49×40 mm.



Figure 5. Advertisement for "Iduna-Heilapparate" from *Die Woche* 47, 1900, promoting an electric medical device to be used as a remedy for neurasthenia, sciatica, articular gout, rheumatism, cold feet, gastric trouble, intestinal, liver and kidney diseases... 45 × 125 mm.



Figure 6. Card 3 of the trading cards series 276 *Nordische Göttersage* (1894) by the Liebig Company, a manufacturer of meat extract. The card depicts “Donar fighting against the Midgard serpent and the giant of frost,” thus showing a characteristic mixture of German and Norse mythological motifs.



Figure 7. Card 6 of the trading cards series 1050 *Die Edda* (1934) by Liebig Company depicting *ragnarök*, the end of the Norse gods. Liebig cards were available in various languages.

Figure 8. Advertisement of the Saxonian engine works “Aegir” from *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, 1921. The firm produced rotary current motors. Aegir, in the Icelandic sources either a personification or a giant of the sea, is often depicted with a trident in modern times. As a borrowing from the Roman Neptune this attribute turns him into a god of the sea: a Germanic parallel to the sea gods of classical antiquity. 40×60 mm.

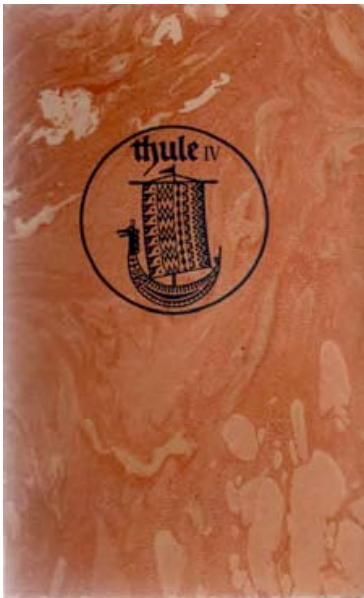


Figure 9. The “Thuleschiff,” a stylized viking longboat, decorated the covers of all volumes of the *Sammlung Thule*. This is the 4th volume, published in 1922 and containing Andreas Heusler’s translation of *Njáls saga* from 1914.





Figure 10. Card 3 of the trading cards series 846 *Island, das Land der Edda* (1912) by the Liebig Company.

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# Racist Caricatures in Iceland in the Early 20th Century

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**Abstract** – In this article, I take the republication of the book *Tíu litlir negrastrákar* (hereafter *Ten Little Negroes*) in Iceland as an example of how Iceland is often exempted from the global heritage of racism. As scholars have started to explore relatively recently, the Nordic tends to have a hegemonic position as existing separate from colonialism of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The original publication of the book *Ten Little Negroes* in 1922 shows, however, the familiarity of racial caricatures in Iceland, especially when contextualized within images of Africa in general during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In my discussion, I place the book within the global heritage of racism, as well as discussing its connection to the more localized and national heritage of Icelandic identity, seeing the book as linking the past and the present in an interesting way.

**Keywords** – Racism, Iceland, Africa, globalization, caricatures

## Introduction

In 1922, an Icelandic version of the nursery rhyme “Ten Little Negroes” was published in Iceland with the translated rhyme illustrated by an Icelandic artist. The publication was well received and was republished several times until 1975 and then again in fall 2007. That last republication generated intensive debate that dominated every media in Iceland and revealed different understandings of what racism is, as well as being entangled within emphasis on national “heritage,” with some individuals perceiving the book as a part of Iceland’s cultural heritage.

In my discussion, I take the book and this controversy as an example of how Iceland is often exempted from the global heritage of racism. As scholars have started to explore recently, the Nordic countries often have had a hegemonic position as existing separate from colonialism and racism of the 19th and early 20th centuries. As I

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explain here, the book *Ten Little Negroes* became localized within heritage discourse in contemporary Iceland as having nothing to do with racism, even though the rhyme had been published and distributed in many countries for over more than one hundred years. Due to this constant reproduction of the rhyme and its images in various localities, the book can be viewed as a part of a global heritage of racism, which has especially since the 19th century organized meanings and relationships between different individuals. I thus place the book within the global heritage of racism, as well as discussing its connection to the more localized and national heritage of Icelandic identity, seeing it as linking the past and the present in an interesting way.

In my analysis, I have found Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad to be especially insightful when she speaks about how ideas of equality have not only been seen as characteristics of the West, but especially associated with the Nordic countries. Gullestad stresses how in Norway this has evolved around the idea of “sameness,” in that people need to be more or less the same to feel of equal value.<sup>1</sup> Here I want to emphasize how the idea of equality and the idea of the egalitarian Nordic countries has been a powerful source of identity for people in these countries. It revolves generally around ideas of the Nordic welfare state, gender equality, rationality, and modernity that have become important in branding Nordic countries in international relations.<sup>2</sup> The lack of exploration of the entanglement of the Nordic countries with colonialism and colonial ideologies and legacies strengthens this association between the Nordic and a de-historicized equality.<sup>3</sup>

In the first part of the article, my discussion is contextualized in theoretical insights offered by scholars investigating racism and racial practices as well as the importance of memory in creating and recreating national identity. I then move to analysis of the book in a wide context, its existence within Europe and the U.S., as well as its appearance in a Nordic context. The discussion locates the book in Iceland, contextualizing its images within other images associated with

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<sup>1</sup> Gullestad 2002: 46–47.

<sup>2</sup> Wren 2001: 145–146; see discussion in Browning 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Keskinen 2009; Maurer, Loftsdóttir, & Jensen 2010.

the book, furthermore briefly demonstrating how some of the discussions surrounding the book exempted Iceland from the history of racism in the present and in the past.

This article is based on research projects that I have conducted on the images of Africa in Iceland and on national identity and conceptions of multiculturalism and national identity in Iceland.<sup>4</sup> In 2009 I collected material relating to the republishing of the “Negroboys,” conducting textual analysis primarily of blog material and other public texts, such as television programmes, newspaper articles, and radio talk shows. Interviews were taken with individuals and focus groups, exploring their views and perceptions of the book and the debates of its republication.<sup>5</sup>

### Racism and Creation of Meaning

In the 19th century, racial classifications of human diversity were given scientific legitimacy within Europe and North America, being closely interwoven with ethnocentric ideas of cultural differences. Classifications based on skin colour had certainly existed before, such as in the classification system by Swedish naturalist Carl Linnée in 1735,<sup>6</sup> as well as being evident in the colonial system of overseas colonies.<sup>7</sup> The term “race” seems to appear in the 16th century, but its meaning was imprecise.<sup>8</sup> With the elaboration of ideas of race in the 19th century, a comprehensive system of thought was created that was seen as explaining with the authority of science the presumed supremacy of certain populations and the subjection of others. This meant, as noted by Michael Pickering, that in the early 20th century

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<sup>4</sup> The project Images of Africa in Iceland was funded by RANNÍS (The Icelandic Centre for Research) and the Research Fund of the University of Iceland during the years 2001–2005. The ongoing research on the book *Ten Little Negroes* was funded in 2009 by the Developmental Fund for Immigrant Matters, which is run by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

<sup>5</sup> For this project I have interviewed forty-one individuals, some in focus groups. Of those, twenty-seven are Icelandic, seven are immigrants from Europe or North America socially classified as white, and seven are socially classified as black, the majority with African origin (or, in one case, the parent of a child classified as black).

<sup>6</sup> Pratt 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison 1995: 51.

<sup>8</sup> Wodak & Reisigl 1999: 176.

an entire generation came of age in Europe who did not generally question the basic racist hypothesis that humans could be divided into several racial types.<sup>9</sup> Racial classifications situated people with darker skin colour within uniformed groups with specific characteristics, and likewise situated the “white” race within this hierarchy of mental and cultural characteristics. Even though comprehensive, racial classifications were still never quite fixed or agreed upon, and they were entangled with hierarchical relationships based on other categorizations such as gender and class, as well as prejudice towards certain ethnicities.<sup>10</sup>

Since the middle of the 20th century, scholars have rejected race as a scientific tool for understanding human diversity, seeing racial categorization and racism as reflecting a pervasive social-historical reality rather than being based on scientific facts.<sup>11</sup> More recently scholars have increasingly started to question how whiteness—just as blackness—gains meaning within systems of racial categorization, thus drawing increased attention to the fact that racism is not only about “black” people but also those classified as white.<sup>12</sup> Whiteness should be placed within other dimensions of identity and seen as an unstable and heterogeneous construction.<sup>13</sup> As stressed by Nirmal Puwar (2004), the power of being white and male is found in the invisibility of these categories; they are unmarked and thus normalized and self-evident.

Identifying racism as a type of social memory draws attention to the trans-generational aspects of racism and racist images, which have persisted in spite of harsh criticism of racial categorization and denouncing of race as a scientific category. I find V. Y. Mudimbe’s concept “colonial library” useful in reflecting how images and ideas from the colonial period continue to exist in the present, often uncritically reproduced in various media. Andreas Huyssen’s identification of memory as a hypertrophy of the present points, furthermore, at how today’s constant remembering of past creates a

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<sup>9</sup> Pickering 2001: 125.

<sup>10</sup> Pickering 2001.

<sup>11</sup> See discussion in Wodak & Reisigl 1999: 176.

<sup>12</sup> Ware 1996: 119; Hartigan 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Hartigan 1997.



framework for understanding the present,<sup>14</sup> even though that remembering involves, as does all memory work, interplay of remembering and forgetting. Colonial nostalgia is one form of social memory, and in William C. Bissell's reading of Bryan Turner's work, he points out how colonial nostalgia can be seen as involving a departure of a golden epoch and displeasure with the presumed disappearance of a more simple and authentic world. Nostalgia, as stressed by Bissell, has to be seen as "a social practice that mobilizes various signs of the past" and does so embedded in a specific historical context.<sup>15</sup>

### Visual Images of Africa

In the European context, images of Africa have tended to be highly stereotypical, defining the continent as a place of monsters, savagery, and darkness.<sup>16</sup> Even after the publication of detailed scholarly works such as Heinrich Barth's travels in Niger in the middle of 19th century, scholars continued to reproduce the same stereotypical material.<sup>17</sup> As argued by Daniel Miller, Africa could be seen as an "empty profile" onto which Europeans projected their fantasies.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have moreover stressed how the images associated with the continent served as a mirror in which Europeans and North Americans could reflect themselves,<sup>19</sup> similarly to what has been pointed out with ideas of "primitive people" in general creating an "other" with which the Victorian society could reinforce itself.<sup>20</sup> The idea of the "savage" thus constituted a projection of what was both feared and desired.<sup>21</sup> As discussed by Christopher B. Steiner, the images of so-called "savages" are often remarkably similar, which is not due to some intrinsic homogeneity of these categories but the "reductionism inherent in our own representations of other

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<sup>14</sup> Huyssen 2001: 15.

<sup>15</sup> Bissell 2005: 223.

<sup>16</sup> Miller 1985.

<sup>17</sup> Miller 1985: 20.

<sup>18</sup> Miller 1985: 6.

<sup>19</sup> Miller 1985; Mudimbe 1994.

<sup>20</sup> Barkan & Bush 1995: 2.

<sup>21</sup> Barkan & Bush 1995: 6.

cultures.”<sup>22</sup> Some expeditions had an artist to make illustrations, but many travel accounts were illustrated by Europeans who had never seen the people or societies they were meant to represent. They thus often copied material from other sources, inserting them into their own artwork.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, in antiquity and in the middle ages, images of Africa in Europe were much more plural than became the reality later on, because even though Africa was often seen as the place of monsters, there existed also more positive and dynamic views of people within the continent.<sup>24</sup> In spite of accumulating knowledge about Africa in the 19th century, the image of Africa became, as phrased by Paul S. Landau, “flattened out” and simplified in the 20th century.<sup>25</sup>

During the early 19th century, Africa was seen as an exotic background for adventure stories that were closer to fiction than reality.<sup>26</sup> As phrased by Robert Thornton, the availability of Africa for many European audiences depended on texts describing the continent. There were, however, many individuals originating from Africa living in Europe. Most of those living in London, for example, were ex-slaves from North America or the West Indies.<sup>27</sup> The visual media in the colonial era with postcards, comic strips, and colonial exhibitions addressing black people and Africa in some ways became extremely popular.<sup>28</sup>

The rhyme about the so-called Negro boys was presumably originally written by the American Frank J. Green in 1864, adapted from an even earlier version about the “Ten Little Indians,” and has since been published in many countries.<sup>29</sup> Some scholars believe that “Ten Little Negroes” is the original rhyme to which “Ten Little

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<sup>22</sup> Steiner 1995: 203.

<sup>23</sup> Steiner 1995: 207.

<sup>24</sup> See discussion in Pieterse 1992: 29; Friedman 2000. I have discussed the images of Africa in medieval times in Iceland that reflect plurality as well (Loftsdóttir 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Landau 2002: 4.

<sup>26</sup> Riffenburgh 1993: 14.

<sup>27</sup> Lindfors 2001: 63.

<sup>28</sup> Landau 2002: 5.

<sup>29</sup> Pieterse 1992: 166.

Indians” was adapted.<sup>30</sup> In the United States, black comic figures pushed away caricatures of other groups such as the Irish and became the most popular comic characters. Stanley Lemons notes that there were two peaks in black people’s popularity as comic figures in American history, both times when racial discrimination against black people was at its peak. The comic “negro” became popular in the 1840s when slavery was a serious political issue and then again in the 1880s and 1890s when racial discrimination was at its high. Especially in the 1880s, Lemons notes, grotesque caricatures became quite important, representing black people with big mouths and ears, oversized hands and feet, and sloping foreheads, which was supposed to suggest lower intellect.<sup>31</sup> There exist several versions of the rhyme “Ten Little Negroes,” but as the Dutch sociologist Jan N. Pieterse points out, they generally have in common that they are about dark-skinned boys who are always children, never learning from experience.<sup>32</sup> The rhyme was published in various European and Nordic countries either in a book format or as a part of a collection of children’s rhyme. In Holland it was published at least as early as 1919,<sup>33</sup> and in Finland the nursery rhyme was probably first published in the collection *From Home and Away: A Selection of Fairytales for Children* (*Kotoa ja kaukaa: valikoima runosatuja lapsille*) in 1946, but it was also published as a part of another collection, *Funny Counting Book* (*Hupaisa laskukirja*), a compilation of counting rhymes, which was published sometime in the 1940s. As an independent book, it was possibly first published in the 1960s (*10 neekeripoikaa*).<sup>34</sup> In Denmark, the rhyme was published in Danish at least as early as 1922 in *The Children’s Picture Book* (*Børnenes Billedbog*), published by Wilhelm Hansen in Copenhagen, and has been reproduced as a song on various CDs. The illustrations for these books demonstrate both how similar caricature can be observed, but also variability. In one of the Finnish versions the boys are, for example, girls.

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<sup>30</sup> White 1974: 5–6.

<sup>31</sup> Lemons 1977: 104.

<sup>32</sup> Pieterse 1992: 166.

<sup>33</sup> Pieterse 1992: 168.

<sup>34</sup> These books were identified for me at the Finnish Institute for Children’s Literature. Jarkko Päivärinta, researcher at the Tampere University in Finland, helped me with finding this information, as did Anna Rastas at the same university.



Figure 1. Front cover of one of many publications of the rhyme in English.  
 Note similarities of these illustrations and Muggur's illustrations presented below.

## Nationalism and Images of Africa in Iceland

Nationalistic discourses of Icelandic identity have historically strongly emphasized purity. Jón Jónsson Aðils is often seen as the most influential person in shaping Icelandic nationalistic notions,<sup>35</sup> seeing nationalism as having hidden protective powers that help the nation to keep itself pure from foreign influence.<sup>36</sup> The emphasis on purity of the nation and its language and people has thus often centred on keeping them from elements perceived as “foreign.” The Icelandic language, for example, has been carefully kept untouched from foreign influences in an effort to maintain some kind of “pure” Icelandic.<sup>37</sup> Icelanders themselves have been stressed as homogenous and isolated from the rest of the world.<sup>38</sup> Such nationalistic discourses have to be placed in the context that Iceland was a Danish dependency until the middle of the 20th century, and such

<sup>35</sup> Matthíasdóttir 1995: 36–64.

<sup>36</sup> See discussion in Loftsdóttir 2009a.

<sup>37</sup> Sigurðsson 1996; Pálsson 1989: 121–139.

<sup>38</sup> Simpson 2000.

nationalistic discourses attempted to justify and explain the need for Iceland's independence by representing Icelanders as a real nation. Language and medieval Icelandic literature were used as the most important factors in justifying Iceland's independence, as well as being important in shaping nationalistic identity.<sup>39</sup> As pointed out by Guðmundur Hálfðánarson, claims of independence were not directed against the Danish government in Iceland but more presented as the result of what was seen as an “unnatural” arrangement in which one nation ruled another.<sup>40</sup>

Simultaneously, as Icelanders sought to secure their own identity in the late 19th century, Icelandic texts published during that time showed little sympathy for African subjects who were colonized and deprived of their lands and dependence. The annual news journal *Skírnir* published from 1827 reflects how the Icelandic authors saw the Europeans as distributing civilization to the rest of the world, celebrating narratives of explorers and conquests of the continent, while concurrently denouncing the slave trade.<sup>41</sup> Geography books published in Iceland during the late 19th century and early 20th century, furthermore, reflect how racial ideologies were important in explaining how the world was to be understood and related to, subjectively organizing human societies and diversities.<sup>42</sup> These books were often based on Danish geography books and adapted to Icelandic circumstances. Even though racial categorization is presented as self evident, there is little consistency in how racial categories are explained and delimited.

To give an example, Karl Finnbogason's book from 1913 claims that humans can be distinguished into racial types by the shape of head, hair type, skin colour, and linguistic properties. Even though Finnbogason's categorization places primary emphasis on physical and linguistic characteristics, his description of each race (as defined by him) reflects the close association with personal characteristics. Native Americans (labelled Indians in the text) are described as serious, cruel, silent, and devious (*undirförlir*) and Africans (labelled

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<sup>39</sup> Sigurðsson 1996: 42.

<sup>40</sup> Hálfðánarson 2000: 91.

<sup>41</sup> Loftsdóttir 2008: 179–180; Loftsdóttir 2009b.

<sup>42</sup> See Loftsdóttir 2010: 85.

Sudan Negros) as kind but loud and talkative. A geography book by Steingrímur Arason published in 1924, however, characterized racial difference as deriving from habits and appearances (*báttum og útliti*) but directly states that racial classification is mostly based on skin colour. Value-based judgements are often clearly spelled out, such as in a discussion of Australian aboriginals, who are said to be on the lowest cultural stage. “Savages” in general are described as having more developed senses.<sup>43</sup>

### The Icelandic Negro Boys

The rhymes were entitled “The Negroboys” (“Negrastrákarnir”) in Icelandic and published in 1922 with illustrations by Guðmundur Thorsteinsson (1891–1924), called Muggur. They were translated into Icelandic by Muggur’s brother-in-law, Gunnar Egilsson. Muggur was well known at that time and became one of the most beloved Icelandic artists. He was known for his beautiful artwork, often pictures relating to Icelandic folktales and landscapes, as well as for creating the first Icelandic playing cards. Muggur was born in 1891 into an affluent Icelandic family, his father being a prosperous merchant in Iceland, which then had a population of only a little over 70,000 people, the majority of whom were poor farmers or fishermen. Muggur travelled around Europe and lived a large part of his life in Denmark as his family moved there in 1903. Muggur stayed in a small town in Norway for one summer in 1916 to work, where he made the illustrations for “The Negroboys.”

When illustrating “The Negroboys,” he drew monkey-like bodies, thick red lips, crooked teeth, and big eyes. The skin is pitch black and the hands are exceptionally big, making the characters very similar to the ones popularized in the United States in the 1880s and 1890s. Comparing them to the illustrations of the rhyme from other parts of the world as earlier discussed, Muggur’s illustrations resemble the ones from the United States and Denmark. I am not implying that he was influenced by these particular books (the Danish publication seems to have been published around the time that Muggur’s book was originally published), but more pointing at how widespread such

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<sup>43</sup> Loftsdóttir 2010: 85–86.

## RACIST CARICATURES IN ICELAND

caricatures of black-skinned people were at the time. Muggur had visited the United States, having spent some time in New York in 1915.<sup>44</sup> As I have already discussed, racist imagery in general was in no way alien to Iceland during that time. The book illustrations thus fitted naturally within the ideology of the time both in Iceland and elsewhere. The racial caricatures become even more pronounced when these pictures are compared with another book by Muggur, entitled *Dimmalimm*, which is often spoken about as the most popular children's book of all time in Iceland. The story tells of a little girl, Dimmalimm, who meets a swan, which turns out to be a prince in disguise. The book has been republished many times and translated into many languages. It is sold in Icelandic heritage and tourist shops. Muggur's drawing of the girl and the prince in his human form underlines childlike features and innocence by giving them large eyes, shy smiles, and timid body postures. They have blond hair and fair skin, thus standing in striking contrast with the monkey-like "boys" in the *Ten Little Negroes*.



Figure 2. The front cover of the *Negroboys* was the same in its republication in 2007 as the 1922 publication.

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<sup>44</sup> Uttenreitter 1930: 31.

## The Debate about the Book in Iceland

As earlier stated, Icelandic national identity has strongly been based on notions of purity. Foreigners or cultural diversity were not a part of the image that Icelanders both represented to themselves and others.<sup>45</sup> Following Iceland's rapid economic expansion the number of immigrants increased quickly, leading to immigrants constituting more than 8% of the population in 2008, compared to below 2% in 1996.<sup>46</sup> The number of adopted children has also grown rapidly, as has the number of refugees as well as the number of Icelandic children with parents who have immigrant backgrounds. Probably not surprisingly, various discussions have come up in Icelandic society regarding what multicultural society means in an Icelandic context, as well as how inequalities based on origins can be avoided.<sup>47</sup> Simultaneously, ideas of Icelandicness seem to still be based very much on common origin, as was evident in the economic boom and also in the first months after the economic fall. In various media Viking blood and shared ancestry were strongly emphasized as something helping "us" out of the crisis, almost as it had been forgotten that the regression was also hitting immigrants very hard.<sup>48</sup> The debates about the republication of the book *Ten Little Negroes* can be situated alongside an ongoing discussion of what it means to be Icelandic in an increasingly globalized world, a discourse that is in dialogue with other important discourses elsewhere on diversity, European identity, and so forth. As mentioned earlier, the republication in 2007 was perceived in a very binary way in Iceland where some people objected to its republication, questioning why it should be published today in a more multicultural Icelandic context, and others objected forcefully to such criticism, defending the book as being not racist.

In my analysis of blog pages written at the peak of the debate and in interviews, many express the view that the book is not racist because Icelanders were, after all, not familiar with racism at that time due to their isolation from the rest of the world and that the book

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<sup>45</sup> Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir 2009.

<sup>46</sup> *Statistics Iceland 2009*: 1–24.

<sup>47</sup> Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir 2009: 206.

<sup>48</sup> Loftsdóttir 2010.



was a positive part of Iceland's history and heritage, often directly associating the book with Muggur. A media interview with one of the publishers reflects this view: "Many people are fond of this book and find it beautiful. They find it historical and a cultural treasure and for me it is impossible to connect it with racism."<sup>49</sup> This view is also reflected in how many fail to see the book as having any connection to racism in the past. In October, a few days after the discussion started, one person posted a blog on his weblog suggesting that perhaps a new book should be published called *Ten Big Racists* as a mirror upon "ourselves" (referring to Icelanders). Some of the comments that he received stress that the rhymes are a part of funny and silly stories created in the past and that it is just coincidence that the main characters are black, or that this discussion is not fruitful because everyone can be discriminated against, both black and white. Some stated stories about their own children who were teased or beaten up by other children that seem to attempt to affirm that racism as such does not matter.<sup>50</sup> What is visible in many of the comments is that they do not engage with their own position as, presumably, "white" individuals, speaking about "black" people in the terms that "they" should not be offended and even that the book provides "us" with an opportunity to learn about black people. Individuals that supported the book often mentioned it as part of Icelandic culture and their own childhood memories:

Sorry, I think this is rather funny, I remember I had this book, and I also had *Litli svartí Sambo* [Little Black Sambo, another children's book], even the doll [...] I have never felt any prejudice against people with another skin colour, no more than those with differently coloured hair.<sup>51</sup>

Following the criticism of the book other social commentaries were framed within the nursery-rhyme style, such as criticisms pointed at Icelandic bankers, Icelandic farmers, and women's position in the world. In an interview in regard to the publishing of the book *Tíu litlir*

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<sup>49</sup> See interview by Baldursson 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Baldur 2007.

<sup>51</sup> "Sorry, mér finnst þetta eiginlega bara fyndið. Ég man að ég átti þessa bók og ég átti líka Litla svarta Sambó, meira að segja dúkkuna líka (á hana ennþá). Dúkkan var alltaf í miklu uppáhaldi hjá mér. Ég hef aldrei fundið fyrir fordómum gegn fólki sem hefur einhver annan húðlit frekar en annan háralit." Jónsdóttir 2007 (my translation).

*sveitaskrákar* (Ten Little Farmers), for example, the author explains that the book is intended as criticism on government policies in relation to farming in Iceland.<sup>52</sup>

## Heritage and Multicultural Society

Some of the discussions focusing on the republishing of the *Ten Little Negroes* can be seen as colonial nostalgia in the sense that they bring images of more “simple” times when such images were not objected to. As such, these public discourses seek to separate Icelandic identity from past issues of racism and prejudice. Contextualizing the publication of the nursery rhyme in 1922 within European and North American contexts shows, however, that the book fitted very well with European discourses of race, and the images show similarity to caricatures of black people in the United States. Furthermore, ideas of racial groups ranked in a hierarchical and racist way were well established in Iceland at that time and were seen as useful in Icelandic schoolbooks in classifying diversity. These debates also reflect how memory continues to be grounded in national discourses rather than global or post-national ones, even in debates that are very similar in different places, as is evident in relation to racist images and multiculturalism. These images and the rhyme itself derive quite clearly from the “colonial library” spoken about by Mudimbe, a product of times where certain people were discriminated against heavily due to their skin colour.

As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the Nordic countries are often seen as standing for equality and are separated from Europe’s colonial past. In Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, to take examples, scholars have shown that public discourses emphasize that race has never mattered in spite of these countries being engaged in various colonial and racialized practices.<sup>53</sup> In that context it is useful to recognize that racism is also a part of Iceland’s heritage, inherent and self-evident in Iceland’s self-conceptions during a specific time period.

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<sup>52</sup> “Tíu litlu sveitaskrákar basla í búskapnum” [Ten Little Farmers Struggle with Farming] 2007: 31.

<sup>53</sup> Gullested 2002; Sawyer 2002; Frello 2010: 74.

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# Monuments to Settlers of the North: A Means to Strengthen National Identity<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – In this article two topics will be discussed: a) Icelanders’ proposal to erect a memorial to the country’s first settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, and the ensuing public debate and b) the background to the memorial to Thorfinnur Karlsefni, who is said to have settled in the New World shortly after 1000 AD, and the debate that took place in North America. The principal research questions concern the role of intellectuals in the 19th and 20th centuries in raising public support for the idea of erecting the memorials to the settlers, and what arguments were adduced to promote nationalistic sentiments among the public for that purpose.

**Keywords** – Iceland, settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, monument, Einar Jónsson, pioneer, the New World, Thorfinnur Karlsefni, Norse

## Introduction

One November day in 1875 a group of people gathered on Austurvöllur field in the middle of the little town of Reykjavík, where a statue was to be unveiled: a gift to the Icelanders from the Copenhagen City Council to mark the millennium in 1874 of the settlement of Iceland. The statue was a self-portrait by the renowned sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844), who was of half-Icelandic descent. Although presented on the occasion of the millennium, the statue did not serve to commemorate the settlement of Iceland.

Some years earlier a debate had taken place about marking this national milestone by erecting a memorial to Ingólfur Arnarson, identified as Iceland’s first settler in the medieval *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements). This discussion had, however, led to nothing, but the

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Icelandic by Anna Yates.

proposal had given rise to a debate about the role of public art. The idea of a monument to Ingólfur Arnarson came up again in the first decade of the 20th century. The suggestion appeared in the Danish press as a response to the idea that the Danes should present the Icelanders with a bronze cast of Thorvaldsen's figure of the Greek hero Jason, on the occasion of a visit to Denmark by Icelandic parliamentarians in 1906.

In this article two topics will be discussed: a) the Icelanders' proposal to erect a memorial to the country's first settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, and the ensuing public debate and b) the background to the memorial to Thorfinnur Karlsefni, who is said to have settled in the New World shortly after 1000 AD, and the debate which took place in North America. The intention is to throw light on the ideas of opinion-makers in the later 19th and early 20th centuries about the role of the settler and their conceptions of works of art commemorating him, on the conflict between the artist and those who commissioned such works, and on how their views related to the image of the North. The principal research questions concern the role of intellectuals in the 19th and 20th centuries in raising public support for the memorials and what arguments were adduced in order to promote nationalistic sentiments among the public for that purpose; in addition, the expectation of what the monument's message would be with respect to Nordic culture, and how an artist's radical artistic philosophy relates to ideas of the character of the Norse, will also be discussed.

## A Thousand Years of Iceland: A Monumental Debate

The idea of memorials to honour the memory of individuals, not for their descent or family but for their work in the interests of their nation, or even of humanity as a whole, arose from the Enlightenment, and it entailed putting across a certain message to the public.<sup>2</sup> With the rise of nationalist consciousness in the 19th century—which led both to unification, in Germany, for instance, and demands for secession and autonomy—the erection of monuments in continental Europe increased. National monuments were erected, some of them on a large scale, in honour of national heroes—both

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<sup>2</sup> Berggren 1991: 22–23.



real-life people and folk heroes who served as national symbols, or who were personifications of concepts such as *liberty* or *the nation*. One of the best-known examples of this is the Statue of Liberty in New York, erected on Liberty Island in 1886.

Lying behind the idea of national monuments in the 19th century was generally a nostalgic glorification of a social order based on traditional values. Stylistically they were usually characterized by the adoption of models from the classical humanist tradition. They could also be a propaganda tool for certain groups in favour of some specific idea, exploiting the alleged will of the people to unite around some symbol. They were meant to be timeless symbols to uphold the memory of some event, or a historical or mythical person.<sup>3</sup>

It was in early 1863 that the idea was proposed that the millennium of the settlement of Iceland should be commemorated by the erection of a monument to Ingólfur Arnarson, the first settler. It was discussed in a small group of intellectuals in Reykjavík, and the debate continued intermittently until 1874. No action resulted, however, due to a lack of resources. The debate on the matter indicates how people viewed the role of public works of art, and merits further scrutiny. In order to understand the situation, it is important to bear in mind that Iceland was at that time a Danish colony that had, however, gained greater autonomy after the end of absolutism in Denmark in 1848. But the political debate in Iceland was coloured by an ambivalent attitude to the Danes, and among the members of the intellectual Evening Society (Kvöldfélag) in Reykjavík were zealous advocates of Icelandic independence, such as the artist Sigurður Guðmundsson (1833–1874), who, at a meeting in 1863, proposed that a memorial to Ingólfur Arnarson should be erected in Reykjavík to mark the millennium of the settlement.<sup>4</sup> Like other Icelandic intellectuals of the time, Guðmundsson had been educated in Copenhagen, at the Royal Academy of Arts, in the mid-19th century. He had there become acquainted with national-romantic views, both through his studies and from other Icelandic intellectuals in the city. He soon became deeply interested in the Icelandic sagas,

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<sup>3</sup> Ellenius 1971: 24–26, 39–42.

<sup>4</sup> Collection of the National and University Library of Iceland. Fundargerðarbækur Kvöldfélagsins í Reykjavík, 30. janúar 1863 [Minutes of the Evening Society in Reykjavík, 30 Jan. 1863]. Unpublished.

and also in cultural history in general, and he apparently gathered materials from a multitude of sources, as indicated by drawings he appears to have traced from foreign books and periodicals, probably during his student years in Copenhagen.<sup>5</sup> Thus it is probable that he had seen illustrations in foreign periodicals of monuments erected in continental Europe in the 19th century.

Guðmundsson was a keen advocate of the development of Reykjavík, visualizing the small town growing to be Iceland's capital and the centre of culture. He was the first member of staff of the Antiquarian Collection (Forngripasafnið), preceding the National Museum of Iceland. In addition, he worked in various other fields of culture. His idea of commemorating the millennium of the settlement by a monument to the first settler is in keeping with the tradition that had evolved in Europe as a manifestation of growing nationalism. Like many monuments in other countries, the image of the settler Ingólfur was a symbol for a historical event. The rather amateurish sketch Guðmundsson drew of Ingólfur, with his arm raised and a sword at his belt, reflected the established conventions of depicting warrior heroes.<sup>6</sup> The posture is the classical *contrapposto*. But Ingólfur does not hold his sword aloft as was the rule with military heroic figures, but holds a flaming torch, like the Statue of Liberty in New York. In this way Guðmundsson alluded to old accounts of the settlement of Iceland, according to which a man could claim only the land he had crossed on foot between dawn and dusk, carrying a living flame. The torch may also be interpreted more broadly as symbolizing the settler who lights the way to Iceland for those who follow.

There was considerable debate in the Evening Society as to whether or not a monument should be erected. Some members suggested something more practical, such as purchasing a steamship, or constructing a parliament building or a home for the Antiquarian Collection. Many of the speakers emphasized the importance of a visible memorial to the settlement, something out of the ordinary. One member, for instance, said during a debate about the statue,

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<sup>5</sup> These documents are in the collection of the National Museum of Iceland.

<sup>6</sup> The drawing has been published in the chapter "Ingólfur Arnarson" in Kristjánsson 1948: unnumbered page.

## MONUMENTS TO SETTLERS OF THE NORTH

“The statue must also be such, that people can salute it.”<sup>7</sup> In Guðmundsson’s view, it was a matter of honour for the Icelanders as a nation to commemorate their first settler with a statue, as all civilized nations would do. At a meeting of the Society in 1874, he pointed out that the Americans were that year planning to erect a statue of Leifur Eiríksson (Leif the Lucky), which should be seen as an inspirational challenge to the Icelanders. Guðmundsson also visualized the statue as a landmark on Arnarhóll, a grassy knoll said to be the place where Ingólfur’s high-seat pillars washed ashore.<sup>8</sup> The choice of the site thus had a historical resonance, while also evoking the same national monuments in mainland Europe in the 19th century, which had a crucial influence upon their surroundings.

The debate about the statue of the first settler in the Evening Society gives no indication that any prominence was given to presenting a heroic image. In a newspaper article publicizing the proposal, the tone was more of gratitude towards the pioneering settler. The people of Iceland were also urged not to let the millennium of the settlement pass without commemoration. From the arguments of those who were in favour of the idea, especially Guðmundsson, one may infer the significance of the statue to the Icelanders as a nation among nations, and its importance for Reykjavík as a future capital. These attitudes were founded, of course, on growing nationalism, with the aim of promoting patriotic fervour; but the civil aspect was given equal weight by promoting Reykjavík, which had been the home of the first settler, as an ideal capital for the nascent nation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Collection of the National and University Library of Iceland. Fundargerðarbækur Kvöldfélagsins í Reykjavík, 10. apríl 1874 [Minutes of the Evening Society, 10 Apr. 1874]. Unpublished.

<sup>8</sup> According to medieval sources, when he arrived at the coast of Iceland, Ingólfur flung his high-seat pillars, carved with likenesses of Norse gods, into the sea, vowing to settle where they washed ashore. Thus he placed the choice in the hands of the gods, and was led to Reykjavík.

<sup>9</sup> “Hugvekkjur út af þúsund ára landnámi Ingólfs og fyrstu byggingu Íslands II” [Homilies on the Millennium of Ingólfur’s Settlement and the First Inhabitants of Iceland II] 1864: 159–162.

## Ingólfur Arnarson—Iceland's Columbus

Although plans to erect a statue of Ingólfur Arnarson in Reykjavík came to nothing in 1874, King Christian IX of Denmark and Iceland visited his colony that year, and the Icelanders received their first constitution. This marked a turning point in the Icelanders' campaign for independence: thirty years later Iceland attained home rule, and a Minister of Iceland was appointed, resident in Reykjavík. The town had thus taken on the role of capital city, and it was developing a more urban identity. A parliament house of cut stone had been built, with the beginnings of a flower garden where the Thorvaldsen statue stood. In addition, two banks had been built of stone on the main street, and in 1906 construction work commenced on a stone building to house the National Library. Preparation was under way for the foundation of the University of Iceland. Iceland's first professional artists had made their entrance and were showing their work. Urban culture was establishing itself in Iceland's main centres of population, and a forum for it was coming into being in Reykjavík.

It is in this social context that one must view the debate that took place in 1907–1908 about the statue of the settler Ingólfur Arnarson by sculptor Einar Jónsson (1874–1954). The background was, as mentioned above, that a delegation of Icelandic parliamentarians visited Denmark in 1906 at the invitation of King Frederik VIII of Denmark and Iceland. At the end of the visit it was proposed that the Danes might present to the Icelanders a bronze cast of Thorvaldsen's sculpture *Jason*, but this idea met with an unenthusiastic reception in the Danish press. Instead it was suggested that it would be more appropriate to present the Icelanders with a statue of their first settler and, referring to the fact that Jónsson had participated in the Free Exhibition (Den frie Udstilling) of 1906 with a maquette of the settler, to commission the Icelandic sculptor to make it. Not surprisingly, this idea was warmly welcomed in Iceland. The following appeared in the periodical *Ísafold*:

We would receive a most beautiful and hugely famous work of art in *Jason*, and it is most pleasant to us that the sculptor, that world-renowned genius, was of Icelandic origin. Yet it weighs far more heavily, many times more, that the likeness should

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not commemorate a southern, Greek mythical hero, but a Norse Viking and, more than that, the most famous man in the history of this land, except for Snorri Sturluson: Iceland's own Columbus.<sup>10</sup>

The tone of the article is high-flown and nationalistic. Not only does it emphasize Thorvaldsen's family connection with Iceland, which the Icelanders were keen to uphold, it also glorifies the Norse, symbolized by the Viking, vis-à-vis the southern hero of Greek mythology—clearly irrelevant to the Icelanders. On the other hand, the significance of Ingólfur Arnarson for Iceland is stressed by likening him to a famous name in international history, Christopher Columbus. When the issue was again addressed in the press, in relation to the discussion of whether or not the Danes would give the Icelanders the statue of Ingólfur, it came as no surprise that the idea was raised that the Icelanders might find it more rewarding if they were to erect their own statue.

This idea clearly soon gained a following: less than a month later the periodical *Ingólfur* announced on its front page, under the headline “Ingólfur Arnarson Is Coming!” that the Danes had decided against the gift, and that a movement had arisen among the inhabitants of Reykjavík to raise a memorial to Ingólfur. The main news item was that the Reykjavík Craftsmen's Association (Íðnaðarmannafélagið í Reykjavík) had determined to contribute 2,000 krónur to a fund to purchase the statue of Ingólfur from sculptor Jónsson. The paper reports that a committee had been elected to gather contributions, and urges the public and the merchants of the town to give to the fund.<sup>11</sup> Einar Jónsson was at that time living in Copenhagen, where he had been since graduating from the Royal Academy of Arts in 1899. The committee sent him a telegram informing him that the Craftsmen's Association had started fundraising, so he could safely commence work on the statue. The process that was thus put in

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<sup>10</sup> “Harla fagurt og tilkomumikið og stórum frægt listaverk fengjum vér, þar sem Jason er, og hugnæmt er oss það, að höfundurinn, hinn heimsfrægi snillingur, var af íslenzku bergi brotinn. En hitt vegur stórum meira, margfalt meira, að líkneskið jartegni ekki suðræna, gríska goðfræðishetju, heldur norrænan víking og þar á ofan frægasta manninn í sögu þessa lands, annan en Snorra Sturluson,—Kólumbus Íslands.” “Jason eða Ingólfur” [Jason or Ingólfur] 1906: 218.

<sup>11</sup> “Ingólfur Arnarson kemur!” [Ingólfur Arnarson Is Coming!] 1906: 159.

motion was somewhat like what the members of the Evening Society had envisaged. In both cases an association was involved, and public contributions were solicited. Now, however, an Icelandic sculptor was available to take the commission.

The Ingólfur Committee (Ingólfsnefnd) looked for ways to publicize the project, and in the autumn of 1906 an eloquent magister of philosophy and psychology, Guðmundur Finnbogason (1873–1944), was commissioned to give a public lecture on Ingólfur in a hall in Reykjavík. Finnbogason knew Jónsson well, as they had been students at the same time in Copenhagen. A great progressive and a patriot, he had a fine reputation as an orator. His speech began on an optimistic note, celebrating the progress that had been achieved in Iceland, which he attributed to the nation having gone to serious work, which in turn had enhanced the Icelanders' faith in their own capabilities. The movement to erect a statue of Ingólfur was, he said, one of the clearest examples of the will of every class of society to honour the ideal of nationality. Stressing this point still further, he maintained that hopes for a prosperous future for the nation were founded on the memory of all that was finest and brightest in the nation's history; for this reason there was a desire to erect a monument to the first settler.

Finnbogason's speech was largely a eulogy for Ingólfur, although in fact little was known of the real character and history of the first settler, and the presentation must be interpreted in the light of the occasion and the purpose of the address. Finnbogason stated, for instance, that Ingólfur was probably a handsome man, since his sister Helga was described as "the finest of women." He also maintained that Ingólfur was a man of faith, as he was supposed to have sought guidance from his gods, and did not doubt them, and thus he was spared the torment of having to make a choice. He said that Ingólfur had no choice, but that he simply obeyed, and that his obedience was easy for him. On the other hand, Finnbogason presented Ingólfur as a pioneer: not only did he sail to Iceland, he undertook to make a settlement there, and to set an example for others to follow.<sup>12</sup> Later in his lecture Finnbogason gives a description of the settler, as envisaged by Jónsson:

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<sup>12</sup> Finnbogason 1943: 30–35.

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He stands on Arnarhóll, leaning on his high-seat pillar. He is a young man, handsome and chieftainlike. From his face and posture shine confidence, strength and resolve. Indomitable, he looks over the land to which the gods have directed him, the land which is to take on all his hopes, all his achievements and honour. He feels that he is a pioneer into the land of the future; he knows that many noble men will walk in his footsteps, and that this is the beginning of the history of an entire nation. He has planted here a stout branch of his nation's family tree in new soil. And in his mind he sees it grow and blossom. Through his ideals he sees a vision of the history of the Icelandic nation.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 1. Einar Jónsson, *Ingólfur Arnarson*, 1907. Plaster. The Einar Jónsson Museum.

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<sup>13</sup> “Hann stendur á Arnarhóli og styðst við öndvegissúlu sína. Hann er ungur maður, fríður sýnum og höfðinglegur. Úr svip hans og viðmóti skín trúnaðartraustið, styrkurinn og stefnufestan. Óruggur horfir hann yfir landið, sem guðirnir hafa vísað honum á, landið, sem nú á að eignast vonir hans, alla hans dáð og drengskap. Hann finnur að hann er forgöngumaður inn í land framtíðarinnar; hann veit, að í spor sín muni margir göfugir menn ganga og að hér byrjar saga heillar þjóðar. Hann hefur gróðursett sterkan kvist af kynviði þjóðar sinnar í nýjum jarðvegi og sér hann í huganum vaxa og blómgast. Í hillungum hugsjónanna sér hann sögu íslenskrar þjóðar.” Finnbogason 1943: 36.

## The Settler—The Pioneer Spirit

In his sculpture Jónsson had complied with the same tradition as Guðmundsson in his sketch, depicting a man standing with his weight resting on one foot and one arm raised. Jónsson's Ingólfur Arnarson is, however, a far more martial figure, standing erect by his high-seat pillar with its dragonhead tip, and grasping his halberd, while the other arm rests on his upright shield. He wears armour and a helmet, his body is swayed slightly backward while his facial features are strong, and the look in his eyes is penetrating. He is a Viking, in battle array and heavily armed, and from his physique and expression we can deduce his physical and mental character. He is the image of the tough, determined Norse settler.

In 1902 Jónsson had made a maquette of a small statue of Ingólfur that in principle was the same as the large statue completed in 1907. From the late 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century various drafts and completed works survive in which the artist sought inspiration in Norse mythology. It should also be mentioned that, prior to studying at the Royal Academy, Jónsson was a student with Norwegian sculptor Stephan Sinding, a symbolist who portrayed themes from Norse mythology and encouraged Jónsson to seek motifs in the sagas of Icelanders. In addition, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries works such as *Danmarks Kronike* by Saxo Grammaticus, *Heimskringla*, and the *Prose Edda* were published in Scandinavia in splendid editions, illustrated by well-known Nordic artists of the time. The visual Old Norse world, as conceived by Nordic artists—many of whom had based their work on research in museums and consultation with scholars—was thus not unfamiliar to Jónsson.

By the autumn of 1907 Jónsson had completed the statue and the bas-reliefs on the pedestal. He sent photographs to the Ingólfur Committee, which were exhibited in Reykjavík. The image was pleasing to Jónsson's Icelandic contemporaries. Heraldic, it portrayed qualities that the Icelanders of the time attributed to their ancient heroes as described in saga literature. One of those who wrote an article in the press about the statue was Ágúst H. Bjarnason. Like Finnbogason, he had studied philosophy at the University of Copenhagen at the time when Jónsson was beginning his artistic career in the city. He writes:



The image of Ingólfur will be most beautiful from the side where one approaches it unhindered, and nothing conceals Ingólfur's physique and appearance—that is to say, the side where he grasps his halberd. There is so much strength, vigour and fortitude in all his physical build, and his face is so strong-featured, that it must elicit admiration [...] One must admire most greatly his physical form. The chest is very powerfully developed, and the coat of mail fits the body so closely that it delineates all the musculature [...] The face, on the left side, is most determined and manly, yet with fine features.<sup>14</sup>

The writer is full of admiration for the athletic male body and connects the appearance of the figure with personality traits that are deemed admirable. Much of what he says is similar to Finnbogason's lecture on Ingólfur Arnarson. The pioneer stands straight-backed with his chest flung out, and his halberd—the Old Norse weapon of choice—raised on end.

While the statue received a generally enthusiastic reception from those who made their views known, they were less pleased with the bas-reliefs on the pedestal. In these, which were the sculptor's addition, Jónsson had expressed his own idiosyncratic symbolic interpretation of the settlement of Iceland. From the dispute that arose between Jónsson and the Ingólfur Committee, it is clear that in Iceland people knew little of his other work. Only two of his works were familiar to the Icelandic public: *Outlaws (Útlagar)*, purchased by a merchant in 1904, which stood in the lobby of Parliament House, and a sculpture of romantic poet Jónas Hallgrímsson on Lækjargata, one of Reykjavík's main streets. Both were naturalistic works. But by this time Jónsson had abandoned naturalism for symbolism in his art, and he had shown his work with a radical group of Danish sculptors in Copenhagen who exhibited as the Free Sculptors (De frie Billedhuggere). Several of them had been in Paris in the 1890s, where they had encountered and adopted symbolism. Many of them had

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<sup>14</sup> “Fegurst verður Ingólfsmyndin á þá hliðina, þar sem komið er að henni berskjaldaðri og ekkert hylur vöxt né yfirbragð Ingólfs, en það er þeim megin, er hann styðst við atgerinn. Er svo mikill styrkur, fjör og festa í öllum líkamsskapnaði hans og andlitíð svo svípmikið, að það hlýtur að vekja aðdáum manna [...] Einkum hljóta menn þó að dást að líkamsskapnaði hans. Brjóstið er hvelft mjög og hringabrynjan fellur svo aðdánlega vel að líkamanum, að þar mótar fyrir hverjum vöðva. [...] Andlitíð er á vinstri hliðina einbeitt mjög og karlmannlegt, en þó svíphreint.” Bjarnason 1907: 272.

been influenced by the French sculptor Auguste Rodin. The ideas reflected in the works were, however, more important in the art of the members of the Danish group, who had been influenced by the social views prevalent at the *fin de siècle*. Central to their ideology was the requirement of originality, which in turn relates to the concept of the autonomous creative individual, known to Danish artists through the writings of Danish writer Georg Brandes about German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>15</sup>

Like his fellow Free Sculptors, Jónsson was deeply influenced by radical ideas about originality in art. In the bas-reliefs on the sides of the pedestal on the theme of the settlement of Iceland, he departs from conventional illustration. Instead of illustrating the narrative of the *Book of Settlement* he expressed his ideas about the settlement in allegorical scenes, based on symbols and personifications, with references to the ancient text. This conflicted with representational principles, and the members of the Ingólfur Committee found his work hard to understand; in addition, they could not accept his interpretation of history. They were especially distressed by the image *Flight of the Gods to the Mountains of Iceland*, which depicted the gods racing for the mountains with a gigantic hand behind them, in front of which was a man with arms spread wide. In a letter to the artist, the committee members said that he was misrepresenting history, as Ingólfur had fled Norway to escape tyranny, not Christianity. They pointed out that the Old Norse religion had persisted in Norway for a whole century after Ingólfur and others left for Iceland.<sup>16</sup> The artist replied that his intention was not to illustrate in the bas-reliefs the account of Ingólfur's settlement, but to express his ideas about the culture of Norse mythology, which came to Iceland with the settlers. He writes:

The gods come speeding on a cloud through the air, and far in the east they see in the rosy dawn the symbol of Christianity, the great hand of God. In God's hand is Christ, who willingly extends his arms (not nailed). The gods flee, not in fear, but because their day is past. They hasten towards the land of sunset, "Iceland"—and tread their final walk on their white

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<sup>15</sup> Nielsen 1996: 27–31.

<sup>16</sup> Kristjánsson 1948: 173.

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feet, from the mountains of Iceland into the fiery red of the setting sun.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 2. Einar Jónsson, *Flight of the Gods to the Mountains of Iceland*, 1907. Relief. Plaster, destroyed. The Einar Jónsson Museum.

The artist's expositions did not suffice to reconcile his views on the reliefs with those of the committee, but the committee members felt that they might be added in due course, provided that they reflected the account given in the *Book of Settlements*. Jónsson refused. He dismissed the proposal, which he said showed that the committee members intended him to uphold the dead letter, which was opposite to his own views.

The disagreement between Jónsson and the committee was concerned not only with the reliefs, but also with the settler's motto "Sjálfur leið þú sjálfan þig" (Lead Thyself), which Jónsson had carved onto the high-seat pillar, thus accentuating the autonomy of the settler, who was guided by nothing but his own will. As Finnbogason had done in his lecture on Ingólfur, the committee members pointed out that according to the historical sources the first settler had been guided by his gods to settle at Reykjavík. They proposed that Jónsson should change the motto to "Fréttin vísar til Íslands" (The Oracle Points to Iceland). The artist would not accept this. In his reply to the committee in early 1908 he defends his interpretation by referring to what he regards as characteristics of the Nordic race:

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<sup>17</sup> "Guðirnir koma á skýi þeysandi í gegnum loftið, lengst í austri sjá þeir í morgunroðanum „Symbol“ kristinnar, sú mikla guðshönd. Í hendi guðs sést Kristur, sem breiðir út faðminn af eigin vilja (ekki negldur). Guðirnir flýja, ekki hræddir, heldur af því, að þeirra dagur er runninn, þeir flýta sér til sólseturslandsins „Íslands“—og ganga á sínum hvítu fótum sína síðustu göngu af Íslandsjökulfjöllum inn í þá eldrauðu kvöldsól, er hún gengur til viðar." Kristjánsson 1948: 173–174.

I like this motto [Lead Thyself] very much, for a number of reasons. It tells us to have faith in ourselves, which I feel every person should have; to be guided by our own conscience and to take responsibility for what we do. Also because it is progress to lead oneself, instead of being led and following in the footsteps of others. And because this is primarily the motto of the North Germanic race—perhaps not officially, but it lives tacitly in the nature of the Northern peoples.<sup>18</sup>

Jónsson now saw his ideas about the autonomous individual, with which he had become acquainted through debates in Denmark on artistic originality, as intrinsic and characteristic of a specific race. Similar ideas are expressed in Finnbogason's lecture on Ingólfur Arnarson, although he refers only to an individual when he speaks of Ingólfur having the pioneer spirit, emphasizing his role as a pioneering settler. Finnbogason, however, stressed Ingólfur's faith in the guidance of his gods. Another intellectual and politician, Bjarni Jónsson of Vogur, a keen advocate for artists, gave a lecture on the artist and the statue of Ingólfur in early 1908 in which he strove to explain Jónsson's symbolic approach and defend his position. He focused especially on explaining the motto "Sjálfur leið þú sjálfan þig," Lead Thyself, which had met with such a negative response. He refers to the Eddic poem Grógaldur, in which these words are attributed to Óðinn himself. Bjarni Jónsson also defended the bas-reliefs, saying that "the artistic eye has correctly perceived the most vital consequences of the settlement of Iceland: to conserve and protect the memory of Old Norse culture."<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the Icelanders were the guardians of Norse culture, and this was portrayed in Einar Jónsson's work, according to his advocates. Bjarni Jónsson's method of supporting the artist, to tie

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<sup>18</sup> "Þetta „mottó“ hefur mér líkað svo vel og það af mörgum ástæðum. Það bendir manni á að hafa trú á sjálfum sér, sem mér finnst að hver maður eigi að hafa; að vinna eftir sinni samvisku og ábyrgjast það, sem maður aðhefst. Einnig af því, að það er framför að leiða sjálfan sig í staðinn fyrir að láta leiða sig og feta í fótspor annarra. Líka af því, að þetta eru fyrst og fremst einkunnarorð norður-germannska þjóðflokksins, ekki máské opinberlega, en það lifir þegjandi í eðlisfari Norðurláfubúa." Kristjánsson 1948: 172.

<sup>19</sup> "Þar hefir listamannsaugað séð rétt, hverjar afdrifaríkastar afleiðingar landnám Íslands hafði: að vernda og geyma í minnum fornorræna menning." "Listir og vísindi" [Art and Science] 1908: 1.

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his work of art in with the political debate of the time, is typical for the discourse of the early 20th century, when Iceland's new cultural society was emerging, and the statue of Ingólfur Arnarson—or the debate about it—was one aspect of that process. Evidence of this was the article in *Ísafold* in the autumn of 1906, cited above, in which Ingólfur was called “Iceland’s Columbus.” In the autumn of 1908 *Ísafold* published an article in which the author, writing as “K,” discussed among other things the Ingólfur Committee’s criticism of the message of the motto Lead Thyself, and maintained that the intention was not to erect a monument to Ingólfur because he was a man of faith, but because he had the “pioneer spirit.” “K” felt that the motto was an apt choice as it was at the heart of the character of the Germanic race, and cast “a shining light upon our nation’s ambitions for independence.”<sup>20</sup>



Figure 3. Einar Jónsson, The monument of Ingólfur Arnarson on the hill Arnarhóll in Reykjavík, around 1924. Photo: L. Albert. The Einar Jónsson Museum.

After some debate in the press, the subject died down. An agreement was reached with the artist on revisions, including changing the motto Lead Thyself to The Oracle Points to Iceland. Attempts to resume fundraising failed, as by this time money was being raised to finance another monument, to the politician Jón

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<sup>20</sup> “Ingólfs-líkneskið. Hvar er nú komið?” [The Statue of Ingólfur: Where Is It?] 1908: 285.

Sigurðsson (1811–1879), one of the architects of Icelandic independence, and in the public mind the leading national hero. Not until 1923 did the Craftsmen’s Association decide to pay the costs of casting the statue of Ingólfur in bronze and installing it on Arnarhóll hill, but without the reliefs. It was ceremonially unveiled on 24 February the following year. Certain changes had been made: the facial features are less harsh, while the helmet is taller and the ornament is different. The major alteration, however, was that the motto, and the reliefs on the plinth, were absent. The monument was thus not the consistent work of art Einar Jónsson had conceived.

### A Norseman in the New World

In October 1916 an article was published in the Norwegian-language American newspaper *Nordisk Tidende* (Nordic Times) reporting that a statue of Thorfinnur Karlsefni was to be installed in a planned sculpture garden in Fairmont Park in Philadelphia. According to the sagas, Thorfinnur sailed from Greenland to Vínland (America) at the beginning of the 11th century accompanied by a group of men and women and settled there with his wife Guðrídur Thorbjarnardóttir. The origin of the project of memorializing Karlsefni was that a wealthy woman, Ellen Philippe Samuel, by then deceased, had bequeathed half a million dollars to found a sculpture park to be made up of works depicting the history of America. It was reported that the first sculpture was to portray the “first settler,” and that a project committee had been appointed, comprising J. Bunford Samuel (widower of Mrs. Samuel), Henry G. Leach (secretary of the American-Scandinavian Foundation), and two of Icelandic origin: Stanley T. Olafsson and Mr. Björnsson. The article in *Nordisk Tidende* was accompanied by two photographs of Einar Jónsson’s maquette of his statue of Thorfinnur. It is reported that the sculptor has been requested to send the maquette to America, so that the committee could better assess it. The article also mentions a lecture given by Leach on Jónsson’s work in New York some years earlier, in which he describes him as one of the greatest sculptors in the Nordic countries and says that in his work one might see the old saga spirit reborn in modern form.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “Norrønt minde” 1916: 1.

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Figure 4. Einar Jónsson's maquette of the statue of Thorfinnur Karlsefni, 1916.  
The Einar Jónsson Museum.

Einar Jónsson's involvement in the project was the result of this promotion of his work, which had taken place in connection with the publication in 1915 of an issue of the *American-Scandinavian Review* focusing on Iceland. It had included an article by Leach about Jónsson's work with photographs of his art. Leach, who was a scholar of Nordic studies, was in touch with colleagues in Denmark, such as the Icelandic professor Finnur Jónsson of the University of Copenhagen. Einar Jónsson and the professor were acquainted as Finnur Jónsson and another scholar, Valtýr Guðmundsson, who had written his doctorate at the University of Copenhagen on the living conditions of Icelanders during the saga age, had advised Einar Jónsson on the garments and equipment of Ingólfur Arnarson when he worked on his statue. It seems obvious that Leach played a part in Einar Jónsson being commissioned to make the statue of Thorfinnur. In a letter to Jónsson in 1915, he had informed him that plans were under way to erect a memorial to Thorfinnur Karlsefni in Fairmount

Park, Philadelphia; that the donor, Mr. J. Bunford Samuel, intended to ask two or three sculptors to submit proposals; and that he had mentioned Einar Jónsson's name in that context. Leach concluded his letter by asking Jónsson: Would designing such a statue interest you?<sup>22</sup>

The photographs of Einar Jónsson's sculpture in *Nordisk Tidende* appear to have made an impression, and to have been well received, as evidenced by an article entitled *Leif Eriksson Støttens Eftermæle* published in December 1916 in Chicago in another American-Scandinavian periodical, *Scandia*. The writer begins by discussing disputes over a statue of Leifur Eiríksson (Leif the Lucky) in Humboldt Park, Chicago, in which he himself had been involved. He recounts that the statue of Leifur, especially his clothing and weapons, were inconsistent with people's ideas of the appearance and behaviour of the Old Norse. He said that nothing in the statue indicated that the subject was a seafarer, and that those who were familiar with the hard toil on Norwegian vessels could not identify with the image that had been presented. The man portrayed, wearing a flimsy tunic and armed with a sword, bore more resemblance, the writer claimed, to the men who long afterwards had travelled southwards along the shores of Europe and returned to Norway with their haul. The Vikings who sought out uninhabited islands to settle were entirely different. They used their battle-axes both as defensive weapons and as tools on sea and on land. "Around the statue in Humboldt there is no seaweed, no anchor, oars or boatshed. The axe, without which the Viking cannot survive, is absent." This is not a Viking who navigates the southern Arctic seas and the North Atlantic. "He stands, and he will probably feel the cold over the winter."<sup>23</sup>

But the writer saw something quite different in the photographs of Einar Jónsson's Thorfinnur Karlsefni, published in the November and December issues of the *American-Scandinavian Review*. A Viking stood with his hefty battle-axe leaning forward and rested his arms on it. He wore a warm cloak, probably of homespun woollen cloth or hide, surmised the writer, over his chain-mail hauberk. Beneath the cloak a two-foot sword was visible in its scabbard, and on his back Thorfinnur bore a Viking shield. This image, the writer maintains, is a

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from Henry G. Leach to Einar Jónsson, 23 June 1915.

<sup>23</sup> Ray 1916: 1



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true depiction of the settlers of the Viking Age, and does honour to history and to Norwegian heritage.<sup>24</sup>

A clear—and familiar—distinction is drawn here between North and South, and it is obvious from these words that Einar Jónsson’s proposal for a memorial to Thorfinnur reflected the ideas of people of Nordic origin about the appearance and physique of their Old Norse ancestors. The figure is equipped for battle and stands upright with a cloak on his shoulders and a shield on his back; with his extended, crossed arms resting on the axe handle, which leans forward, he looks over his left shoulder with a resolute expression. On his scabbard are images of Iceland’s guardian spirits and on the shield is a runic inscription describing the settler’s home country: “From the northern isle of fire and ice/of verdant dales and blue mountains/of wakeful sun and dreaming dark/abode of the goddesses of the Northern Lights.”<sup>25</sup>



Figure 5. J. Bunford Samuel standing by the statue of Thorfinnur Karlsefni on the Schuylkill River Drive in Fairmont Park in Philadelphia, 1920. The Einar Jónsson Museum.

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<sup>24</sup> Ray 1916: 1

<sup>25</sup> “Frá eylandi norðurs elds og ísa/blómstrandi dala og blárna fjalla/vakandi sólar og drauma—dimmu/dísa heimkynni norðurljósa.” “Þorfinnur karlsefni” [Thorfinnur “Karlsefni” Thorðarson] 1921: 1.

As in the case with the statue of Ingólfur Arnarson, the composition of the piece is characterized by a strict formal structure and an emphasis on what may be termed the heroic image. The sculpture is made up of geometrical shapes, straight lines, oblique lines, and a circle. The expression and bearing of the figure indicate that Jónsson had set out, as with the statue of Ingólfur, through rigorous application of forms, to manifest ideas about the autonomous individual. It should be mentioned, however, that by this time he had moved on from the worldly individualism that had previously inspired him and now focused on the spiritual quest for lofty ideals. But the focus on the individual remained central to Jónsson's development of the work, as was the idea of the responsibility of the artist. In this sense his views were consistent with the idea of the settler of unknown lands.

Einar Jónsson went to the U.S. in the summer of 1917 to work on the final version of the statue. It was cast in bronze in 1917, and later a site was picked for it at East River Drive in Fairmont Park, Philadelphia, where it was unveiled in late 1920 at a ceremony commemorating the Norse settlement of America. A Philadelphia newspaper, reporting on the event, stated that the statue was the first of eighteen to be erected along the river to commemorate the many European nations that had gone to form the American nation.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

While it would be unfair to compare Sigurður Guðmundsson's rough sketch for a figure of the settler Ingólfur Arnarson with Einar Jónsson's completed statues of the settlers of northern lands, Jónsson's sculptures, and the debate about them, are evidence of a changing emphasis in the ideas of what they were intended to represent. In the 19th-century discourse about the statue of Ingólfur, the emphasis was on the nation's gratitude to Ingólfur for commencing the settlement of Iceland. In accordance with this idea, Guðmundsson's figure holds a flaming torch—a reference to the rules of settlement to be followed by men—while the torch may also be interpreted to symbolize the pioneer who lights a beacon for others to follow after him. The torch becomes the first settler's

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<sup>26</sup> "Unveil Viking Statue on East River Drive" 1920.

attribute, and not his weapon—the sword at his side—which remains, however, indispensable in the image of the Old Norse hero.

A good deal more resolve may be read from Jónsson's images of the settlers—from their bearing, facial expression, and weaponry. The images radiate the supremacy of the vigorous male, especially in the statue of Ingólfur. It is clear from the writings of the sculptor's contemporaries, Guðmundur Finnbogason and Ágúst H. Bjarnason, that this presentation harmonized with the views of various intellectuals of the time who were in a position to influence public opinion on cultural and social issues. In his lecture Finnbogason stated that Ingólfur had the pioneer spirit, and Jónsson implied the same when he said that *Lead Thyself* was a motto of the Northern Germanic race. While Jónsson's words must be attributed to his philosophical ideas that he had acquired in Copenhagen on originality in art, they also reflect other views expressed in the public debate on the statue of Ingólfur, in which “Nordicness” is portrayed as a strength. The same appears to have applied in the debate on the monument to Thorfinnur Karlsefni in the U.S. There, however, the focus is on Nordic man having grown strong through his struggle with the hostile nature of the North. In the view of Americans of Nordic descent in that region, the strength of the Norse settlers was manifested in their physique, bearing, and clothing. A man in a thin tunic, wielding a sword, had no place in northern climes. He would feel the cold, and his sword would probably prove easily blunted.

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# Images of the North, Sublime Nature, and a Pioneering Icelandic Nation

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**Abstract** – This article sheds light on the issue of national identity as related to the Tourist Association of Iceland, which was founded near the end of the 1920s. Written Association sources illustrate how the leading participants interpreted their work ideologically, with nationalistic connotations. Not only did they see themselves as heirs of Iceland’s celebrated first settler, Ingólfur Arnarson, but they applied this picture of themselves to the nation as a whole. While engaged in opening up the country—in particular its uninhabited highlands—and in building up a modern travel infrastructure, they interpreted these undertakings as parallel to Iceland’s initial settlement. They therefore viewed themselves as pioneers who had taken on the mission of pacifying the still frightening Icelandic environment and providing access to its resources. In this way, they would not merely contribute to modernizing their country, but also to cultivating a positive national self-image. This self-image was based to a large degree on self-assertion over nature, as well as on portraying the nation as the most northerly preserver of culture within European civilization. Curiously, this meant assigning attributes to Iceland’s own interior that depicted it as a “Far North,” a North that ought to be challenged and wherever possible conquered.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords** – Image, landscape, nation, national identity, nature, pioneering, settlement, the North, the sublime, travelling

## Introduction

In the first decades of the 20th century, the search for a viable national identity played a significant role in Icelandic society, permeating contemporary discussion on various levels. This search had clearly become pressing: while the fight for independence in the 19th century had generally been confined to ideology, the early 20th century saw actual changes such as the gaining of sovereignty and

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations in Icelandic translated by Philip Vogler.

finally, in 1944, the founding of the Icelandic republic. As Benedict Anderson has so convincingly shown, national independence movements tend in every case to present their nation's history as a teleological development and to deploy political myths that buttress their struggle.<sup>2</sup> Frequently, these myths refer back to a Golden Age or some appropriate historical origin. Mythically reworked past events or heroic figures serve to give an aura of legitimacy to the political goal of national sovereignty as one that has long and constantly slumbered in the "soul" of the nation. In the first decades of the 20th century, Icelandic intellectuals like the historian Jón Jónsson Aðils and others became quite influential by compiling the country's history and introducing it to the public through their lectures.<sup>3</sup>

The present article endeavours to outline how the Tourist Association of Iceland (Ferðafélag Íslands), established in 1927, contributed to forming and moulding an Icelandic identity. Reference is made to extant writings relating to the Association, for example, formal speeches, minutes and rules, newspaper and magazine articles, trip reports, and in some cases autobiographical records. Since the period studied reaches from the initial decades of the century until around the mid-1940s, it covers the time just before national sovereignty was officially achieved. From its beginnings, the Tourist Association was not only seen as a travel or recreation club, but was rather ascribed a significant role in nurturing and unifying the Icelandic nation. Association materials turn out upon perusal to combine into a self-description of the nation as a whole. Moreover, they often call on the Icelandic people to cultivate a love for and pride in their country. Also of interest will be how a stereotypical image of Icelanders was connected to an image of the physical environment, and in turn to an image of the North.

### The Tourist Association of Iceland

On 27 November 1927, the Tourist Association of Iceland was founded at a public meeting in Reykjavík, following preparatory work at preceding meetings by men highly influential in Icelandic society at

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Aðils 1903, 1906.



the time.<sup>4</sup> Among these men were politicians, merchants, publishers, and others who had appealed to their countrymen by publishing promotional articles in various newspapers.<sup>5</sup> At the founding meeting, a speech was delivered by Björn Ólafsson (1885–1974). He described the purpose of the new association, which he perceived as serving to encourage and facilitate travelling in Iceland.<sup>6</sup> However, he felt it necessary to explain this purpose better:

Some people may find it strange to found an association for encouraging trips in their own country. To my mind, nonetheless, this plan is so worthwhile, so crucial to our nation, that the people of this country will be unable to become good Icelanders, in the fullest sense of these words, without being acquainted with their own land, without having been influenced by the land itself, without having breathed in strength from its powerful natural surroundings, without their eyes having been opened by this land's beauty and grandeur, to the extent of thanking Providence with deep emotion for being allowed to call it their fatherland.<sup>7</sup>

Ólafsson's speech tells how the establishment of this association and its proposed activities will touch on nothing less than the self-esteem of Icelanders and their relations with their country, even referring to it patriotically as their fatherland. Connecting back to previous discussions, he went on to point out the following:

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<sup>4</sup> According to the first paragraph of the association's founding articles, its formal name in Icelandic is *Ferðafélag Íslands*, in Norwegian *Islands Turistforening*, and in English the *Tourist Association of Iceland*. Þorláksson 1928.

<sup>5</sup> See "Ávarp" [Address] 1927: 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ferðafélag Íslands* 1927 (manuscr.).

<sup>7</sup> "Sumum kann að þykja kynlegt, að stofnað sje fjelag til að styðja að ferðalögum í eigin landi. En í mínum augum er sú stefna svo mikils verð, svo nauðsynleg þjóðinni, að landsmenn geti ekki orðið góðir Íslendingar í orðanna fyllstu mörkinu (sic), án þess að þekkja sitt eigið land, án þess að hafa orðið fyrir áhrifum frá sjálfu landinu, án þess að hafa andað að sjer þróttu frá hinnu máttugu náttúru þess, án þess að augu þeirra hafi opnast fyrir fegurð landsins og mikilleik, svo að þeir með klökkum hug þeirra akka forsjoninni fyrir að þeir geta kallað þetta land föðurland sitt." *Ferðafélag Íslands* 1927 (manuscr.).

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

First and foremost, we wish to found this association in order to assist Icelanders in becoming acquainted with their own country, to urge them forward in doing that, and to make it easier for them to achieve that.<sup>8</sup>

The association would thus have no interest in working with foreign tourists in Iceland or with the growing Icelandic tourist industry, as some had feared; rather, the opposite was to be the case, with the emphasis placed on fellow Icelanders and their ties to the homeland.<sup>9</sup>

Ólafsson's speech certainly paints a quite negative picture of how much Icelanders knew about or were interested in their homeland at the time when the association was founded. He felt that Icelanders knew too little of their country, since they hardly travelled at all and certainly never visited the uninhabited parts of the island. Trips into such parts were considered too expensive, too difficult, and too demanding, and the dangers of the isolated areas were imagined to be even greater than they actually were. The speech implies that fear of the unknown played a role in these misconceptions, so that the association would help out in opening up the country. The association would promote the development of tourism infrastructure by clearing roads and building mountain huts, while ensuring that meals and accommodation remained affordable. Yet another task for the association would be to publish descriptions of routes and trips, as well as maps. The association would have cairns raised in the deserted highlands to guide travellers on their way, so that they would once more be able to use the long-forgotten highland trails. The association's intention of publishing "short, easily understood descriptions for the general public" of flora and fauna and of geological formations would allow for a "new dimension to travel enjoyment."<sup>10</sup> Only when the cliffs, mountains, glaciers, and uplands have become a great, remarkable book which they are capable of reading, the speaker declared, will travelling turn into a true pleasure for people.

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<sup>8</sup> "Við viljum stofna fjelag fyrst og fremst til þess, að hjálpa Íslendingum til að kynnast sínu eigin landi, örva þá til að gera það og greiða fyrir að það takist." Ferðafélag Íslands 1927 (manuscr.).

<sup>9</sup> "Stofnun ferðamannafélags" [The Founding of a Tourist Association] 1927: 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ferðafélag Íslands 1927 (manuscr.).

## SUBLIME NATURE, AND A PIONEERING ICELANDIC NATION

The intentions listed above are based on a definite enthusiasm that aimed at making Iceland accessible, both physically and mentally. The present essay will not address the details of how most of the goals were later dealt with and carried out, but rather will focus on an interpretation process that occurred and developed in the context of the Tourist Association.<sup>11</sup> From the very beginning, public attention was directed towards the parts of the country that appeared distant and strange, removed from everyday life and in fact hardly known. These parts were the Icelandic highlands: expansive, unsettled, and at the time seldom visited areas, lying far back from the coast and seeing almost no practical use. Fantasies of all sorts were still connected with them, nurtured by folk tales and anecdotes from the past. In succeeding decades, nevertheless, the highlands triumphed as the very image of what comprised “Icelandic” countryside, having been remodelled into a “national landscape.”<sup>12</sup> Paradigms for describing this landscape were often sought in Romantic literature. In addition, selected images of the highlands were presented whenever people wished to portray a living national identity. The outcome was, on the one hand, that nature was concentrated into a single idea and, on the other hand, that this idea was intertwined with Iceland’s national identity.

In 1952, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Tourist Association, Björn Ólafsson suggested that no other society existed which could boast with as much justification as the Association that it was an “association of all Icelanders,” standing supreme above all quarrels of class or politics and working to unify the nation by teaching it “to know and appreciate what all Icelanders possess in common: the beauty, glory and power of Icelandic nature.”<sup>13</sup> Nature is in this way presented as a unifying concept and is given certain attributes. Nature is not merely what all Icelanders possess in common but is seen as power that the nation can consume and as an opportunity for the nation’s self-reflection. However, the question remains, what traits are attributed to this image of nature?

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<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Lerner 2010.

<sup>12</sup> On “national landscape,” see Tuchtenhagen 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Ólafsson 1953.

## Wastelands of the North

During the period 1947 to 1956, two natural scientists who both served for decades as officers on the board of the Tourist Association, Pálmi Hannesson and Jón Eyþórsson, published a series of volumes entitled *Hrakningar og heiðavegir* (Perilous Journeys and Highland Trails).<sup>14</sup> While their first volume mainly consisted of historical and contemporary articles by scientific professionals or writers who concerned themselves with nature and travel, Hannesson and Eyþórsson had already modified their editing policy by the second volume, calling upon their general readers, the “plain people” of Iceland, to send in reports of their own travel experiences and of noteworthy trips they had heard about. This proposal was enthusiastically received and led to widespread interest in the series. Not only did the two men edit and then publish the reports they received, but they also collected oral reports and produced their own written versions, besides gleaning snippets of information from newspapers, magazines, and chronicles and turning them into travel descriptions. The publishers’ interest was above all oriented towards *brakningasögur*, or stories of people suffering accidents, getting lost, or being threatened by other perils on journeys through the highlands, across passes through mountain ranges, and on glaciers. Nine such journey descriptions in the volumes of *Hrakningar og heiðavegir* were penned by Hannesson (1898–1956) himself and later reappeared in various editions of his works.<sup>15</sup> Recently, these nine stories were gathered into a single dual-language edition, with Icelandic and German on opposite pages.<sup>16</sup>

One of these nine stories, written by Hannesson in 1933 and entitled *Villa á öræfum*, can be seen as setting the tone for the entire group of nine.<sup>17</sup> The story contains an extensive introduction, where the writer points out the significance of such writings for the Icelandic nation and explains why he finds it essential to collect texts

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<sup>14</sup> Eyþórsson & Hannesson 1947–1956.

<sup>15</sup> See Hannesson 1959, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> Hannesson 2007.

<sup>17</sup> “Villa á öræfum/Allein durch die Einöde,” in Hannesson 2007: 108–145.

of this sort and ensure their survival. The introduction commences with the following image of the highland landscape:

Rising above the communities and uppermost ends of the valleys, the deserted highlands take over, empty and lonely, in all their pathless expanse. No one has ever lit any fire there; never has the chime of consecrated bells been heard there. These gaping deserts drone and boom beyond the bounds of civilization, unknown and unsettled—still retaining the countenance of all beginning, back when time originated. An eternal battle proceeds as the bitter forces of nature attack merciless almost anything that breathes. Whereas whole reaches are ruled by sheer nothingness, there are some spots where short-lived, stunted vegetation manages to grow during the days of longest sunlight, when a touch of wildlife appears. As autumn approaches, however, storms tear away anything attempting to show life above the surface of ground or water.<sup>18</sup>

The above portrait is dark: it recalls the opening words of the Bible, referring to an age before there were any people on earth, before they subdued and obtained dominion over it. Various allusions and indirect quotes in the passage bring out images associated with the settlement of Iceland: not until a person has lit a fire on land does it belong to that settler, not until Christian civilization has penetrated a wilderness with the chime of consecrated bells can the wilderness be considered accessible. However, this territory, isolated from human communities, still remains “unknown and unsettled,” as the text has it. The raw forces of Nature have the last word, with mere people standing no chance against them. As at the dawn of all days, the endless wastes continue to “drone and boom.” Elements of style like alliteration draw attention to the absolute primitiveness of the scene,

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<sup>18</sup> “Upp frá byggðum og daladrögum breiðast öræfin, hin veglausa víðátta, auð og einmanaleg. Þar hefur enginn farið eldi um, og aldrei hefur heyrt þar hljómur vígðra klukkna. Utan við endimörk mannlegs síðar þruga þessi miklu firnindi, ókunn og ónumin, með svip sjálfs upphafsins enn, eins og í árdaga. Römm náttúruöfl eiga þar ævarandi baráttu, harðbýl og fjandsamleg við flest, sem anda dregur. Á stórum svæðum er þar alger auðn, en annars staðar nær skammær og kyrkingslegur gróður að þrífast, meðan sólargangur er lengstur, og fáein dýr viðgangast þar um sinn. En þegar líður að hausti, sópa harðviðrin burtu öllu því, sem unír lífi ofan vatns og molda.” Hannesson 2007: 108.

with the sound and rhythm of the words imitating fairly well the dark droning and booming of the wilderness. The reader perceives the underlying message that mankind still lacks the knowledge, abilities, and strength to make any progress in conquering this repellent, hostile environment.

The story that is told by Hannesson in *Villa á öræfum*, on the other hand, is definitely no song of praise to wild nature. Although the author shows deep respect for the wilderness described, there is no tendency to glorify it, and the actual object of his piece is not the wilderness itself, but a human encounter with nature. His subject is Kristinn Jónsson, a young farm worker who became lost while looking for sheep in north Iceland during late autumn 1898. Due to fog, he ended up in the central highlands, with which he was completely unfamiliar. As chance would have it, he also chose Iceland's longest river to show him the way, and it unfortunately did not flow towards the north, as he assumed, but rather into south Iceland. Kristinn Jónsson trudged on for long days and nights. Not only was he without food and badly prepared for the cold and wet, but for most of the time he had nothing to orient himself by and was tormented by loneliness. Despite all this, overcome and exhausted, he continued as long as he possibly could, finally driven onwards solely by the desire to reach people once more and be buried and rest in human society. His final rescue seemed practically a miracle, leading numerous contemporaries to believe that he had been saved by Providence, and that his lost wanderings were an evil game which merciless powers had been playing on this young man.

Hannesson, however, tells the story as one of a hero who, through his own endurance, determination, and strength of character, pulled himself out of the vicious grasp of the wilderness, albeit just barely. This hero is described as a commoner who accomplished an admirable feat and saved his life by facing vastly superior natural forces even though the odds seemed overwhelming. Kristinn Jónsson is painted as a representative of the Icelandic people and as a model of "composure and manliness."<sup>19</sup> The author goes so far as to compare the journey of this Icelandic farm worker and similar documented occurrences to the achievements of explorers and

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<sup>19</sup> Hannesson 2007: 136.

expedition teams, who at the time were highly honoured and travelled around the globe as representatives of their nations, advancing into the unknown, risking their lives on far-off ice fields, and establishing national claims:

Foreign nations revere the names of those men who have demonstrated achievements in the polar wastes or other places, and erect magnificent monuments to them. To my mind, this story of Kristinn Jónsson is so remarkable that it ought to be preserved through national commemoration. Lacking any gratitude, he himself lies in the Hólar cemetery, Eyjafjörður.<sup>20</sup>

By recording this story and fixing it in the nation's cultural memory, Hannesson recovers it from oblivion and wishes to make it a monument to this representative of the Icelandic people. He also lends it the significance of a national monument, or one which embodies the symbol of a nation, one where the nation will be able to find its traits modelled.<sup>21</sup> Even if this symbol is neither chiselled in rock nor moulded of bronze, publication has preserved it for future times. In this way, the author has succeeded in adapting the oral heritage that stemmed from authentic travel experiences to textual form and perpetuated it for coming generations.

## Reverting to Climate Theories

Hannesson proceeds to present the character traits supporting these achievements as being traits not only of certain individuals but typical of the Icelandic nation itself. Using as an example the hike of a farmer, Sturla Jónsson, over the ice- and snow-covered Sprengisandur uplands in 1916, Hannesson comments that even though this hike differed from that of Kristinn Jónsson in that Sturla had planned his trip and equipped himself suitably, nonetheless both walks might be

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<sup>20</sup> “Erlendar þjóðir halda mjög uppi nöfnum þeirra manna, sem afrek hafa unnið á öræfum heimskautslandanna eða annars staðar, og reisa þeim veglega minnisvarða. Mér virðist þessi saga Kristins Jónssonar svo merkileg, að hún eigi að geymast í minningu okkar þjóðar. Sjálfur hvílir hann óbættur í kirkjugarðinum að Hólum í Eyjafirði.” Hannesson 2007: 136.

<sup>21</sup> On “national monuments,” see Mayer 2004.

taken as noteworthy signs of the “bravery and tenacity” which a merciless and hostile environment had instilled in the Icelandic people.<sup>22</sup>

The gist of this argument is that the Icelandic people possess certain characteristics that they have acquired through natural conditions—through their centuries-old fight with the countryside they inhabit. Such a view corresponds very closely to traditional climate theories which align a nation’s character with interpretations based on climate in a broad sense (i.e., taking into consideration latitude/longitude, local topography, etc.). This kind of interpretation has been familiar since antiquity. In his survey of how theories of this kind evolved, the German scholar Gonthier-Louis Fink illustrates how climate theory, in contrast with scientific climatology, has remained a solely European interest and comprises a facet of European history.<sup>23</sup> In the final analysis, this interest represents the efforts of European peoples and, as time went on, of nations, to establish their identities *vis-à-vis* those of neighbouring peoples with whom they were dealing. Nature was called upon in an endeavour to ground the distinctions detected.

At first sight it may indeed appear to contribute to our comprehension if we generate models that build their explanations on contrasts in living conditions. Nonetheless, these models result in problems when we do not limit their application to deriving living habits from climatic effects but go on to include anthropological or moral aspects such as mentality and national character, or attempt to show the roots of religion or of political orientation.<sup>24</sup> Ever since antiquity, climate theories have also served to denigrate other peoples. In conformity with ethnocentric perspectives, they have purported to objectify the advantages of one’s own people by attributing them to a set of beneficial external conditions.

Aristotle introduced a three-dimensional model in which the south and north represented extreme conditions (hot versus cold),

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<sup>22</sup> Hannesson 2007: 136. On the hike of Sturla Jónsson, see the travel account “Dirfskuför Sturla á Fljótshólum/Eine gewagte Reise,” in Hannesson 2007: 146–175.

<sup>23</sup> Fink 2001.

<sup>24</sup> Fink 2001: 46.



leaving only the temperate zone between these extremes with the opportunity to develop advanced cultures. While three-dimensional models were used until the 18th century, they were then renovated into binary systems that more starkly emphasized a North–South contrast and omitted the buffer zone in between. Such regions, despite being ostensibly based on the compass directions of north and south, have frequently shifted, depending on where the cultural and spiritual centres of power were located at the moment. During the 18th and 19th centuries, for instance, the “North” was mainly a political and less a directly geographical concept, as the German scholar Hendriette Kliemann-Geisinger points out.<sup>25</sup> The border between the European “North” and “South” can however generally be ascertained to have moved farther and farther northwards. In addition, the 18th century experienced the beginning of a double-faceted reverse in paradigms, whose end result was that, firstly, positive traits were now ascribed to the North and, secondly, the culture–nature duality was reassessed so as to valorize what was natural and simple and till then had been perceived as barbaric or uncivilized.<sup>26</sup> This paradigm reversal stemmed mainly from the writings of Montesquieu and Rousseau, although as time passed it was primarily German and Scandinavian writers who reinforced it.<sup>27</sup> Through the formation of national states and each state’s search for a national character, often based on the anthropologically coloured ideas of Herder, this reversal in values assumed an ideological shape and was later driven by clearly political motivations.<sup>28</sup> The re-evaluating reached such degrees that, for example, Germany found it favourable in the 19th century to align itself with the North and even to utilize Scandinavian and Old Icelandic literature for itself and its own Germanic cult, culminating under the Nazis.<sup>29</sup>

In Iceland climate theories were particularly influential in the first decades of the 20th century, as the young nation was especially attracted by the higher value assigned to the North in the context of such theories, along with the great importance assigned to nature.

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<sup>25</sup> Kliemann-Geisinger 2007.

<sup>26</sup> See Fink 2001: 80–81.

<sup>27</sup> See Laudien 2007.

<sup>28</sup> See Henningsen 2007.

<sup>29</sup> See Henningsen 1993 and Julia Zernack in this volume.

Climate theory explanations were shown particular enthusiasm in the context of the Tourist Association. The founder of the mountain climbers' society *Fjallamenn* (which eventually entered into the Tourist Association) was the painter–sculptor Guðmundur Einarsson (1895–1963), associated with Miðdalur. He fervently supported the stance that Iceland's environment played a considerable role in shaping the character of its people. In his opinion, the nation's inhospitable surroundings had rendered it stronger, tougher, and more resilient, a conviction which he presented in allegorical statements about a tiny flower.<sup>30</sup> Finding the flower within a cavity in a lava chunk while he was building a mountain hut by the glacial ice, some 900 metres above sea level, for several days he carefully protected it against the fierce glacial winds. His remarks about it conclude as follows:

For me, this little plant had by now turned into an image of the toughness distinguishing Icelanders and of their ability to establish themselves even in the most difficult of conditions. Whereas flowers reach different sizes depending on the conditions, the ones growing in harsh environments often develop a brighter colour than those which remain warm in greenhouses.<sup>31</sup>

Guðmundur Einarsson implies that the austere harshness of the North is preferable to the gentle softness of the South, seeing how the North brings out desirable characteristics, capable of lasting over the long term. Elsewhere, in his extremely conservative thoughts on national art, he goes so far as to claim that the general spiritual renewal, which he believed was urgently required, would most probably stem from peoples living in mountainous areas.<sup>32</sup>

When those leading the Tourist Association activities during the 1920s and 1930s referred to Nature as the educator of their nation, they were favouring ideas that had already entered Icelandic literature by the early 19th century. One of the country's principal literary

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<sup>30</sup> Einarsson 1946.

<sup>31</sup> “Þessi litla jurt var nú orðin mér ímynd seiglunnar, sem einkennir Íslendinga, og hæfileikans til að festa rætur, jafnvel við hin hörðustu skilyrði. Blómin verða misstór eftir aðstæðum, en þau, sem vaxa við harðrétti, eru oft skærari að lit en hin, sem vermast í gróðurhúsum.” Einarsson 1946: 172.

<sup>32</sup> Einarsson 1928.

pioneers of Romanticism was Bjarni Thorarensen (1786–1841), whom the literary scholar Þórir Óskarsson views as “the only Icelandic poet who can with any accuracy be called a genuine romantic poet.”<sup>33</sup> Thorarensen was esteemed in the 20th century for his poems about nature and the island that was the home of the Icelanders. His interpretation of the relationship between man and nature is paraphrased by Páll Valsson as follows:

What enthuses Bjarni Thorarensen is power; he lingers on what is spectacular in the landscape. Following directly on [...] his ideas about the interaction between man and nature and Nature’s educational role, he reaches the conclusion that Icelanders have survived precisely due to the might of nature—one which has hardened and steeled the nation.<sup>34</sup>

Leading voices in the Tourist Association went so far as to ascribe the same vision to Thorarensen as that being pursued by their 20th-century organization. A good example of this is an article entitled *Fjallvegafélagið* (the Society for Mountain Trails) published in 1931 in *Árbók Ferðafélagsins* (the Travel Association Yearbook). Thorarensen had founded the society in 1831 and kept it running for eight years. The article portrays the 19th-century poet as a direct forefather of the Tourist Association.<sup>35</sup> The association’s reason for this was that Thorarensen’s most famous poems (for example, one entitled “Ísland,” or “Iceland”) “mainly considered the uninhabited and uncultivated side of nature and praised the wild and magnificent powers that had threatened his countrymen the most” and regarded these natural forces as the “guardian angels who protected the nation

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<sup>33</sup> Óskarsson 2006: 251. See also Gylfi Gunnlaugsson in this volume.

<sup>34</sup> “Það er krafturinn sem heillar Bjarna, hann staðnæmist við hið stórbrotna í landslaginu og í beinu framhaldi af [...] hugmyndum um samspil manns og náttúru og uppeldishlutverk hennar, dregur hann þá ályktun að einmitt vegna hinnar máttugu náttúru hafi Íslendingar komist af, náttúran hafi hert og stælt þjóðina.” Valsson 1996: 275–276.

<sup>35</sup> This estimate of Bjarni Thorarensen and the Society for Mountain Trails does not pass the test of investigation into the goals and methods of the society, particularly when one also notes that there were absolutely no grounds for domestic tourism in Iceland in those days. The present paper, however, will not deal further with this matter.

from the weakness of more southerly countries,” as Óskarsson puts it.<sup>36</sup>

Ideas of this kind were central to the leadership of the Tourist Association, which tended to repeat and promote them, not perceiving any ideological threat in them. Examining the actual operations of the Association during its initial years confirms that the officers had the clear mission of educating the Icelandic people. Their wish was to cultivate and educate “the nation,” facilitating access to the countryside as part of their educational programme.

### Images of the Sublime in Nature and the Icelandic Nation

In the 1930s and 1940s, the above-mentioned Guðmundur Einarsson was very successful as an artist, mainly depicting landscapes and scenes of animals or the common people in large-scale oil paintings. He mostly encountered his landscape subjects on expedition-like trips to the mountains, highlands, and glaciers of Iceland. According to the art historian Kristín Guðnadóttir, the following motifs seem to typify his paintings: volcanic eruptions, storm clouds, freezing mountain fog, and other sublime scenes of the Icelandic wilderness, such as high peaks and barren wasteland.<sup>37</sup> The following three motifs can be added to that list: steep cliff walls, canyons, and lava fields. In his style and thoughts, Einarsson kept within the framework of traditional imagery; typical for his oil paintings is their austere, traditional structure and subdued colour contrasts.<sup>38</sup> Finally, he strived to make his art portray the effect of nature’s elementary powers.

Einarsson was a step ahead of most of his countrymen at the time, in that he knew the highlands and enjoyed staying in the Icelandic wilderness. When travelling through areas isolated from human settlements, he furthermore penetrated spots where hardly anyone else dared to go.<sup>39</sup> Upon returning, he painted the scenes, transmitting his interpretations of the highland landscape into

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<sup>36</sup> Óskarsson 2006: 262.

<sup>37</sup> Guðnadóttir 1995: 4.

<sup>38</sup> Guðnadóttir 1995: 4.

<sup>39</sup> Magnússon & Guðmundsson 2006.

numerous Icelandic living rooms. Not infrequently, he even put his life at stake in order to experience volcanic eruptions or storms. Such experiences gave him a unique affinity with nature and set him apart from other contemporary artists producing landscape paintings. Art historian Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson considers this intimacy with nature to be one of Einarsson's strong points, noting that his pictures were unlike those of other Icelanders, who could be said to paint holiday landscapes for tourists, or colourful, summertime landscapes with plentiful light and not so much as a sign of storm.<sup>40</sup> Such tourist paintings created the impression of Iceland as a land rich in vegetation, mainly covered with woods, blessed by eternal summer, and greatly resembling areas south of the Alps. Einarsson provided a different image, according to Ingólfsson:

Guðmundur Einarsson, the mountaineer, knew otherwise. Having travelled through Iceland's wilderness, he was aware of the hazards facing one there; he had waded across glacial rivers, experienced murderous storms and seen the ground open up and emit scalding water, ash, or mud. His predecessors, however, generally avoided this aspect of Iceland in their painting, mostly because it did not suit the optimism integral to the fight for independence. They associated Iceland's wastelands, winter weather, volcanic outbreaks, and other natural catastrophes with everything which had afflicted its people in their dark past.<sup>41</sup>

By contrast, Einarsson was of the opinion that the Icelandic people had been moulded by their struggle with the island's uninviting, hostile natural environment. Colourful summer scenes would fail completely to communicate this aspect, and thus landscapes in his pictures were powerful, raw, dark, and repelling.

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<sup>40</sup> Ingólfsson 1997.

<sup>41</sup> "Fjallamaðurinn Guðmundur vissi betur. Hann hafði ferðast um íslensk öræfi og þekkti hætturarnar sem voru því samfara; hann hafði vaðið jökulárnar, upplifað manndrápsveður og séð jörðina opnast og gjósa heitu vatni, ösku og eimyrju. Þessa hlið á Íslandi sniðgengu forverar Guðmundar í málalistinni að mestu leyti, þar sem hún er ekki í samræmi við þá bjartsýni sem var fylgifiskur sjálfstæðisbaráttunnar. Þeir settu samasemmerki milli íslenskra öræfa, vetrarveðráttu, eldgosa og annarra náttúruhamfara og alls þess sem hrjád hafði íslenska alþýðu í myrkri fortíð." Ingólfsson 1997: 129–130.

Not only Einarsson's landscapes but also Pálmi Hannesson's textual accounts have qualities that may be comprehended through the aesthetics of the sublime.<sup>42</sup> Ever since Immanuel Kant related the sublime mainly to nature, such natural features as towering cliffs, swelling thunderclouds, lightning, volcanoes, high waterfalls, rushing rivers, etc. have been considered exemplary of the sublime.<sup>43</sup> Under the Kantian dichotomy, these features belong to the dynamic sublime, based on their overpowering might, whereas phenomena referring to the immeasurable and infinite belong to the mathematical sublime.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, the Kantian sublime is by no means inherent in the natural features themselves (the objects) but instead occurs in the observer (the subject) as a feeling induced by these features. This feeling is one of ambivalence, since it simultaneously entails delight and aversion. Because it can seem to the subject that the natural object possesses all the power, the subject realizes his physical powerlessness to some extent, yet notices at the same time his potential for considering himself independent of and superior to nature.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, nature is not deemed sublime because it inspires fear, but because it brings out a power in the human subject that potentially allows humans to transcend nature. In the final analysis, the resulting pleasure depends on human capacity.<sup>46</sup>

### Pioneering on the Fringes of the North

Hartmut Böhme, in his article "Das Steinerne" (Stoniness), illustrates how the natural features that Kant was speaking of corresponded exactly during his lifetime to the areas being dealt with at the forefront of scientific and technological control over nature.<sup>47</sup> One of these areas was infinite space, carrying forward the impact of the Copernican revolution. A further area was represented by the processes of practical development, which at the time led not only to the domination of higher mountainous regions (with the Alps as a

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<sup>42</sup> See Pries 1989.

<sup>43</sup> See Kant 1995.

<sup>44</sup> See Kant 1995: 185.

<sup>45</sup> See Kant 1995: 185.

<sup>46</sup> See Kant 1995: 186.

<sup>47</sup> Böhme 1989: 124.

prime, well-known example) but also to the formation of such new sciences and techniques as mineralogy and mining. By the beginning of the 20th century, this dynamic trend had indeed extended into the still unopened polar regions. Böhme's conclusion is that Kant's formulation of the sublime served as a forerunner in the realm of thought, in that it subdued those archaic fears of nature which, on the one hand, hindered the control of nature and, on the other hand, were extinguished by achieving such control.<sup>48</sup> Kant's philosophical contribution on that epochal threshold was to provide in advance an aesthetic interpretation (spearheading an industrial interpretation) of modern endeavours to empower ourselves as subjects and to control the object, nature.<sup>49</sup>

Compared to central Europe, it took considerably longer before Iceland evidenced much progress towards modernization. Not until the 19th century was drawing to a close did the country undertake any urbanization, and as for industrialization, its effects initially only trickled to Iceland from elsewhere. The eventual result was that the years around 1900 can appropriately be thought of as the threshold to a new era: a time when far-reaching changes finally made deep inroads into numerous aspects of Icelandic society.

As mentioned previously, Pálmi Hannesson described his heroes in terms of comparison with famous explorers, thinking of the polar expeditions of the early 20th century. It is noteworthy that he drew these parallels even though the journeys in his accounts did not at all involve planned departures to a Far North. Rather, the opposite was the case, with the heroes heading towards the island interior and frequently moving from north towards south Iceland or between the island's east and west, in geographical terms. Nevertheless, the distance, cold, darkness, strangeness, threat, and sheer raw power of nature that are associated with the country's highlands are also tied by our European, Western culture to connotations of what is Northern. Northern in this cultural sense often stands in sharp contrast to any simplistic relation with the compass points. The instance we have addressed, moreover, actually situates "the North" in the geographically central areas of Iceland. Pictured as remote and

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<sup>48</sup> Böhme 1989: 126.

<sup>49</sup> Böhme 1989: 126.

strange, this interior had for centuries been encircled by the accessible and settled areas where people lived. Continuing along this line of thinking, we start to visualize a country in the North which possessed its very own “North”—a culturally interpreted North in the land’s interior—and fully utilized the potential of that North for building up a relevant national identity.

Partly assisted by the development of the tourism infrastructure, a national advance took place in the first decades of the 20th century, aimed at Iceland’s interior and upwards onto its glaciers. This penetrating advance into the interior can be interpreted symbolically as an advance into “the North,” with the purpose of possessing and civilizing it and thereby, in the end, dispelling what was left of the raw, strange, and threatening. What was happening was also sensed as national expansion with ideological overtones: an act of claiming possession of the nation’s geographical core and of achieving self-realization there, an act tantamount to self-assertion.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a remarkably exaggerated pioneering rhetoric was ongoing in Iceland. Good examples are provided by some of the political speeches at the 1930 millennium of the Althing.<sup>50</sup> The rhetoric of pioneering and possessing the land was particularly attractive and deeply meaningful for the budding nation, since it had a well-known pioneering legend to refer to. This legend was personified by Ingólfur Arnarson, who figured as Iceland’s founder and first settler and was accepted as the epitome of a successful pioneer.<sup>51</sup> A monument to this pioneer was erected in Reykjavík in 1924, following an initiative for building it that was launched in 1906. At the launching, the philosopher Guðmundur Finnbogason gave a public speech presenting reasons for seeing the monument as significant for the nation as a whole.<sup>52</sup> He portrayed Arnarson as a forerunner, whose tracks every later generation of Icelanders had been able to follow. The speech described the original settler as a good-looking, noble young man, whose face and posture showed optimism, strength, and purposefulness. These were traits which the Icelandic nation ought to adopt at large. Finally,

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<sup>50</sup> See Jónsson 1943.

<sup>51</sup> See Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir in this volume.

<sup>52</sup> Finnbogason 1943.



Finnbogason said he felt the nation had a debt to the country's first settler: to pay him a debt of respect and gratitude and to carry on his mission in the context of the present day:

We have the ambition of being a separate nation. We have the ambition of wanting to determine our own fate, without having to satisfy anyone's claim but the verdict of history itself. We have the ambition of preserving the consecrated fire of culture by the Arctic Circle, closest to the northern lights. And we desire to prove this ambition by preserving and continually honouring every asset of our country and nation. We desire to take on the task from the point where our forefathers stopped, increase our inheritance and get interest on it. We desire to become settlers in a modern sense.<sup>53</sup>

Establishing Arnarson as a model, the philosopher encourages his contemporaries to be new settlers. He links their political demands for independence to their responsibility to assert themselves once more on the northern edge of European civilization, and thus assigns a type of frontier status to their northern country. Living on this boundary of civilization, the foremost task of Icelanders should be to establish and preserve culture (as symbolized by the warmth of the fire which humans keep alive) against nature (as symbolized by the polar cold). This mindset is very similar to that of Pálmi Hannesson, though with a broader perspective.

Finnbogason is neither referring merely to taking possession of the Icelandic highlands, nor merely to pioneering in the sense of spatial expansion. Instead, he explains that expanding by gaining possession of more of the earth in general is more or less concluded, since mankind now possesses and controls every global region. On the other hand, for this very reason a fresh kind of pioneering is taking over, which he describes as the discovery and utilization of all

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<sup>53</sup> “Vér höfum þann metnað, að vera sérstök þjóð. Vér höfum þann metnað, að vilja sjálfir ráða örlögum vorum og hafa þar engum öðrum reikning að ljúka en dómi sögunnar sjálfar. Vér höfum þann metnað, að varðveita vígðan eld menningarinnar norður við heimskaut og næstir norðurljósunum. Og þennan metnað viljum vér sýna í því, að vér varðveitum og höldum í heiðri allt, sem vér eigum bezt í landi og þjóð. Vér viljum taka þar við, sem forfeðurnir hættu, auka arfinn og ávaxta hann. Vér viljum vera landnámsmenn í nýjum skilningi.” Finnbogason 1943: 36–37.

of a land's available resources. In his view, pioneering the interior may in fact go on indefinitely, because in his speech he designates every kind of progress as pioneering in some sense, using for examples scientific and technological progress as well as ordinary entrepreneurship. What he is basically speaking of is modernization, and interpreted in that way, Iceland had already begun "a new era of pioneering."<sup>54</sup> Finnbogason thus points out how, at every individual site, Icelanders now perceived endless, untamed power and had once more begun to praise their homeland.<sup>55</sup> His speech not only expands the concept of pioneering to the development and utilization of science and technology, but also extends it to the areas of culture and the arts, where he remarks that much remains undiscovered:

Our goal and our standard should then be a constant pioneering in the world of objects and the world of ideas. No matter where, any pioneering is in reality similar; no matter when in history, it demands the same characteristics—the characteristics of the forerunner: courage and strength, knowledge and determination.<sup>56</sup>

Whereas the painter Guðmundur Einarsson depicted his entirely down-to-earth expeditions into mountainous regions as pioneering and the writer Pálmi Hannesson attempted to get the journeys and outdoor trials of common Icelanders valued as pioneering, the philosopher Guðmundur Finnbogason expressed a vastly more comprehensive sense of pioneering. The philosopher challenged Icelanders to undertake pioneering in a modern sense, gathering knowledge and becoming actively engaged. His scheme was in fact a call to empower the subject and to gain overall control over nature, meaning far more than merely possessing the Icelandic highlands. Through enacting his scheme, the nation would be able to exalt itself, to conceive an image of itself as exalted and sublime. Mentioned repeatedly, the sight of the national image as reflected in the still undeveloped highland region, along with the challenges to civilization

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<sup>54</sup> Finnbogason 1943: 36–37.

<sup>55</sup> Finnbogason 1943: 36–37.

<sup>56</sup> "Ævarandi landnám í heimi hlutanna og í heimi hugsjónanna á því að vera mark vort og mið. En allt landnám er í raun og veru líks eðlis, sömu eðliseinkenni þarf til þess á öllum öldum, eðli forgöngumannsins: áráðið og aflið, vitið og viljafestuna." Finnbogason 1943: 38.

which that environment entailed, would allow the nation to perceive itself as such a sublime subject.

The attempts of the Icelandic nation to describe itself, as presented in this paper, are saturated with imperatives. These are self-descriptions in which Icelanders' efforts to exalt their nation appear again and again. The attributes consistently emphasized in such descriptions are manliness, tenacity, endurance, courage and bravery, strength of character, enthusiasm for progress, etc. It is difficult to ignore the decidedly masculine character of a national identity distinguished by such attributes.

As I have elsewhere illustrated, there were actually two dominant ways to symbolize the Icelandic nation during this period: on the one hand as a pioneer and on the other as the Lady of the Mountains (*Fjallkonan*).<sup>57</sup> Although these two representations seem at first to point in different directions, they show more than contrasting or complementary maleness versus femaleness or activity versus passivity. Instead, it is more relevant to see them as representing two different segments of nationalistic time: constantly turning towards the future as well as the past, like the face of Janus. This time-scale anomaly, typical of nationalism, often appears through distinctions drawn between the sexes. As Anne McClintock points out:

What is less often noticed, however, is that the temporal anomaly within nationalism—veering between nostalgia for the past and the impatient, progressive sloughing off of the past—is typically resolved by figuring the contradiction in the representation of time as a natural division of gender. Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary, principle of discontinuity. Nationalism's anomalous relation to time is thus managed as a natural relation to gender.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See Lerner 2010.

<sup>58</sup> McClintock 1996: 263.

Paired figures allowed for simultaneous twofold support of the national image, on the one hand by the female allegory of the Lady of the Mountains with her history-transcending values, and on the other hand by the male symbol of the pioneer with his orientation towards progress and the future. However, glorifying the pioneer and establishing him as a mythical guideline for today's world, which shines through in many contemporary sources, valorizes male attributes. One result is that no public monument has ever risen to the Lady of the Mountains in the island's capital, Reykjavík, while there is one to the pioneer. From the beginning, this was also perceived as a national monument, with the Icelanders being assigned attributes that fit with the monument.

The patriarchal officers of the Tourist Association saw themselves as modern, forward-looking pioneers. One of their priorities was to take possession of the interior of their country, which for them was still wild, distant, and symbolic of uncontrolled nature. They thus adopted the image of the first settler for themselves and their nation, since he had advanced into unknown territory and subdued it for himself and his descendants. Imbued with optimism for the future, these officers pictured themselves as trailblazers at the northern edge of civilization. In his story of 1933, Pálmi Hannesson challenged his nation to direct itself to the highlands, take possession of them, and observe its reflection in sublime nature. He was convinced that the nation was starting to awaken,

noticing the portion of its homeland that lies beyond the bounds of civilization: those pathless expanses rising above the communities and uppermost ends of the valleys, wastes droning and booming, sublime and lonely.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “Því að nú er þjóðin að vakna til vitundar um þann hluta ættlands síns, sem liggur utan við endimörk mannlegs siðar, hina veglausu víðáttu, sem þrumir ofan við byggðir og daladrög, stórbrotin, auð, einmanaleg.” Hannesson 2007: 136.

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# Between Nostalgia and Modernity: Competing Discourses in Travel Writing about the Nordic North

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**Abstract** – In travel narratives by 19th-century visitors, the Nordic North generally emerges as pre-modern and uncivilized. Yet the most widespread view of the Nordic countries today is that they are socially progressive, liberal, and politically advanced. The connection between present-day socio-political discourses and cultural discourses of the past thus seems to be very weak or even absent. When a micro-perspective is applied, however, it becomes clear that the idea of a northern modernity has a long history. Current interpretations of the region as a site of progress do not break with previous depictions but constitute the continuation of a counter-discourse that was always present. Nineteenth-century works frequently contain both images of fairy-tale forests and descriptions of modern cities, and sometimes manage to combine the idea of the demanding, masculine-coded North with a view that foregrounds women’s emancipation and opportunities in society. To function as an alternative and an inspiration, however, the region needs to be modern in a different way than London or Paris. It could be said that the modernity the Nordic North was made to represent in the second half of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century built on the same features that led to nostalgic interpretations of the region.

**Keywords** – Nostalgia, modernity, gender equality, religious revival, 19th-century travel writing

## Introduction

In 19th-century Anglophone travel writing, presentations of the Nordic North generally emphasize either the region’s geographical distance from the European centres or its lingering connection to the past. A classic image is the picture of a Norwegian forest in Thomas Forester’s *Norway in 1848 and 1849*.<sup>1</sup> In line with Romantic ideals, the

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<sup>1</sup> Forester 1850: facing 366.

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picture shows a man dwarfed by grandiose nature and suggests an understanding of the North as a space that inspires awe and moves people closer to themselves and to God. The insignificance of the man in relation to the high mountains and trees surrounding him invokes the sublime, and the sense of remoteness in the scene suggests the exploration paradigm, where the North is perceived as a blank space, open for inscription. The absence of technological equipment implies a nostalgic pattern that places the region in a rural past that may be figured as Arcadian or uncivilized, depending on the describer's point of view. The idea that the Nordic North is nature, not culture, persists in promotional material to the present day and the pictures in 21st-century tourist brochures frequently follow patterns similar to Forester's illustration (see for example Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir in this volume). Yet the most widespread view of the Nordic countries from the mid-20th century onwards is that they are socially progressive, liberal, and politically advanced. Instead of representing the past, the area is frequently regarded as pointing towards an enlightened future, not least where gender politics is concerned.



Figure 1. Spectacular pictures of sublime nature are common in 19th-century travel writing about the Nordic North (Forester 1850: facing 366).

## BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND MODERNITY

In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest in the interplay between resilience and adaptation when it comes to regional development, particularly in the social sciences where the focus has been on community development, economic change, and sustainability. The issue raises slightly different questions from a humanities' point of view, since in culture, old models are surprisingly vital, not least because canonized and popular texts and pictures continue to be circulated. Because of their continued presence, historical cultural paradigms influence present-day understandings, as the photos of deep Northern forests and magical waterfalls in the tourist brochures illustrate. In comparison, the connection between the socio-political discourses of the present and the cultural discourses of the past seems to be very weak or even completely absent. Given the resilience of the older models, the question is whether current interpretations of the Nordic North as exemplary modernity constitute a break with previous depictions or whether there is a long-standing relationship between the competing discourses of nostalgia and modernity in northern description.

### Ancient Modernity

For an English or American 19th-century commentator, modernity would probably have meant rationality, industrial progress, democratic ideals, and social reorientation. Pre- or non-modernity would have been associated with myth and superstition, a rural lifestyle, feudal governing principles, and stable social codes. In comparison with the European centres, the characteristics of the Nordic countries would have clustered on the pre-modern side. Philosophical ideas about northernness complicate the picture, however. Remnants of Montesquieu's, Winckelmann's, and Mallet's climate-based arguments were still in operation throughout the 19th century, and would have supported a view of the North as masculine and rational and the South as feminine and artistic (on Mallet, see also Gylfi Gunnlaugsson in this volume). For Anglophone visitors, the dichotomy between the industrial North and the idyllic/aristocratic South of both England and the U.S. would also have played a role.<sup>2</sup> A mental association between northernness and progress would have been close at hand, and it is in a sense quite remarkable that nostalgic

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<sup>2</sup> Tebbutt 2006: 1134.

images of the North became so prevalent, since philosophical-political ideas persistently pointed in the direction of modernity and progress.

Nevertheless, the rural character of much of the Nordic North invited nostalgic interpretations that were continually reproduced due to the intertextual nature of the travel genre. Elizabeth Jane Oswald's description of her travels in Iceland from 1882 provides a typical example:

The way was chiefly through green pastoral valleys, and I generally stopped at the farms and shared the life of the people. It was as if one had stepped out of the restrictions of modern life into a simple Arcadia.<sup>3</sup>

The perceived absence of culturally and socially determined distinctions and categories means that the northern periphery offers a freedom not available in the centre, and at the same time as she highlights the pre-modern character of Iceland, Oswald uses her narrative to criticize what she terms "the crowded uniformity of modern life."<sup>4</sup> The relief from the demands of modernity to be found at faraway locations is a common theme in travel writing and characterizes what Chris Bongie terms "exoticizing exoticism."<sup>5</sup> Macro-level discussions of northern travel writing normally emphasize such positive exoticism and the concomitant Arcadian, North-as-nature paradigm in foreign constructions. When a micro-perspective is applied, the nostalgic model is revealed to be far less universal, however. Nineteenth-century travel texts frequently contain both images of fairy-tale forests and descriptions of modern cities, and sometimes manage to combine the idea of the demanding, masculine-coded North produced by the exploration paradigm with a view that foregrounds women's emancipation and opportunities in society. Although civilization and modernity are generally thought of as metropolitan phenomena, the aspects of civilization critique present in travel writing may locate modernity in the periphery instead. Occasionally, texts about the northern periphery also describe a political modernity rarely acknowledged in narratives about

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<sup>3</sup> Oswald 1882: 178.

<sup>4</sup> Oswald 1882: 237.

<sup>5</sup> Bongie 1991: 17.

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southern spaces. In apparent contradiction to her praise of the escape from modernity offered through Iceland's Arcadian character, Oswald suggests that politically, the country is actually more advanced than Britain because of the liberated position of the Icelandic woman in the 19th century and historically.<sup>6</sup> Like many of her contemporaries, Oswald takes part in a dominant, nostalgic discourse that contains and constantly clashes with a counter-discourse about northern modernity. The focus of this counter-discourse was increasingly the more liberal gender norms in the Nordic countries.

There consequently seem to be several simultaneous but contradictory movements from the centre to the margins of Europe: a nostalgic movement from the depressingly modern back to a simpler lifestyle with clear value systems and stable moral codes; a parallel, radical movement away from the modern, but stale and stagnant, centre, to an elsewhere still on the verge of its future; and a movement away from a centre that perceives itself as modern to a periphery where the historical precedents for this modernity can be found. In all these cases, the difference between the European centres and the peripheral North is a matter of their respective places on a modernity scale, but the meaning attributed to the positions are radically different.

The complexity of these modernity discourses has meant that most investigations into foreign images of the North have concentrated on its qualities as natural landscape and historic preserve, and the fact that even in the 19th century the Nordic countries could inspire modern developments in the European centres is rarely discussed. To function as an alternative and an inspiration, however, the region needed to be modern in a different way from London or Paris. The modernity represented by the Nordic North in the second half of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century was to a great extent a kind of ancient modernity, based on Viking-age customs, romanticized history, and the ideals expressed in medieval Nordic literature. In effect, 19th-century Anglo-Saxon visions of the modern North largely built on the same features that led to nostalgic interpretations of the area.

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<sup>6</sup> Oswald 1882: 50.

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The introductory poem of Rosalind Travers's travel book *Letters from Finland, August, 1908–March, 1909* captures a typical combination of nostalgia and modernity:

Leave the South! O, leave the weary golden shore  
Of the Midland sea,  
Where a thousand ships have touched before;  
Come away with me  
To a place of wide untravelled waters,  
Silvering the leagues of sombre wood,  
Where the lake-nymphs and the river-daughters  
Dance all night along the shining flood.

Leave the South! for she is mournful with the weight  
Of remembered years;  
Lapped in ancient splendours, dim and great,  
Wrought of time and tears.  
For the dark earth that nourishes her flowers  
Hardly veils the ever-watchful dead.  
The purple vine and cypress in her bowers  
Are memories of passion and of dread.

But the North lies all open to the morrow  
From the fells to the strand;  
Her clear morning wakens, free of sorrow,  
On a timeless land.  
Dreamily the pines sway in slumber,  
Careless is the singing charm  
Of the brook, which the grey stones cumber  
With a heavy arm.

Till the lake-water ripples to the falling  
Of low wings in flight,  
And the woodland hears a whispering and calling  
Through the brief, golden night.  
Lightly, from each rock-cleft and hollow,  
Little people of the stones slip forth,  
Weaving spells, which the wanderer must follow  
On and on, through the glamour of the North.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Travers 1911b: no page numbers.

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The poem conveys the idea that the South is old and played out whereas the North represents the future (the “morrow”). The countries around the Mediterranean are burdened by too much history, while Finland, in this case, looks forward. In apparent contradiction, however, northern nature is represented as unexplored and numinous, and mythical features are highlighted.

Analogous ideas can be found also in domestic 19th-century literature, and a similar contradiction informs Fredrika Bremer’s tale *The Midnight Sun* from 1848 where northern Sweden is presented as the primary reason for the country’s vitality at the same time as Bremer stresses its underdeveloped, uncivilized character.<sup>8</sup> Domestic and foreign interpretations interacted, and apart from being known as a feminist forerunner, Bremer was Sweden’s most internationally famous author at the time. Her descriptions were therefore likely to influence foreign expectations on the factual as well as the symbolic level. The travel writer Susanna Henrietta Kent who visited Sweden in 1877 thus concludes her narrative with a quotation from *The Midnight Sun* that brings out the combination of romantic, feminized nature and possibilities for renewal that, for her, characterizes Sweden:

My beloved’s form is tall; great are the contrasts which she presents; from her feet, which are bathed by the Baltic waters, which are caressed by carpets of flowers, up to her crown, on which sits a diadem of wedge-like ice-rocks, and over which flame the northern lights. Unexhausted and inexhaustible is the treasure of wisdom which she possesses, and which she preserves in her silent woods and in her soundless deeps. And perhaps the Great Creator placed her so aside on the earth, so far up in the north, that, longest of all countries, she might husband her original strength, and when her sisters of the South have grown faint with the conflict, with the over-stimulus of culture, she may breathe upon them a renovating spirit of life.<sup>9</sup>

In Bremer’s and Kent’s works, as in Travers’s poem, the North functions as a source of newness precisely because it is untouched by

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<sup>8</sup> Bremer 1848: 6–7.

<sup>9</sup> Kent 1877: 223–24.

the excesses of civilization, which means that nostalgic and modern patterns coexist in the representations. There is consequently no clear break between the images clustering around the Nordic North in the 19th century and those beginning to emerge in the latter half of the 20th century. Myths, history, or untouched nature can be integrated in a nostalgic narrative as well as in one focusing on newness and social progress, and the exploration paradigm highlighting the undiscovered nature of the North paradoxically enables constructions that foreground its modernity. There is nothing inherently old or new about the region, and despite the forces of modernization characterizing the 19th century, the role the North is made to play is only partly determined by actual conditions. An equally if not more important factor is the describer's position and purposes. As Andrew Wawn makes clear, the Victorians referred to the Viking North to support such divergent agendas as

patriarchal family values and female suffrage; social Darwinism and social engineering; extension of the franchise and *Führerprinzip* centralism; constitutional monarchy and republicanism.<sup>10</sup>

The ideological flavour of northern description is patently unstable.

### Nostalgic Modernity and Religious Revival<sup>11</sup>

Besides its reputation as an industrial region, northern England was known as a landscape of religious dissent, and the Nordic North has a similar history of independence in relation to the state churches.<sup>12</sup> Via the imaginative link between religious free-thinking and personal liberty, the dissenters could be seen as forerunners of political modernity and, in the Scandinavian context, their demand for religious freedom could be traced back to Viking-age parliamentary democracy as practiced in the Icelandic Althing. In this way, liberal and early socialist ideas could be provided with a northern pedigree that, by way of circular reasoning, located modern political

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<sup>10</sup> Wawn 2000: 32.

<sup>11</sup> The discussion in this section draws on Hansson 2009, although from a different perspective.

<sup>12</sup> Tebbutt 2006: 1134.



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developments in the past. In England as well as in the Nordic countries it was theological, not political, differences that led to the establishment of the dissenting churches, however, and their members were driven by deep faith and a strict adherence to Biblical doctrine that stood in contrast to notions of political radicalism. The tension between nostalgia and modernity therefore becomes particularly noticeable in descriptions of the religious revival movements in northern Scandinavia and Finland. On the one hand, representations of devout peasants function as nostalgic reminders of a rapidly disappearing past for Europeans uncomfortable with the changes brought by the Industrial Revolution. On the other hand, the same image serves as an illustration of a new social order with individual conscience and individual choices as its lodestars.

In Sweden, religious meetings outside the state church were against the law until 1858, and especially the pietistic movement called *Läsare* or Readers received a great deal of attention in travel narratives from the early 19th century onwards. In line with the nostalgic view, the members of the movement were shown as representatives of old-fashioned piety, but the fact that they consistently broke the law was often understood as a subtle attack on central power and a manifestation of liberalism. Their democratic principles and forms of worship primarily attracted farmers, workers, and servants rather than the more privileged segments of society, which meant that for an outside observer, these groups were frequently understood as politically progressive.

The U.S. travel writer Bayard Taylor delivers the opinion that the Readers represent democracy and liberty and even suggests that they may transform Sweden from an old-fashioned, almost feudal kind of society to a modern, democratic nation:

The present movement, so much like Methodism in many particulars, owes its success to the same genial and all-embracing doctrine of an impartial visitation of Divine grace, bringing man into nearer and tenderer relations to his Maker. In a word, it is the democratic, opposed to the aristocratic

principle in religion. [T]he Läsare [...] will in the end be the instrument of bestowing religious liberty upon Sweden.<sup>13</sup>

The recurring descriptions of curtailed religious freedom suggest that many travel writers advocated a religious liberalism that contrasted with the political imperialism their home cultures represented. The philanthropist and social reformer Charles Loring Brace was particularly interested in tracing the history of American virtues in the ancient North:

To an American, a visit to the home of the old Northmen is a visit back to his forefathers' house. A thousand signs tell him he is at the cradle of the race which leads modern enterprise, and whose Viking-power on both hemispheres has not yet ceased to be felt.<sup>14</sup>

There is a metaphorical transference between a puritanical, Christian ideal and the myth of a rough, forceful northernness in Brace's text, and the idea of the invincible Viking hovers over descriptions of the revivalists' power of resistance against State decrees. Like Taylor, Brace suggests that the religious movements make the North a site of liberation and modernity. Relating a conversation with a man he meets in northern Norway, he writes:

"The main thing in it all, sir, is what you in America will understand—we want the Church utterly kept apart from the State."

It would be presumptuous in me, as yet, to give a judgment on this remarkable religious movement. But from all evidence thus far, I fully believe it is a natural vigorous protest against the state Church, accompanied, of course, with much fanaticism.<sup>15</sup>

Brace is writing for an American readership and, like most travel writers, he applies the value system of his own culture to what he experiences. His pronounced purpose of locating the origins of

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor 1859: 429.

<sup>14</sup> Brace 1857: iii.

<sup>15</sup> Brace 1857: 86.

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American ideals of liberty in the old North thus sometimes changes into its opposite and becomes an attempt to squeeze Nordic conditions into an American paradigm. Although the North is the original home of the freedom model, it has now been transplanted to the United States where it is integrated in Protestant ideology:

Our great principle in America—as we believe, the principle of Protestantism—is that the conscience must be free; that liberty is the true atmosphere of the soul, and without it, religious life withers and dies.<sup>16</sup>

As Brace sees it, the Scandinavian revival groups offer the only hope for the North to regain a lost, true Christianity—and with it, the lost Viking virtues of liberty and independence.

The liberal principles connected with the revival movements included a considerably more progressive attitude to the role of women. In several cases, women appeared as preachers and importantly, the religious movements stressed a personal relationship between God and the individual, which meant that in matters of faith, women could not be ruled by anything except their own conscience. Women and men were seen as equal before God, and in this, 19th-century religious revivals, across Europe, can be understood as emancipatory. Evangelical fervour interacted with a growing feminist awareness also through the demand that everyone should be able to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, which required raised levels of literacy and paved the way for better education for women. In addition, the movements provided impulses for wide-ranging philanthropic work, mainly organized and carried out by women, and it became socially and morally acceptable for women to use, for instance, their literary talents in the service of religion.

The Irish travel writer Selina Bunbury was one of the many women able to carve out a literary career by supplying material to religious tract societies and produce wholesome books for family consumption. Despite her ardent belief in religious freedom—especially for the Irish Catholics she hoped to convert with her writings—she is ambivalent in her comments on the revival

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<sup>16</sup> Brace 1857: 278–79.

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movements in Sweden. On the one hand, she welcomes the modern views represented by the new religious groups, but on the other, she fears that they constitute a threat to the unity of the country:

There is a double movement going on—a forward, impulsive one, in which both the political-liberal party and the evangelical-religious one may bear a share—it is true that in all, of what are termed onward movements, they become combined. There is also a retrograde tendency, less strong and less visible, but very sure. Were liberty of dissent allowed, we should soon see the results of both. The issue would probably be fatal to the Swedish Church; and in the present enforced submission to its doctrines, laws and practices, there is at least that good which results from the repression of outward infidelity, and absence of the distracting, life-wasting squabbles which bear the name of Controversies.<sup>17</sup>

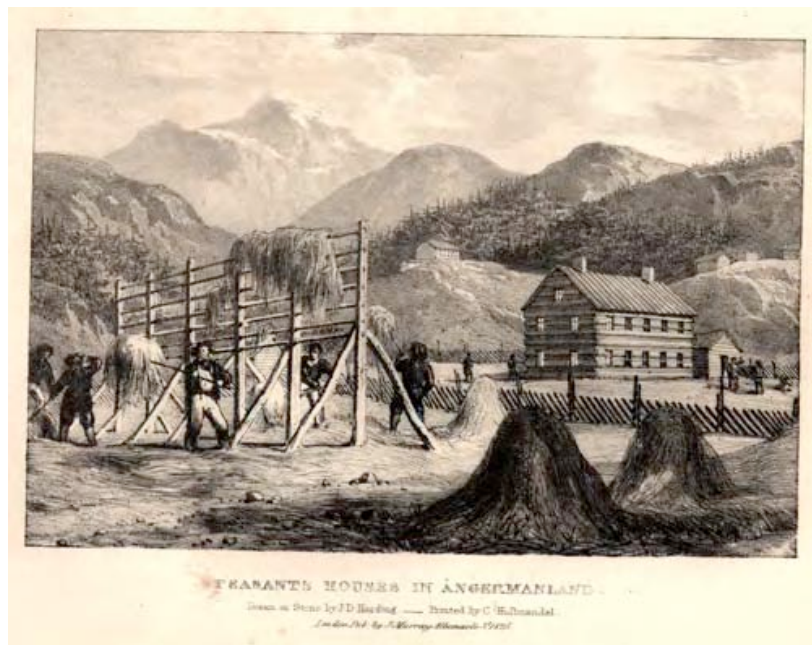


Figure 2. Rural landscapes were often interpreted nostalgically by visitors from more industrialized countries (Brooke 1828: 572).

In the end, Bunbury seems to prefer a world order that is less democratic, but more stable, than the one advocated by Taylor and

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<sup>17</sup> Bunbury 1853, vol. II: 279.

Brace. Whereas the Americans seem to come down firmly on the side of the religious revivals as symbols of liberty and modernity, Bunbury at least partly views them as a threat to stability and perhaps also to a nostalgic image of the North. In many cases, the religious movements led to the destruction of folk customs that were considered immoral in the light of the new piety, and in this respect, at least, it could be said that she was correct in her fears.

### Arcadian Gender Politics

With the rise of the middle class around and after the Enlightenment, what was defined as proper femininity was exiled from the public sphere of state affairs to the domestic, private sphere. Since modernity was associated with the public, it was generally gendered masculine.<sup>18</sup> One attribute of the non-civilization or natural character of the European peripheries, however, was that the public sphere was seen as insufficiently developed. In foreign understandings of the northern margins there is thus no clear dichotomy between public and private, official and domestic realms, and as a result, no clear space reserved for women or reversely, that women were barred from. During her visit in Sweden, Norway, and Finland, Selina Bunbury therefore describes herself as occupying a considerably more public role than her position as an Evangelical middle-class woman would have allowed at home. Describing how she was asked to give her opinion of whether there would be war between Sweden and Russia, Bunbury notes that her foreignness provides her with an aura of expertise: “He thought, I fancy, that as I was a foreigner, I must possess universal knowledge: therefore he begged to ask me—if Russia would make war on Sweden!”<sup>19</sup> Bunbury’s public role on this occasion is made possible by her outside position, but also by her and her audience’s view of Sweden as a socially undeveloped country where it is acceptable for women to voice political opinions. Sweden allows Bunbury to be modern because the country is itself pre-modern: “Few lands are more backward in the mechanical, as well as in the fine arts, than Sweden is,” Bunbury writes,<sup>20</sup> summarizing its

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<sup>18</sup> Felski 1995: 16.

<sup>19</sup> Bunbury 1856, vol. II: 95.

<sup>20</sup> Bunbury 1853, vol. II: 14.

character as “agricultural and pastoral.”<sup>21</sup> The country’s “mechanical backwardness” inspires nostalgia for an England now destroyed by mechanical developments:

Would these people be happier or better if a great factory received them, congregated amid the roar of steam machinery? Here it is impossible not to turn back with a yearning our Manchester men would despise, to the times of spinning wheels and weaving looms in the cottage homes of Great Britain.<sup>22</sup>

According to Linda M. Austin, the English cottage became as an “icon of public memory” in British 19th-century imagination, forging a communal identity that built on “an idea of nation founded on an endangered rural capitalism and revived under the aegis of the country’s commercial and imperial ventures.”<sup>23</sup> In Austin’s analysis, it is particularly in the final decades of the century that the cottage emerges as a national, nostalgic symbol in Britain,<sup>24</sup> but the idea that a visit to a foreign country also includes a visit to an environment in the past is common in travel writing through the 1800s. To the extent that nostalgic symbols were bound up with questions of national identity,<sup>25</sup> it might also have been easier for people who did not subscribe to the collective identity being created to consume the “English” cottage and its equivalents elsewhere. The rural memory emblemized in the cottage could still be accessed in the North where it was safe from the ravages of industrialization as well as uncluttered by ideological baggage: a visit to northern Europe allows a kind of apolitical nostalgia, as it were.<sup>26</sup> Thus Sweden can occupy the symbolic role of an Arcadian past in Bunbury’s travel narratives precisely because she views the country as deplorably backward in comparison to England. The nostalgic paradigm can further contain her representation of Sweden as a place where she can enjoy a public role she is barred from at home, since it is based on a similar

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<sup>21</sup> Bunbury 1853, vol. II: 15.

<sup>22</sup> Bunbury 1856, vol. II: 215.

<sup>23</sup> Austin 2007: 126.

<sup>24</sup> Austin 2007: 126–127.

<sup>25</sup> Austin 2007: 126, 138.

<sup>26</sup> Tebbutt 2006: 1126.

understanding of the country as underdeveloped. The pattern is more in conflict with her accounts of the progressive gender politics of the Scandinavian countries, however.

The ideology of separate spheres was predominantly a middle-class phenomenon, and Rita Felski notes that it “was undercut by the movement of working-class women into mass production and industrial labour.”<sup>27</sup> Women in paid work, like women with money to spend on consumer goods, are signs of a modern femininity that develops throughout the 19th century, she argues. Ignoring the class aspects of the matter, Bunbury comments that women are “the true workers of Sweden,” since they “draw sledges to market, and drag heavy loads of wood over the frozen waters.”<sup>28</sup> Whether buyers or sellers, these Swedish women perform on the public arena of the market and function as signs of modernity in the text. In her combination of romantic story and travelogue *Evelyn, or a Journey from Stockholm to Rome*, Bunbury addresses the situation for middle-class women more specifically by making the Swedish character Evelyn defend women’s right to fulfilling work:

In England [women] are excluded from many departments they can fill in other countries; and surely the trade of governesses is most frightfully overdone. If a woman, therefore, possess talent, and use it as a woman should, why should not the talent be recognised, more especially on account of the difficulties which belong to her class?<sup>29</sup>

Evelyn is a fictional character from a different country than Bunbury, and by using her to express more radical ideas, Bunbury can make it seem as if she herself remains within the boundaries of proper, even conservative ideas of femininity. Because of her Swedishness, Evelyn is exempt from the conventions that apply in England and can be used in the narrative as a representative of a modern outlook absent in the centre of Europe but present in the peripheral North.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Felski 1995: 19.

<sup>28</sup> Bunbury 1853, vol. II: 59.

<sup>29</sup> Bunbury 1849, vol. I: 228.

<sup>30</sup> A few of the comments in the section about Selina Bunbury have previously appeared in Hansson 2003.

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In *Life in Sweden*, Bunbury suggests that the Swedish divorce laws almost make it worth a woman's while to get married:

“Why was she divorced?” I ask.

“Her husband was a tyrant”, is the answer.

Perhaps our lawyers would get more employment if this plea held good in England.<sup>31</sup>

In a similar way, Elizabeth Jane Oswald comments on the easy divorce procedures in Iceland both in the past and the present in her book *By Fell and Fjord*. In ancient times, she writes, “a few angry words or a slap on the cheek”<sup>32</sup> were sufficient grounds for divorce, and even at the time of her visit in the early 1880s, “the Icelanders are at liberty, like other Lutherans, to divorce each other, for what seem to us small causes, such as mere incompatibility of temper.”<sup>33</sup> Although Oswald presents the religion of the Nordic countries as an important reason for a more liberated approach to marriage, she traces its history back to Viking times. The tension between modernity and nostalgia becomes very noticeable in her narrative since she draws on myth, saga and folklore to give historical precedence to desired developments in gender politics at home. Describing conditions in the “days of the sagas,”<sup>34</sup> she stresses women's power and freedom:

After a woman had been once married, whether she was a widow or divorced, she became a free agent. The married woman was, from the earliest times, the true household leader, the queen or companion of her lord. The sagas tell of the same freedom of the wife in her own sphere, and association with her husband's life and pursuits, which is the ideal of wedded life now in this country. She was not, like the Greek wife, doomed to a narrow life in her own side of the house apart from the interests of the men; still less was she like the plaything of the Eastern harem; and old age did not deprive her of her influence, while it added to her dignity. Her words

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<sup>31</sup> Bunbury 1853, vol. II: 305.

<sup>32</sup> Oswald 1882: 49.

<sup>33</sup> Oswald 1882: 50.

<sup>34</sup> Oswald 1882: 50.



were often then held sacred, her influence grew paramount, as one to whom the gods had imparted a more than human wisdom.<sup>35</sup>

To throw further “light on the position of the women of the north in the early middle ages,” Oswald translates a portion of *Egil’s Saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, foregrounding the great freedom and social rights the Icelandic women enjoyed.<sup>36</sup> As opposed to most 19th-century travelogues, novels, and treatises about Iceland, hers is “a book of heroines rather than heroes,” as Andrew Wawn notes.<sup>37</sup> Her descriptions acquire extra weight since she views the Icelanders as the “Scandinavian ancestors who have made Great Britain what it is” by passing on the ideal of political freedom.<sup>38</sup> The progressive conditions for women in Iceland are given legitimacy through their saga origins, and her text consistently invites the conclusion that the same conditions should apply in England since the countries are ideologically linked.

Nevertheless, stories of the old North are not inherently politically liberal, and Viking culture is sometimes also used to support a patriarchal outlook, as in *The Viking: A Novel* (1879) by Margaret Cartmell (M. R.). The narrative flirts with alternative models of womanhood, but reinstates conventional gender constructions at the end when the main character Eric wins his bride and “the wild daughter of the ocean was conquered at last!”<sup>39</sup> His beloved submits completely, and admits that she has been foolish not to accept his authority before:

Suddenly Rhunmelda, colouring deeply, said: “Eric, dost thou remember once telling me that I could not rule the Northmen, that I was not strong enough to do so. I want to tell thee that thou was right, and that I failed!”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Oswald 1882: 50.

<sup>36</sup> Oswald 1882: 186.

<sup>37</sup> Wawn 2000: 306.

<sup>38</sup> Oswald 1882: 36.

<sup>39</sup> Cartmell 1879: 258.

<sup>40</sup> Cartmell 1879: 258.

The ideological content of the North is exceedingly versatile, and was put to a variety of uses by 19th-century Anglophone commentators.

Alongside stories of masterful Vikings and nostalgic images of northern Europe as a rural Arcadia, and sometimes even integrated in such works, there were consequently presentations where the region emerges as a social and cultural counter-space, a modern alternative characterized by social reform and a new gender order. This circumstance has received considerably less attention from critics, partly, perhaps, because the study of travel writing has been mainly informed by post-colonial theories that have rather focused on expressions of imperialism and condescension in the texts. The suggestion of a counter-space seems to be an important difference between narratives about England's colonies and descriptions of peripheral but independent regions, however. Colonies are more likely to be viewed as extensions of the colonizing centres and therefore insufficiently civilized in comparison. Peripheries, on the other hand, are unattached to the European centres, with their own distinctive backgrounds and histories, which means that they can be presented as alternative spaces where varieties of modernity can be found.

### Literary Modernity

The view of the Nordic countries as politically radical was strengthened in the period 1870–1890 through the artistic and literary developments described as “the modern breakthrough.” Literary iconoclasts like Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Ola Hansson, and Laura Marholm were both admired and fiercely attacked for their daring treatment of controversial issues and their aesthetic innovations. In *A Doll's House* (1879), for instance, Ibsen criticizes 19th-century marriage norms and creates one of the first feminist heroines in drama. His plays were important inspirations for the New Women writers of the 1890s, and in George Egerton's (Mary Chavelita Dunne) stories a northern setting often becomes symbolic of an unconventional way of life.<sup>41</sup> In her book *Through Finland in Carts* (1897), the travel writer Ethel Brilliana Tweedie devotes considerable space to Minna Canth's feminist play *The Worker's Wife*

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<sup>41</sup> O'Toole 2008: 130.

(*Työmiehen vaimo*, 1885), and quotes information from a Finnish publication called *Women and Women's Work* where it is stated that

here in Finland, as well as in Scandinavia, the female authors have been, since the middle of the century, deeply influenced by the problem of the emancipation of the women, which forms such a prominent feature of modern society. This problem has been introduced into several works of fiction, and has been treated at greater or less length in many treatises, essays and pamphlets. The first Finnish authoresses who wrote on the subject of the emancipation of women were Fredrika Runeberg and Adelaïde Ernroth.<sup>42</sup>

Although most of the Scandinavian and Finnish late 19th-century writers would probably have rejected the feminist label and lived far from gender-equal lives, they were frequently seen as representatives of sexual liberty and created expectations of a corresponding social modernity in their countries of origin. Nevertheless, the modern lifestyle possible in the North is not always figured as an effect of a more advanced society, but often depicted as the result of its opposite. Discussing Egerton's short story "At the Heart of the Apple," Inga-Stina Ewbank shows that Norway emerges in the text as "a world of natural morality, untrammled by artificial social conventions, a pre-lapsarian world."<sup>43</sup> Egerton produces a "feminist version of Pastoral" through her descriptions of Scandinavia, where the Arcadian is a prerequisite for the modern.<sup>44</sup> The figure of the New Woman is usually defined through external characteristics linked to the metropolis, but placing her in the periphery, as in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Egerton's stories, foregrounds the importance of a change of mentality rather than a change of external circumstances in the matter of gender politics. In this way, the location of the metropolitan New Woman in a landscape normally understood as Arcadia forces a re-examination of the relationship between place, modernity, and gender codes.

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<sup>42</sup> Tweedie 1913: 180.

<sup>43</sup> Ewbank 1999: 18.

<sup>44</sup> Ewbank 1999: 19.

## Finland: Numinous Nature and Exemplary Modernity

In various ways, all the Nordic countries were used to illustrate a modern outlook in Anglophone travel writing, but in the early 20th century, Finland emerges as the country with the most progressive gender ideas and a symbol of sexual-political modernity. As one of the first countries in the world, Finland granted the vote to women in 1906, and in 1907 the first women were elected to the parliament. Sylvia Borgström MacDougall traces the progressive Finnish views on women's emancipation to the Middle Ages in her travel book *A Summer Tour in Finland* (1908):

The oldest document in Finland [...] is an edict on parchment for the protection of women in Karelen (Eastern Finland); dated 1316. No wonder women of the present day have such privileges in Finland, if they commenced to clamour for their rights at such an early date!<sup>45</sup>

Elsewhere in the text she makes clear that “clamouring” for rights is more necessary in England than in Finland where women already have all the rights of citizenship. Since the Suffragettes and the idea of the New Woman met with considerable resistance at home it was important to provide an example that worked and to show that women's new roles in no way compromised their femininity:

Women are engaged in seemingly every branch of work, with the result that meetings of “suffragettes” and women demanding their rights are unknown in a country where women are students in the University, clerks in the banks, in the post-offices, and in business houses, and where women not only have their vote, but can be elected members of the Diet. Yet with it all they are not in the least overbearing; indeed, for the greater part, they are exceedingly modest and womanlike. As I landed, one of the recently elected women members of the coming Diet was pointed out to me in the crowd. She was well-dressed and young-looking, with keen, deep-set eyes and a pleasant smile, and in no way resembled

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<sup>45</sup> MacDougall 1908: 31.

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the grotesque caricatures of the women members of the Finnish Diet in some English journals.<sup>46</sup>



Figure 3. New Women were usually depicted as unfeminine in the English popular press ("The New Woman at the Duke o' York's," *Punch* 1896: 208).

Finland is presented as far more modern and progressive than England, where women do not have the vote and are barred from both educational institutions and many lines of work. By referring to the medieval document in the university archives MacDougall gives Finland's claim to modernity in this respect a long history, like Elizabeth Jane Oswald, who saw the origins of women's condition in Iceland in saga and folklore.

The female member of parliament described in the passage is one of the first things Sylvia MacDougall comments on in her travel book, and in the first decade of the 20th century the emancipation of women in Finland becomes a standard theme in foreign accounts. The English writer Rosalind Travers visited Finland soon after MacDougall, in 1908 and 1909, and even before her arrival, she makes clear that the issue of female suffrage will be important in her

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<sup>46</sup> MacDougall 1908: 5.

narrative. As an evening entertainment onboard the ship taking them to Helsinki, a Miss Celia Travers is “going to utter a few words on Woman’s Suffrage,” and this fellow traveller is later identified as the narrator’s cousin.<sup>47</sup> She is described as a Suffragette, and Travers quotes her saying that she will visit Finland because there, women have achieved suffrage: “I’ll go to the only civilized country in Europe, the one where women have got their full rights. Let me pay a visit to Uncle Keith in Finland.”<sup>48</sup> Like Oswald, who created a link between Iceland and England on the grounds of historical ideological connections, Travers establishes an ideological link based on family relationships. If the originally English “Uncle Keith” can live in a country where women are politically emancipated, so can the Englishmen who still remain in their home country.

From the great number of letters that Travers later wrote to relatives and friends in Finland, it is difficult to work out whether she was really accompanied by a cousin on her journey, and in the narrative Celia rather functions as a way for the author to include views and opinions that she may not have been completely convinced she would like to advocate in her own voice. Celia and her admiration for the Finnish parliamentary system become ways for Travers to use northern practices to further political causes at home without having to take full responsibility for the ideas, in a similar way to how Selina Bunbury used her fictional travel companion, Evelyn, sixty years earlier.

Later in life Travers became a Socialist and married Henry Mayers Hyndman, the controversial initiator of the first Socialist organization in England, the Social Democratic Federation, in 1881 and the founder of the first Socialist journal, *Justice*, in 1884, as well as the founder of the National Socialist Party, a small leftist party without right-wing leanings. In the notice about their engagement in *The Times*, Travers is said to take a deep interest in Finland and in the Russian revolutionary movement.<sup>49</sup> She was instrumental in making conditions in Finland known to the English reading public before the First World War, but she also used Finnish examples to agitate for

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<sup>47</sup> Travers 1911b: 5.

<sup>48</sup> Travers 1911b: 5.

<sup>49</sup> “Engagement of Mr. H. M. Hyndman” 1914: 5, col. F.

votes for women, as in the article “The History of Women’s Suffrage in Finland” published in *The Englishwoman*, a monthly journal dedicated “to further the enfranchisement of women,” as its subtitle states.<sup>50</sup> In her travelogue, Finland becomes the model example of modernity for England to emulate. The usual relationship between the civilized centre and the backward periphery is thus reversed in her narrative, at least where questions of gender equality are concerned.

In *Letters from Finland*, Travers includes descriptions of politicians and politics that are clearly intended to produce an image of the country as a democratic example. This was also how the book was received. The *New York Times* reviewer concentrates on the mentions of female suffrage and particularly recommends it to women readers:

FINNISH LETTERS; Make Admirable Reading and Characterize the Country Ably

There are several reasons why women should read this book. First, it illustrates the most intelligent manner of visiting a country and a most human way of recording impressions. Second, it has a great deal to do with the question of suffrage—not from the conventional point of view, but from a sympathetic understanding of the political significance of the problem.<sup>51</sup>

The reviewer continues to mention examples from Travers’ text where female suffrage is a central theme:

On the thoroughfares one meets with female members of Parliament, and, save in the army and in the Church, there is not a vocation denied to the women. The question of equality is an all important one with them, while the questions of unions are just as imminent as in this country.<sup>52</sup>

The review thus concentrates on the social and political sections of the text and mainly disregards the natural and exotic features. The

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<sup>50</sup> Travers 1911a: 246–55. See Bristow 2006 for a brief presentation of the journal *The Englishwoman*.

<sup>51</sup> “Finnish Letters” 1912: BR223.

<sup>52</sup> “Finnish Letters” 1912: BR223.

headline statement that the narrative characterizes “the country ably” suggests that by the first decade of the 20th century, the nostalgic image of the Nordic North was slowly being replaced with one where the North represents modernity. The reviewer concludes that the Finnish people have radical opinions, just like their neighbours in Sweden and Norway: “And from what the author says we infer that the Finns, like their neighbours in the Scandinavian countries, are a people with advanced ideas.”<sup>53</sup> The Nordic countries are regarded as a coherent cultural and political region where there are no particular differences between the individual countries. As a result, the entire North emerges as the site of modernity in the review, in contrast to only a few decades before when a nostalgic paradigm would have been dominant.

Travers’s travel book, however, transmits both nostalgic and modern images. On one level, *Letters from Finland* emphasizes Finland as the site of progress, democracy, and modernity, but on another level, Travers returns to romantic ideas of a simpler, mythical, and mystical North. At the same time as she depicts Finland as one of Europe’s most modern countries, she draws nostalgic pictures that build on the epic poem *Kalevala*, the mysterious, deep forests and the entrancing summer light. Immediately after describing the female member of parliament she calls Hilja Raunio, she sketches a nostalgic-romantic picture that can only with great difficulty be reconciled with the examples of political progress she has just mentioned:

Did you not imply that I should find these Arctic forests indeed “woodlands lorn,” quite empty of nymphs and elves and naiads, and all such beautiful necessary creatures? Oh! how mistaken you were, for this simple northern land is the very home of wood-magic, and dryads and oreads have been honoured here since most ancient times. [...] Yes, certainly I have seen them! Have I not spent three weeks of fair weather in these island woods? and pray, what am I a poet for, if the nymphs of forest and river are not more visible, as well as more pleasing to me, than a fragment of mycetoza, for instance.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> “Finnish Letters” 1912: BR223.

<sup>54</sup> Travers 1911b: 66–67.





Figure 4. Lennart Forstén's picture of the Finnish city Tampere (Tammerfors) captures the tension between nostalgia and modernity, with the forest and the factory chimneys side by side (Topelius 1845: facing 64).

Although there is certainly a gradual development throughout the 19th and early 20th century from representations of the North as Arcadia to representations where the Nordic countries represent social Utopias, this is no clear-cut process. Instead, it is a matter of interaction and tension where the North is made to represent an uncertain modernity that also always contains its opposite.

## Conclusion

Closing her narrative, Sylvia MacDougall writes:

Finland is very young and very old. "Progress" is now her battle-cry. But in her heart the deeds of her forefathers are still remembered—pioneers of a race of honest men and brave women.<sup>55</sup>

A slippage between representations of the North as mythological/natural space and socially progressive/organized space

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<sup>55</sup> MacDougall 1908: 312

characterizes many 19th- and early 20th-century narratives about the Nordic countries where nostalgic images are refigured to fit with ideas of modernity and the distant past is reinterpreted to serve the needs of the present. The location of progress and newness in the geographical periphery is a reversal of imperialist rhetoric that admits the existence of a non-metropolitan modernity. This modernity is sometimes seen as an effect of the absence of such signs of modern life as urbanization and industrial progress, where liberty and equality can flourish in Arcadian spaces that are untouched by hierarchical social organization. On other occasions it is understood as the still surviving influence of folklore and ancient customs, as in Elizabeth Jane Oswald's Icelandic narrative, and on yet other occasions it is a logical continuation of utopian discourses where the North provides an alternative precisely because it is removed from the centres of social and political influence. In the end, the understanding of the region as lost Arcadia or egalitarian Utopia is less a matter of image and counter-image than necessary aspects of each other.

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*CONTEMPORARY IMAGES*



# The Image of Iceland in the Local and Global Nexus of Whaling Politics

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**Abstract** – This paper looks at the development of the whaling debates and their contribution to the international image of Iceland. It traces the debates through two stages: an “era of peaceful protest” from ca. 1978 to 1985 and a “battle-lines” period after 1985, explaining the positions of both sides and the images each produced. For the anti-whaling side, the Icelanders were “bloodthirsty hunters,” while the pro-whalers portrayed themselves as citizens of a small nation bullied by “sentimental eco-terrorists.” The paper concludes by commenting on the development of the Icelandic whale watching industry after 1995 and how this industry has promoted an international image of Icelanders as whale-protectors rather than whale-hunters to foreign tourists.

**Keywords** – Whales, whaling, Iceland, Norway, International Whaling Commission, Greenpeace, Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, environmentalism, indigenous rights, whale watching

Who is endangered, and who must be protected? In the globally interconnected 21st-century world, these are fundamental and complex moral questions for which the answers are not easy or clear. When the issue of species protection is raised, one thinks first and foremost of animals whose lives or environments are being threatened by human actions. Since the environmental campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s, which urged concerned citizens of rich Western nations to donate money or to take action to “save” certain animals, it has been tacitly understood that human actions have placed animals at risk of extinction and in need of protection, and that the rights of animals for survival should assume precedence over the desires of humans for meat, leather, fur, or other such products. But the Greenlandic politician and indigenous rights activist Finn Lynge turned the usual formulation of this moral claim on its head when he identified “carnivorous humans” as an endangered population deserving protection. Lynge, who made this statement in response to

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the Greenpeace anti-sealing and anti-whaling campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s, was not, of course, referring to carnivorous humans in general—a group so large that it could hardly be thought of as endangered—but to indigenous people as a group with a particular relationship to meat consumption, to hunting, and ultimately to nature. According to his argument, indigenous people have a direct connection to nature, and this particular relationship with nature is not comprehensible to people who have separated their consciousness from the natural world—that is, by most of the rest of the carnivorous and non-carnivorous humans on earth, who purchase their food from stores in exchange for money. This relationship of indigenous people to nature, Lyngé argued, makes their cultures distinctive and deserving of protection from the threats to their traditional food supplies posed by industrialized nations and non-governmental organizations such as Greenpeace. By saving the animals, we endanger our fellow humans and their cultures.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1985–1986 hunting season, a voluntary international agreement negotiated and regulated by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) has maintained a commercial hunting quota of whales set at zero (this zero-catch quota is often referred to as a “ban” in media discussions of whaling, although this is not technically accurate), with exceptions for certain cases defined as indigenous hunting.<sup>2</sup> This agreement attempts to satisfy both of these moral principles: animals deserve to be protected from humans, and minority groups deserve to be protected from majority ones. The global discussion about whales and whaling since the 1960s has resulted in an uneasy consensus on both of these principles, and the current policy attempts to balance the two ideals. This consensus, however, is not the result of a fundamental philosophical agreement between parties, but has emerged from a history marked by negotiation, protests, even violent protests, and compromise in which the sides not only disagreed, but misunderstood each other’s philosophical position. This article traces the history of these whaling debates in and around Iceland and, to a lesser degree, as they have applied to the other whaling nations in the North Atlantic, including

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<sup>1</sup> Lyngé 1992.

<sup>2</sup> International Whaling Commission, <<http://www.iwcoffice.org/conservation/rms.htm#moratorium>>; see also Friedheim 2001.



Norway, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland. The purpose is to show what effect the whaling debates have had on the international image of Iceland from the 1970s to the 2000s. The main source materials for tracing the shifts in this debate are newspaper articles from this period, especially *Morgunblaðið*, the largest Icelandic daily newspaper at the time, and *Aftenposten* (hereafter, *AP*), one of the major Norwegian dailies.<sup>3</sup>

An overview of this material shows that the North Atlantic whaling debates have fundamentally transformed themselves in the thirty or so years over which they have taken place. In the early phase of the debate, there was a relatively long period—from the late 1970s until at least the mid-1980s—during which the “pro” side failed to understand what was at stake in the “anti” efforts to achieve a ban on whaling. (For the purposes of simplicity, I refer to the two parties in the debate as the “pro” and “anti” whalers, although this is too absolute a distinction.) The pro camp did not grasp what it was about whaling that the whaling protesters found morally objectionable, and therefore made gestures that were meaningless to the other side—for example, proposals to reduce their hunting quotas, or to hunt whale species that they did not consider to be endangered. In the eyes of the anti side, however, such proposals were useless at best and offensive at worst. Their position was that whales had been scientifically proven to be sentient, intelligent beings, and that killing even one was the moral equivalent of murder. Since proposals to reduce the hunting quotas obviously did not meet this moral demand, the anti-whalers perceived whalers and their supporters as “bloodthirsty” and “barbarous,” and promoted this image of whaling nations in the international media in order to gain public support for their cause.

The anti side, for their part, failed to understand what symbolic role whaling played for whalers and whaling nations, and that whaling could have cultural meanings apart from its economic significance. They therefore made proposals of the kind that Lyngé and other whaling proponents found paternalistic and condescending,

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<sup>3</sup> References to *Morgunblaðið* before 1986 are to the paper copies; thereafter most of the articles (with a few exceptions) were obtained from the electronic archive, <<http://mbl.is/mm/gagnasafn/>>, and therefore do not include page numbers. All references to *Aftenposten* are from its electronic archive (<<http://www.aftenposten.no/>>).

suggesting that other people from different cultures ought to change their traditional food sources and livelihoods in order to meet the moral demands of foreigners. In the heated debate that ensued, the anti-whalers were publicly castigated as “sentimentalists” and “terrorists,” and thus consigned to a category outside the realm of rational discourse and negotiation. One of the major outcomes of the debate that I trace in this article was actually the development of this cultural meaning of whaling in Iceland, which had not emerged as a significant piece of Icelandic identity until it came under attack in this period.<sup>4</sup>

The progression of the whaling debates in the North Atlantic, and especially in Iceland, can be divided into two phases. The first phase could be seen as an “era of peaceful protest” lasting from about 1978 until 1985—from the first demonstrations against whaling by environmental protection organizations in Iceland—until the IWC’s moratorium went into effect. This “peace,” however, was less the result of tolerance and understanding for the other’s position, than of each side misunderstanding the fundamental premises of the other. The era of peaceful protest was followed by a period in which positions on both sides solidified, a period of “battle lines,” as the two sides came to the rude awakening of the true nature of the opposition in the period after 1985. This phase was marked by the sabotage of whaling boats and equipment in Iceland and Norway, the unsuccessful Norwegian attempt to extradite the perpetrators of the sabotage, the Norwegian resumption of commercial whaling under the objection clause of the 1985 agreement, and the withdrawal of Iceland from the IWC in 1992.<sup>5</sup> In 2002, Iceland returned to the IWC and resumed whaling under a scientific permit in the 2003–2004 whaling season.<sup>6</sup> In 2006, the year in which the 1986 IWC agreement

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<sup>4</sup> Brydon 1991, 2006; see also Mathisen 1996.

<sup>5</sup> On the rights of member nations’ to register objections to the 1985 agreement, see <[http://iwcoffice.org/conservation/table\\_objection.htm](http://iwcoffice.org/conservation/table_objection.htm)>.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the conditions under which scientific permits are allowed are defined under <<http://iwcoffice.org/conservation/permits.htm>>. Scientific catches are based on the stipulation that the nation conducts legitimate and necessary scientific research on the whales that could not be performed by non-lethal means. The scientific legitimacy of many of these permits—especially Japanese scientific whaling—has come under intense public debate. While the IWC requests the submission of scientific data, including the assurance that the proposed catch will not harm the stocks, ultimately it is the nation itself that decides whether to not or engage in scientific whaling.

was due to expire, the maintenance of the zero-catch quota was upheld by a narrow vote at the annual IWC meeting.<sup>7</sup> In the 2006–2007 season, Iceland followed Norway in registering a scientific objection with the IWC and killed its first fin whale in a commercial hunt since ceasing whaling. Iceland’s re-entry into the IWC and resumption of whaling marked a shift in the cultural meaning of whaling for Icelanders from the “peaceful protest” era. It asserted in an international arena that whaling was a fundamental element of Icelandic culture and that Icelanders, rather than international organizations, were the authorities on the sustainability of North Atlantic whale populations.

### The Development of the Whaling Debates, 1970s to 2003

During the first phase (ca. 1978–1985)—the “era of peaceful protest”—the pro-whaling factions were not organized, unlike the anti-whaling factions. Supporters of whaling in Iceland did not perceive the anti-whaling movement as fundamentally hostile to their activities. They believed that environmental protests were mainly aimed at the so-called larger whaling nations such as Japan and the Soviet Union and did not affect small-scale whaling of the type in which they were engaged. Naturally, they assumed, the larger nations were responsible for most of the environmental problems in the world, and therefore were the objects of protest in the age of increasing environmental awareness. Icelandic newspaper articles during this period more often discussed the effect that a whaling ban would have on the Japanese economy than on the Icelandic economy. For example, *Morgunblaðið* reported in 1980 that, of every 100 whales caught in the world, the Japanese caught ninety-nine.<sup>8</sup> A 1983 article on a boycott of fish from the whale-hunting nations Japan, Norway, Peru, and Russia organized by the Animal Welfare Institute did not even mention the possibility that Iceland might also be affected by such a boycott.<sup>9</sup> Since the United States and Great Britain were at the

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<sup>7</sup> International Whaling Commission, <<http://www.iwcoffice.org/Meetings/meeting2006.htm>>.

<sup>8</sup> “Hvalur í hættu” [Whales in Danger] 1980: 1.

<sup>9</sup> “Hvetja menn til að kaupa ekki fisk frá hvalveiðipjóðunum” [Urging a Boycott on Fish from Whale-Hunting Nations] 1983: 16.

forefront of the anti-whaling movement and two of the major whaling nations were the Soviet Union and Japan, anti-whaling was seen in Iceland as an expression of political opposition to the Soviet Union and a fear of Japanese economic power. Therefore, nations like Iceland, a NATO member with a small economy, essentially friendly to the interests of the United States, had no reason to be concerned about the anti-whaling protests.

Furthermore, Icelanders were not themselves united around the whaling issue in this early period, as is also the case today. An Icelandic nature protection group, Skuld, protested against whaling in Reykjavík in 1979 and 1980.<sup>10</sup> They pointed out that hunting and eating whales was unnecessary for the Icelandic economy and food production, as well as anti-modern, now that scientific research had made us aware of the intelligent and sympathetic nature of whales, a position borrowed from the Greenpeace/environmentalist platform.<sup>11</sup> A reporter for *Morgunblaðið* travelled with a Greenpeace boat on some of the group's attacks on so-called pirate whalers in Spain in 1980 and wrote articles sympathetic to Greenpeace.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the newspaper never wrote editorials on the whaling issue until 1985, apparently regarding the impending moratorium as not being sufficiently worthy of particular Icelandic interest. The general feeling of Icelandic pro-whalers before 1985 was that, by catching a few hundred whales per year, the Icelanders were not contributing to environmental problems or species endangerment, and therefore not really the objects of the foreigners' anger.

Greenpeace and other anti-whaling groups perceived the matter quite differently, however. Because of their perceived characteristics of intelligence and maternal nurturing, the anti-whalers thought of whales as essentially human, and killing even one, for any reason, was the moral equivalent of murder. In popular environmentalist rhetoric during this early period, nuanced questions such as which nations killed whales, for what purpose, with which weapons, how many whales were killed, and which species they belonged to, were secondary issues compared to the central charges of murder and

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<sup>10</sup> "Friður með hvölum" [Peace with Whales] 1980: 30.

<sup>11</sup> Agnarsson 1983: 45.

<sup>12</sup> Kjartansson 1980a: 16–17 and 1980b: 1.

genocide. This environmentalist view of whales as intelligent and human-like animals was a popular rendering of the work in the 1960s and 1970s of a number of biologists and zoologists, such as Scott McKay, Robbins Barstow, and Roger Payne (the founder of Ocean Alliance), on topics such as humpback whale songs and dolphin communication. Some of the scientists were inspired by their research to become environmental advocates themselves. Barstow, for example, writing for the popular press, described whales as having “a special affinity for human beings,” a “universal appeal,” and a “mystique” that “inspires wonder and exhilaration among people from all races and all nations in a way that no other non-human species has equalled so widely.”<sup>13</sup> The view of whales as unique and highly intelligent animals with a special relationship with humans became also a theme in popular media by the mid-1980s, with films with explicit environmental messages about whales becoming commercially successful. Some examples include *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986), which features the crew of the starship *Enterprise* travelling into the past and obtaining a humpback whale song to save the Earth from a threatening alien probe and the whales from extinction. A film that later came to have particular relevance for Iceland, *Free Willy* (1993), details a troubled boy’s relationship with a killer whale; the boy finds redemption himself through his efforts to free the whale from an amusement park.

For environmentalists in the 1970s and early 1980s, whales took on an even greater significance than the blue whale’s status as the world’s largest mammal would suggest. As the organizers of a 1983 conference, sponsored in part by the IWC and Greenpeace, acknowledged, whales, in addition to being of interest in their own right, function as “powerful symbols of environmental concern.”<sup>14</sup> As symbols of endangered animals and threatened environments, their main role in popular discussions in recent years has been to draw attention to general environmental concerns about a range of causes, rather than specific debates over the health of certain species of whales, the issue in which the pro-whaling advocates are most interested. At a meeting celebrating the 1985–1986 hunting moratorium, Sir Peter Scott, one of the founders of the World Wildlife Fund, summed up the significance of whales to the global

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<sup>13</sup> Barstow 1987: 19.

<sup>14</sup> Barstow 1987: 19.

environmental movement: “If we can’t save the whales, we can’t save anything—least of all the human species. The whales are a symbol of survival, perhaps the symbol of all life on earth.”<sup>15</sup>

After the zero-catch quota went into effect, the whaling debates entered a second stage from 1985 on as the “battle lines” between the two sides hardened. As the IWC has no regulatory apparatus, the agreement on zero-catch quotas was purely voluntary. Norway ceased commercial whaling in compliance with the agreement the following year, in 1987, but Iceland continued to whale until 1989. Greenpeace and a splinter group, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, founded by former Greenpeace member Paul Watson, took responsibility for the enforcement of the moratorium upon themselves. This was carried out by so-called Greenpeace actions, where members placed themselves between whaling boats and whales, and by the more radical activities of the Sea Shepherd members, who destroyed whaling vessels and the equipment of whaling companies.<sup>16</sup> In one of these actions, two men from the Sea Shepherd sabotaged two boats and navigational equipment belonging to the whaling company Hvalur hf. in the Reykjavík harbour before racing back to Keflavík and fleeing Iceland in November 1986. On the road to the airport, they were stopped by an Icelandic policeman for speeding, but, unsuspecting of what these foreigners were up to, the policeman only gave a warning before allowing them to proceed to the airport and flee the country. The next morning, when their actions were discovered, the reaction of the Icelandic public was one of shock and disbelief, as the headline in *Morgunblaðið*, finally aroused over this issue, reflected: “This never happens here...”<sup>17</sup>

In the face of an opposition prepared to intensify the battle, believing that they had both legal backing and the consensus of world opinion on their side, the pro-whaling side acted to organize itself, both locally and globally. In the North Atlantic, this took the shape of the High North Alliance (HNA), founded in Lofoten, Norway, in 1991 as an umbrella organization of Norwegian, Icelandic, Faroese, Greenlandic, and Canadian fishing and whaling groups, and the North

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted from “Peter Scott—A Passion for Nature” [Motion picture] (2006).

<sup>16</sup> Watson 1994.

<sup>17</sup> “Það gerist aldrei hér...”: 11 (my translation).

Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), founded in Nuuk, Greenland, in 1992 with members from Iceland, Norway, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands. The HNA is an advocacy group that aims to protect the rights of hunters and whalers, while NAMMCO contests the scientific competence of the IWC to evaluate the health of whale populations in North Atlantic waters and argues that the pilot and minke populations there, among others, can be better managed by local authorities. The North Atlantic countries have also supported larger organizations with more global aims, such as the World Council of Whalers, founded in 1997, and the Inuit Circumpolar Council, founded in 1977, in their efforts to spread more positive images of whaling cultures and to promote the claim for an indigenous right to the consumption of whale meat.

Accompanying these structural moves, an organized pro-whaling argument emerged in Iceland during the “battle-lines” phase, grounded on the concept of the “rights of small nations.” In July 1985, as the IWC agreement was just about to go into effect, *Morgunblaðið* wrote that “no nation, especially a small nation, can afford to build policy and make decisions on such a two-faced morality.”<sup>18</sup> What *Morgunblaðið* meant by “two-faced morality” was that the Greenlanders would be permitted to catch 200 minke whales under the indigenous whaling exemption, but the Icelandic minke catch of about the same number would be forbidden (in fact, the Greenland catch hovered between 100 and 200 whales in the following years).<sup>19</sup> The assertion of the “rights of small nations” was a rhetorical attempt to cast the Icelanders and the history of their relationship with the sea—however short their history of whaling may have actually been—symbolically into the now-recognized category of indigenous people—that is, as a minority nation whose culture is misunderstood and threatened by the actions of powerful outsiders. From the mid-1980s, some Icelanders, Norwegians, and Faroe Islanders began to defend whaling as an expression of their cultural values and national sovereignty. They phrased their argument in language very similar to that of indigenous rights advocates like Finn

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<sup>18</sup> “Engri þjóð, síst af öllu smáþjóð, líðst það að byggja stefnu sína og ákvarðanir á tvöföldu siðgæði.” “Vísindalegur hvalveiðar” [Scientific Whaling] 1985: 26 (my translation).

<sup>19</sup> Complete figures on aboriginal subsistence catches since 1985 are available at <[http://iwcoffice.org/conservation/table\\_aboriginal.htm](http://iwcoffice.org/conservation/table_aboriginal.htm)>.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

Lynge: The people of North Atlantic nations have historically experienced a struggle for survival against the harsh realities of nature. Having done so, they have a different relationship with nature than foreign urban dwellers, who are removed from the realities of life and death. Therefore, a person's national identity as an Icelander or Norwegian—although he or she might live in a large city, buy meat from the supermarket, and have never fished or whaled—endows this individual with certain rights, including the right to eat whale meat in a restaurant in Oslo.<sup>20</sup>

Towards the end of the 1980s and on into the early 1990s, this argument solidified as the North Atlantic countries continued to be publicly attacked on the whaling issue, and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society continued its activities in Norway in 1992 and 1994 after the Norwegian resumption of commercial whaling in 1992.<sup>21</sup> By this time, Iceland had left the IWC but was not whaling. Opposition to the globally accepted position on whaling became an important piece of North Atlantic identity in the political realm. It was regarded as necessary for smaller nation states to take strong stands against unfair pressure from larger nation states through the domination of the IWC, otherwise they would appear open to manipulation and their national sovereignty would be at risk. Furthermore, it was even more important not to give in to so-called terrorist attacks like those of the Sea Shepherd. The economic value of whaling to North Atlantic countries was not a significant point in the “rights of small nations” argument. It was the small nations against the large nations. In this spirit, the Norwegians declared their support in 1997 for Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe in their efforts to get elephants removed from the endangered species lists, a move that brought Norway under intense international criticism. Just as the Norwegians claimed for minke whales, the African nations maintained that elephants were not endangered, but were destroying farmers' crops and therefore had to be hunted. Kåre Bryn, the Norwegian whale commissioner, denied after his trip to Zimbabwe and South Africa that Norway was in the business of “trading whales for elephants.” Rather, he claimed that Norway and the African countries were in the same situation: “We have a relationship with

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<sup>20</sup> Kalland 1994.

<sup>21</sup> “Miljøterror straffes ikke” [Environmental Terrorism Goes Unpunished] 1996.



animals that ‘everyone’ thinks are endangered, but in reality these populations are highly sustainable.”<sup>22</sup> That oil-rich Norway should attempt to cast itself on the world stage as a post-colonial African nation illustrates how symbolic and removed from economic realities—and, in the views of anti whalers, how “absurd”—the whaling debates had become by the late 1990s.

Between 1998 and 2003, an episode played out in North Atlantic waters that brought to life the abstract political and moral principles of both sides. It was embodied by the charismatic and famous figure of Keiko, the killer whale who had starred in the movie *Free Willy* in 1993. Although Keiko had become very ill in a Mexico City aquarium, by 1998 he had won friends worldwide through the movie highlighting his plight. The Free-Willy-Keiko Foundation had brought him to Oregon and negotiated successfully with the Icelandic government to return him to Icelandic waters where he was born. Returning Keiko to the wild seemed to be simple humanitarianism in the eyes of some animal rights advocates and environmentalists, but it actually violated Icelandic law against the import of living animals. Six years earlier, the Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries had refused to allow Sea World to return another killer whale to Icelandic waters because there was a risk that the animal could be carrying undetectable infections acquired during captivity. This whale was not, however, an international media star, but had been in part responsible for the death of a trainer.<sup>23</sup> In the negotiations with the Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries preceding Keiko’s return, many marine biologists cited the earlier case to support their contention that a whale who had grown to adulthood in captivity had not learned the skills to survive in the wild, and the entire plan was a flawed, sentimental idea based on a Hollywood script rather than good marine biological practice.

The Icelandic public, bemused at the idea of spending upwards of 9 million dollars to return a whale that had already lived half of his natural life span in captivity to the wild, cheerfully received Keiko as the celebrity he had become, with commercial promotions tied to his

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<sup>22</sup> “Norge og disse afrikanske landene er i same situasjon, ved å ha bestander av dyr som ‘alle’ tror er truet av utryddelse, men som i realiteten er svært bærekraftige.” “Norge får hvalstøtte, gir elefantstøtte” [Norway Gets African Support on Whaling, and Supports Africans on the Elephants] 1997 (my translation). See also Arnalds 1998.

<sup>23</sup> Davis 1997.

release in Icelandic waters.<sup>24</sup> Some Icelandic protesters against the Keiko decision, however, believed that the Ministry was acquiescing to the American cultural view of whales in allowing the return of the animal when the Icelandic position on whaling had not been respected by the Americans. One protester provocatively asserted in a letter to *Morgunblaðið*, “I furthermore oppose allowing foreigners telling us how and what we may eat [...] let’s eat Keiko and begin whale hunting immediately!”<sup>25</sup> In the same issue of the newspaper, Ólafur Hannibalsson expressed sympathy for the United States for the recent September 11th attacks, but noted that Iceland had experienced terrorism as well with the 1986 Sea Shepherd action, although the international press had not recognized it as such, and international courts had failed to address the issue. Only the injuries of powerful nations with popular causes were readdressed, he implied, while those of smaller countries were ignored.<sup>26</sup>

Many Icelanders, however, seemed to see Keiko as an easy way of winning international goodwill on environmental issues and as a marketing opportunity. According to a poll conducted in the fall of 1998, 54% of Icelanders supported Keiko’s return, only 24% were against it, and the rest were indifferent.<sup>27</sup> The Norwegians also welcomed Keiko after he swam into their waters, and allowed him to be buried in Norwegian soil after his death there in December 2003. Keiko was a way of showing to the world that Norwegians and Icelanders were not heartless barbarians in their relationship with whales, as they had been so often portrayed in the media. Rather, they were protecting a whale that had been damaged not by North Atlantic peoples, but rather by commercial interests in anti-whaling countries. In any event, any good feelings between environmental interests and North Atlantic whaling nations generated by the Keiko story were short-lived. In 2002, Iceland re-entered the IWC, although only by a narrow vote, and it resumed scientific whaling in the 2003–2004 season. After the moratorium was sustained at the 2006 IWC meeting

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<sup>24</sup> Orlean 2002, Brydon 2006.

<sup>25</sup> “Ég ennfremur mótmæli að láta útlendinga segja okkur fyrir verkum og hvað við megum éta [...] Étum Keikó og byrjum hvalveiðar strax!” “Étum Keiko og byrjum hvalveiðar strax” [Let’s Eat Keiko and Begin Whale Hunting Immediately] 2001: 42 (my translation).

<sup>26</sup> Hannibalsson 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Guðmundsson 1998.

when it came up for a vote after the twenty-year period, Iceland resumed commercial whaling in the following season.

### Conclusion: The View from Húsavík

Húsavík, a small community of fewer than 3,000 people on the north shore of Iceland, advertises itself as the “whale watching capital of Europe.”<sup>28</sup> It is home to two whale watching companies, North Sailing (Norðursigling) and Gentle Giants (Hvalaferðir), which are located directly adjacent to each other on the harbour and take tourists five or six times per day into Skjálfandi Bay to see whales during the May–September season. Other highlights of tourism in Húsavík include two highly individualized museums: the Húsavík Whale Museum and the Icelandic Phalological Museum, also located in close proximity to each other. As far as I could tell on my visit to Húsavík in June 2009, no formal cooperation takes place between these two institutions—the display of whale penises at the Phalological Museum appears to be purely coincidental—but nevertheless both are strongly influenced by the personalities and interests of their founders. The Húsavík Whale Museum was founded in 1997 by the Icelandic anti-whaling advocate Ásbjörn Björgvinsson. The rooms of the museum, which is housed in the one of the buildings of a former slaughterhouse, are divided into different themes, such as whale biology, the history of whaling, whale watching, etc. The museum’s presentation is in many respects excellent and extremely accessible to the visitor, and the information is accurate (although not always entirely up to date). It is, however, fair to say that the information is selected to present a distinct position on the whaling debates: namely, that Icelandic whaling should not continue, and that the Icelandic whale watching industry should replace the whaling industry, as appears to be taking place outside the museum in Skjálfandi Bay. For example, the exhibit on whale biology compares the life cycle of whales and of humans and the amount of milk drunk by an infant whale to that of a human infant, encouraging visitors to think of whales in the terms of 1970s environmentalism, as intelligent fellow mammals. The exhibit on whaling history focuses on the whaling history of Iceland and Norway and avoids treating the history of Greenlandic or Faroese whaling

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<sup>28</sup> Whale watching in Húsavík is discussed in detail in Einarsson 2009.

(except for a brief reference to the Faroes). This overview simplifies some of the complexities of whaling and its cultural meaning for different North Atlantic peoples, as it appears from the presentation that whaling in the North Atlantic was historically limited to the Icelandic–Norwegian industrial hunt that began in the 19th century.

The whale watching tours in Húsavík—judging again from the one I went on in June 2009—do not take a position of advocacy so openly. The tour guides rather concentrate their narrations on the biology and behaviour of the whales and other animals in the bay, and, of course, on following the whales and pointing out their above-water sightings to tourists. When asked, however, the guide told me that foreigners “only rarely” ask questions about current Icelandic whaling, and she assumed they were probably mostly unaware that it goes on at all, despite the fact that whaling was taking place that season just beyond the boundaries of the whale watching ships’ tours. There was, she pointed out, “at least the possibility” that whale watching and whaling ships could run into each other in the waters while both practising their trades. A certain hesitation to discuss Icelandic whaling at all marked the conversation between us, which took place on the dock after the conclusion of the tour. It seems fair to conclude that the tourism industry in Húsavík would prefer that the foreign image of Iceland be represented by whale watching rather than by whaling.

This brief glance in summer 2009 at one of the sites where the image of Iceland in the whaling debates is produced suggests that Húsavík could be interpreted as a continuation of the “Keiko position”—that is, a place to show the world that Icelanders can protect whales instead of killing them. Húsavík’s geographical location on the north shore of Iceland and its history as a former whaling community stands in counterpoint to Reykjavík in the south, where decisions about how many and which species of whales to kill are made. Reykjavík perhaps represents to the world the pro-whaling position of the “battle-lines” period, while Húsavík could be seen as representing the “new” Iceland. This is obviously too simple a distinction, because, as my research has shown, an Icelandic anti-whaling voice existed from the beginning of the whaling debates. Whale watching as an alternative to whaling, and the image of Iceland produced by this industry, however, came much later, as one of the outcomes of the debate itself. Angela Walk dates the beginning of the

Icelandic whale watching industry to 1995, although a British company had conducted tours in Iceland in 1992, and whale watching tours had taken place already in the 1970s and 1980s in California and Japan.<sup>29</sup> Icelandic whale watching companies, like the Icelandic treatment of Keiko, show the world that some Icelanders act to protect and nurture whales, even as their countrymen kill and eat them.

The whaling debate continues to be volatile in Iceland and internationally, although overshadowed in the international reporting about Iceland by the financial crisis and the Icesave controversy after October 2008. It is impossible, especially for a historian like myself, to predict how these discussions will develop in the coming years. However, what seems to be clear is that—even with the Icelandic resumption of whaling—an alternative image to the “bloodthirsty Icelandic hunters” emerged in the late 1990s around Keiko, but perhaps more enduringly around the growth and development of Icelandic whale watching. Whether this will replace the older image remains to be seen, but the development of a second, alternative image of Iceland and whales moves the complexity of the discussion beyond the simplified positions of the 1970s debate. For example, Niels Einarsson sees the development of the whale watching industry in Húsavík as evidence of Arctic societies’ well-defined ability to adapt and survive in changing conditions.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast with this new image, the whaling that continues in Iceland, now alongside whale watching, finds its philosophical justification in more traditional images of Iceland, many of which in some form date back several centuries to the first foreign visitors to the island.<sup>31</sup> Icelandic whaling holds the image of Iceland as a small nation whose actions are too insignificant to injure anyone. The whales they catch are few in number and not of an endangered species,

Icelandic whaling advocates argue.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, pro-whalers

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<sup>29</sup> Walk 2005: 19–26.

<sup>30</sup> Einarsson 2009.

<sup>31</sup> The history of these images is discussed in more detail in Oslund 2011.

<sup>32</sup> For an example of this argument, see the *Report of the Status of Stocks in Icelandic Waters 2009–10* issued by the Icelandic Marine Research Institute (Hafrannsóknastofnunin).

see Iceland as a country protected by larger powers (historically by Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries; since 1945 by the United States) whose aberrant actions will be overlooked by the international community because Iceland is so central—either culturally or geopolitically—to their protectors. Although these two Icelandic images—self-contradictory though they are—have a long history, that does not mean that they will necessarily survive, or at least, not that they will survive in the guise of whale hunting. The emergence of a new Icelandic image around whale watching, one that conforms more to international norms, shows how new images can emerge that exist alongside or even replace older ones.

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ICELAND IN THE LOCAL AND GLOBAL NEXUS OF WHALING POLITICS

“Það gerist aldrei hér...” [This Never Happens Here...] (1986).  
*Morgunblaðið*, 17 Nov., p. 11.



# Banking on Borealism: Eating, Smelling, and Performing the North

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**Abstract** – This article examines the exotic performances and representations of Icelanders and “the North” (or Borealism) in media and daily life, focusing on food traditions and their practice within intricate foreign–native power relations and transnational folkloric encounters. It suggests a theory for understanding the dynamics, agency, and ironies involved in images of “the North” and the performance of identity amongst “foreigners.” The study looks at Icelandic expatriates and draws examples from media, bankers’ marketing events during the peak of Icelandic business ventures, and the everyday practice of food culture. It explores the roles of identity and folk culture in transcultural performances. In approaching the questions of differentiation and the folklore of dislocation (i.e., among expatriates), the everyday practices of food traditions are studied as an arena of negotiation and performance of identity. Interlinking theory and ethnography, the article examines how expressive culture and performance may corrode the strategies of boundary making and marginalization re-enforced by stereotypes and exoticized representations. Finally, this article looks at the concept of ironic, as opposed to “authentic,” identities.

**Keywords** – Performance, representation, identity, oral narrative, food tradition, folklore, irony, cultural re-appropriation, image

## Introduction

As I stood in the midst of the revelling Viking-helmeted bankers at the 2007 midwinter feast of Glitnir Bank in London, various perplexing thoughts ran through my mind: “Can one draw a line between marketing and tradition?” I thought as a waiter offered me hors d’oeuvres. Detecting a whiff of cured shark in the air, I was reminded of the words of an expatriate Icelander describing the relative abnormality of traditional food in Iceland: “And from an island like this,” she said, gesturing upwards as to the North on a wall map, “way out in the ocean where the natives eat shark and sheep heads.” “Can one base identity on irony?” I thought. Standing there,

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perplexed as I often am during fieldwork, I began to comprehend how both identities and images were being performed ironically and in a transnational context. But who was performing to whom? And why?

The material effects of globalization, tourism, and international capitalism on national and local culture are often all too evident. Conversely, the uses and practices of identity and images in creating such transnational processes are more ambiguous. Yet, as this article argues, tradition-based images and performances of identities are instrumental in establishing the everyday contexts necessary for their practice. Equally elusive, verbal and visual irony play a significant role in the differentiation of groups of people through tradition, performance, and folklore—often on a grand scale. Food traditions have long been a major component in this folklore of differentiation—defining and separating groups from one another. Presented here is a study on the narratives, food traditions, and ironic performances of identity that involve the interaction and merging of groups. Whether on the film and television screen, in the privacy of an expatriate's home, or through organized marketing events—such as the Glitnir midwinter feast—these performances take place in the midst of cultural and socioeconomic developments such as the outstretching of Iceland's financial sector abroad and the following economic crises. Such transnational developments can charge the liminal space of “foreignness” with various shifting dynamics. One of these dynamics involves images of an exotic North (in a word: Borealism) enveloping, among others, Icelanders and their practices abroad.

While remaining relatively obscure to most of the world, Icelanders abroad have been met with a considerable media backdrop of their cultural and economic adventures and misadventures. These include a prolific contribution to film, art, and music but also coverage of aggressive Icelandic business ventures and the disastrous collapse of an overgrown Icelandic banking sector. Research among people in the midst of these processes, such as bankers (the “Viking raiders” or “Venture Vikings,” as they have become known), artists, and students abroad, offers insights into the experience and folklore involved in these developments and the images attached to them. Ironic performances of folk culture and seemingly archaic food traditions are an integral part of this. This article explores these

exoticizing representations and performances of traditional Icelandic food practices abroad as well as the concept of ironic, as opposed to authentic, identity.

### Theory, Field, and Method

Folkloristic and ethnological perspectives have much to offer in illuminating the dynamics of images and identities. On top of an emphasis on fieldwork and a critical understanding of tradition, the disciplines' emphasis on cultural context, practice, and performance offers fresh perspectives on the relationship between image and identity and how the latter is formed and sustained. In the wake of numerous adaptations of Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, a form of dominance through cultural authority, much scholarship on national identity has been focused on its top-down delivery from an emergent nationalistic intelligentsia to "the masses."<sup>1</sup> While making a remarkable contribution to illuminating the processes of nation building, these analyses tend to overlook the elaborate contextual, and in a sense horizontal, identifications in everyday folkloric communication—that is to say, when people of varying social status and cultural capital form or rather negotiate their identities in everyday interaction, for example, while talking, eating, dressing, playing, etc., rather than within the pedagogical environment of a classroom, a museum, or the hegemonic and ordered space of ceremony and festival. Many of these vertical approaches also fail to address adequately the complexities of contemporary transnational communication and commodification of culture and identity. Among these are the interrelationships of media and folklore, the irony or inner and outer meanings of representations, and the expressive bricolage often employed in the practice of tradition. By avoiding such overly hegemonic discourses on the construction of national identity, one may better understand the often ironic representations of Icelanders and "the North" in both the media and daily life and focus on their practice within intricate power relations.

To fully comprehend transcultural performances of this kind, the imbalance of power must be confronted in the analysis and research

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<sup>1</sup> See Gramsci 1992. See also an analysis of Icelandic nationalism based on the works of Renan, Anderson, Bourdieu, and Gellner in Hálfðanarson 2001.

models. A prolific model of the force relationships in vernacular practices can be found in Michel de Certeau's monumental work *The Practice of Everyday Life*.<sup>2</sup> Combining the often isolated research of representation on the one hand and the study of modes of behaviour on the other, de Certeau focuses on the subtle processes of people conducting their lives in the midst of cultural consumption and innovation, or what de Certeau refers to as the art of living. This work of scholarship also includes the study of narration that he describes as being inseparable "from the theory of practices."<sup>3</sup> The problem of studying everyday life lies, according to de Certeau, in its "tactical" position: he perceives cultural practices as reactions countering or evading a strategy of authority. He separates these power relationships into strategy and tactics. The former is defined as the power relationships possible when a subject of power and authority can be separated in a given environment, such as a supervisor within a workplace. The latter, tactics, refers to the subject that is without spatial or institutional locality, such as a passerby or vagrant, and therefore "fragmentarily insinuates itself into the other's place."<sup>4</sup> Applying these terms to autonomous initiatives of everyday performances, as will be done below, is helpful in understanding the processes and power relationships embedded in the various contexts of foreign–native encounters.

Studying everyday performances of identity in foreign–native encounters requires research over an extensive period and field. While the ethnography on which I base this case study is not quantitatively conclusive, based rather on qualitative methods, its range is nonetheless extensive. The field of choice lies in those spaces where Icelanders are met with at least some sort of media backdrop (such as film, advertisement, or product marketing), significant relations of either a historical (e.g., colonial ties) or current nature (tourism, education, business, arts, and culture). The fieldwork began in 2005 and ranges over many northern European cities and various countries across the North Atlantic. Fieldwork that is stretched out over national boundaries has offered an opportunity to study nationality in terms of space. Fieldwork that has spanned over a number of years

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<sup>2</sup> de Certeau 1988.

<sup>3</sup> de Certeau 1988: 78.

<sup>4</sup> de Certeau 1988: 9.

has, in turn, offered insights into nationality in terms of changing roles and unfolding events. Since my fieldwork began, various seismic, economic, and social developments have affected Icelanders and their image abroad. The liminal space of foreignness that Icelanders abroad inhabit has therefore been charged with various shifting dynamics.

Perhaps the most influential of media reporting has sprung from news coverage of Icelandic business abroad. While Iceland may still be relatively obscure in the minds of many Europeans and North Americans, the coverage of the country's cultural and economic adventures and later misadventures, to say nothing of their effects on foreign depositors, has been considerable. Indeed, since my research began, major news outlets covered various aspects of aggressive Icelandic business ventures as well as the disastrous collapse of an overgrown Icelandic banking sector. Fieldwork among people in the midst of these processes is therefore especially important and can offer insights into experience and culture that preceded these and the images attached to them.

The scope of the ethnographic enquiry involves a lot more than probing the effects of "current events." Much of the fieldwork was carried out in collaboration with fellow folklorist and partner Katla Kjartansdóttir, centring on reflexive participant observation, qualitative inquiry, and audio/visual documentation of how Icelanders abroad conceptualize, perform, and negotiate their identities. While this article draws examples mainly from London and Helsinki during a period of escalating Icelandic business ventures abroad, the larger body of fieldwork explores Icelandic identities in numerous locations and contexts. We attended gatherings and visited private homes in cities such as London, Helsinki, Glasgow, Berlin, Edinburgh, and Copenhagen and interviewed participants who live or have lived in various other locations in Europe and North America. Through interviews and participatory observation we explored self-image as well as self-representation under "the gaze of the Other."

In my analysis special attention is, however, paid to the relationship between the transcultural exchanges of everyday life, e.g., through personal narratives and anecdotes and representations in the media (press, advertisements, film, etc.). Increasingly, representations in the global media make their mark on the transnational and

transcultural encounters practiced in the liminal space of “foreignness” and being “abroad.” Folklorists have effectively turned their attention to the problems of such encounters and the role that expressive culture and performance plays in them.<sup>5</sup> Going beyond the discipline’s prior emphases on the artistic beauty and skill of folklore, great strides have been taken in examining the processes by which boundaries are drawn and differential identities are solidified through traditional and expressive culture. Folklorists have also gone further in illustrating the negotiable processes rendering people and symbols foreign and marginal. They have also laid bare the latent and overt strategies involved in the manipulation of identity symbols, such as traditional food.<sup>6</sup> In the study presented here one may see an example on how such exoticizing manipulations are not only a means of solidification and separation but also an elaborate tool of transcultural interaction.

### Borealism: Images of the North

In describing the cultural practices involved in exoticizing the inhabitants of the North, I use the term *Borealism*.<sup>7</sup> Originating in the Latin *borealis* (the North), it is an appropriation of Edward Said’s term *Orientalism* that refers to the ontological and epistemological distinction between East and West.<sup>8</sup> His study, as do aspects of my own, reveals the assumptions and power relations involved in cross-cultural relations. The image of one’s ethnicity or regional background plays a significant role in the negotiation of power in transnational encounters. So making sense of images of the North in general, or Icelanders in particular, is in many ways a study of relations between the centres and margins of power. This is clearly experienced in the “foreigner’s”/migrant’s/expatriate’s negotiations of power within a host country. Whether in the acquisition of access to or status within new communities or in the corporate acquisition of markets, cross-national power relations reveal the fluctuating agency and

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<sup>5</sup> For overview on performance studies, see Bial 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Bendix & Klein 1993; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1994; Abrahams 2000.

<sup>7</sup> The term *exotic* is here defined as that which is strikingly, excitingly, or mysteriously different or unusual.

<sup>8</sup> Said 1979.



appropriation that is the experience of people from the margins of regional power bases or the “fringes of the North.”

It is, in many cases, difficult to discern the images of Iceland as they appear through contemporary media from historical images of the North in general. The concept of the North is full of extremes and ambiguities. As revealed in Peter Davidson’s exploration of the concept in art, legend, and literature, two opposing ideas of North repeat and contradict each other from antiquity well into the 19th century. First of all, it is “a place of darkness and dearth, the seat of evil. Or, conversely [...] a place of austere felicity where virtuous peoples live behind the north wind and are happy.”<sup>9</sup> From savage dystopia to enlightened utopia, the pendulum has swung back and forth between the civilized and the wild. Researchers have nonetheless discerned patterns in this dynamic construct, claiming for example that the ancient Greeks and Romans and the Christian church associated the North with barbarism while the South was considered the cradle of civilization. During and after the Reformation these roles were in many ways reversed in northern European discourse, and many saw the light of reason and progress shine brightest in the north.<sup>10</sup>

From Iceland’s earliest recorded history, and arguably even before its settlement, the barbaric and exotic has been related to the food culture of the remote northern isle. This seems to be the case even within what we now call the “Nordic” countries where, only a few centuries after the settlement of Iceland, its settlers were ridiculed for their consumption of fatty foods and named the *mörlandar* or fatlanders. In the 13th-century text *Morkinskinna*, the eloquent, yet endearingly crass, anti-hero Sneglu Halli called upon himself the wrath of a Norwegian king by spending too much time eating gruel and too little singing the king’s praise.<sup>11</sup> The exotic, if crass, food image of Iceland is likely to have been enduring and widespread as suggested by Dutch Captain C. G. Zorgdrager, who visited Iceland in 1699. An illustration based on his description, and published soon

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<sup>9</sup> Davidson 2005: 21.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Clarence E. Glad and Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson in this volume. See also S. Jakobsson, ed., *Images of the North* (2009).

<sup>11</sup> Jakobsson 2008.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

after his visit, depicts a bizarre form of cookery in the north of Iceland where, apparently, a leg of lamb is boiled at the end of a rope in a gushing hot spring.



Figure 1. An engraving from C. G. Zorgdrager's description from 1699.<sup>12</sup>

To this day an exotic image of Icelanders is perpetuated, and increasingly so, through the media of photography books, advertisements, and films. Examples of this are the 66° North advertising campaign for fleece clothing by Jónsson & Le'macks (photography by Ari Magnússon) and the books/exhibitions *Icelanders*<sup>13</sup> and *Faces of the North*.<sup>14</sup> These publications directly evoke images of a characteristically Northern or Arctic culture, concentrating on those who allegedly have not fully crossed the threshold of modernity. Commonly, these eccentricities are ironically expressed through traditional Icelandic food. An interesting example of this is the advertisement for the major Icelandic airline Icelandair: a group of French businessmen are interrupted by their boss while enjoying some Icelandic dried fish after a meeting with an Icelandic business associate. The Icelandic, however, is nowhere to be seen, having left with one of the frequent evening flights. He has apparently

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<sup>12</sup> Zorgdrager 1723.

<sup>13</sup> Sigurjónsson & Jökulsdóttir 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Axelsson 2004.

closed the deal and left a whiff of dried fish in the air, to the disgust and dismay of a late-coming French business executive. He is dismayed, not because of the fine print in the contract, but because of the exotic odour of dried fish in the air—an attack on the senses within the sterile office space.

Icelandic films have likewise done much to exoticize and ironize Icelandic food traditions. In Dagur Kári's critically acclaimed film *Nói Albínói* (Nói the Albino), the preparation of traditional food is presented in a most barbaric fashion. The protagonist, Nói, wearing the signature Icelandic woollen cap, is an outsider who dreams of escaping the country. In a scene where his dysfunctional family prepares blood pudding, the audience is challenged with close-ups of the messy business of fat grinding. The grotesque affair is further highlighted when the hapless Nói fumbles and spills a huge pot of blood all over his family. In another recent Icelandic film, *Mýrin* or *Jar City* by Baltasar Kormákur, an adaptation of the novel by the popular crime writer Arnaldur Indriðason, there is a scene where the protagonist is seen digging into a particularly gelatinous dish of singed sheep's head, or *svið*, meaning something singed. Indeed, in light of the emphasis placed on the protagonist's consumption of *svið*, one would be justified in suspecting that its sole purpose was to catch the othering eye of foreign audiences.

While this traditional dish, consisting of a split, singed, and boiled head of sheep, is still commercially available in Iceland and displayed in the food stores, the dish's everyday status has diminished in recent decades. It has been steadily gaining a place among other traditional dishes such as sour ram's testicles and cured skate, which are rarely seen except at the time of their designated festivities to which they may add a sense of folksy patriotism. Nonetheless, the proprietor of the drive-through restaurant featured in the film claimed a huge boost in sales of this handy and centuries-old fast food after the screening began.<sup>15</sup> Yet at the time, the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, Einar K. Guðfinnson, who was not one to recoil in the face of traditional produce, seemed slightly bemused in his personal blog:

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<sup>15</sup> “*Mýrin* hefur mikil áhrif: sviðasala margfaldast á BSÍ” [BSÍ Observes Influence of *Mýrin* as Svið Sales Soar] 2006.

We know well that many do not like whaling, have reservations to the invasion of Icelandic companies, do not appreciate our dams. And perhaps detective Erlendur feasting on *svið* in Arnaldur's and Baltasar Kormákur's film, *Jar City*, gives a worse image than before; this is, at least, not the image of "gourmet" Iceland—the modern Iceland.<sup>16</sup>

The minister seems to be suggesting here that this alleged antithesis of gourmet Iceland has little basis in contemporary reality or that, if it does, then it is not an image to be heralded. Indeed the Icelandic government, at both a local and international level, has invested heavily in the promotion of Icelandic cookery as gourmet and high cuisine and its produce, mainly dairy, fish, and lamb, as "natural" and clean. In that light it is interesting to compare Guðfinnson's statement to a recent comment made by the current Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. In a speech at the national farmers' congress (Búnaðarþing) on 28 February 2010, the new left wing government's Jón Bjarnason strongly criticized a television commercial that showed young people shunning traditional Icelandic food and opting for pizza. The minister described it as "some sort of humourless 2007 presentation in the spirit of the Venture Vikings where traditional Icelandic national food is belittled."<sup>17</sup> In comparison, the former minister finds the presentation of traditional, rather than modern, Icelandic food an embarrassment. But the current minister speaks in defence of traditional food and puts the mockery into the context of a passé neo-liberal period. The ministers also contrast in the immediacy of their comments. The former minister's comment betrays a certain lack of forcefulness in his concerns for the modern "image" of Iceland.

This ambivalence comes to the heart of the matter. Despite the potentially deprecating effect on the nation's image, depicting it rather as eccentric and peripheral, little protest against these representations was voiced in Iceland. On the contrary, high political figures had openly embraced these eccentricities as a national asset. In an attempt

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<sup>16</sup> Guðfinnson 2006.

<sup>17</sup> "Einhverskonar húnorslaus 2007 útgáfa í anda útrásarvíkinga þar sem að gert er lítið úr hefðbundnum íslenskum þjóðlegum afurðum." "Síminn lítillsvirðir ekki þjóðlegar íslenskar afurðir" [Síminn Doesn't Disdain Traditional Icelandic Products] 2010 (my translation).

to illustrate and trumpet Icelandic business successes abroad, the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, stated in a speech:

Because of how small the Icelandic nation is, we do not travel the world with an extra baggage of ulterior motives or big power interests rooted in military, financial or political strength. No one is afraid to work with us; people even see us as fascinating eccentrics who can do no harm and therefore all doors are thrown wide open when we arrive.<sup>18</sup>

This, in fact, also highlights that although this filmed folklore is to some extent local and artistic self-representation, it is also a potentially lucrative transcultural commodity, reflexively aimed at both foreign and domestic consumers. This, at least in part, ironic exposition of Icelanders as primitive and exotic nature-folk seems to have been received with open arms both by Icelanders and the foreign target audience. From *Sneglu-Halli* to *Nói Albínói*, the ironic performance of Icelandic food traditions has played a significant part in Iceland's relations with the outside world and not least through the export of films or literature. In an age of international markets and mass communication, "foreign" commodities are often received and integrated without much political or social turmoil.<sup>19</sup> When it comes to the integration of "foreign" people and culture into local society, the reverse is often the case.<sup>20</sup> However, what I wish to bring into focus here through the ethnography is that against a backdrop of media exoticism of the North, many Icelanders living abroad actually embody projected images of eccentricity and perform and exaggerate differentiating folklore in their everyday lives, not as a tool of separation, but of interaction, entry, and access.

## Performing the North

*Íslendingar erlendis*, or "Icelanders abroad," is a term that perhaps connotes a strangely static condition of "Icelandicness" and the idea that their presence outside of Iceland is merely tentative. Somehow a

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<sup>18</sup> Grímsson 2005: 5.

<sup>19</sup> Bendix & Klein 1993: 5.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Spooner 1986; Appadurai 1986.

term such as *Icelandic American* or *Icelandic Canadian* has never caught on in the Icelandic language: the descendants of Icelanders who emigrated to North America over a century ago are still referred to as *West-Icelanders*. Icelanders abroad are also often considered to be excessively Icelandic, a reflexivity which Barbro Klein has frequently come across among Swedes when referring to Swedish Americans.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Icelandic expatriates in any given area rarely form a cohesive community and are usually few and far between.<sup>22</sup> Still, many of the largest groups, who live in some of the largest cities of northern Europe and the U.S., gather on festive holidays. In-group congregations such as these are often focused on occasional calendar customs that serve meaningful cohesive purposes. While the performance of tradition has proved an integral part of these in-group congregations of Icelanders abroad, traditions and folklore are not performed exclusively for group cohesion. Rather they prove just as important in the reflexive liminality of foreigner–native encounters in which exoticizing performances are generated.

While exploring the role of identity and folk culture in these transcultural performances, it became clear that many Icelanders perform ironically, and with self-parody, various traditional food customs—often causing dismay or disgust from the target audience in the host countries. This practice reaches its zenith when congregating on the *þorrablót*, a quasi-traditional midwinter feast involving what used to be the last reserves of cured meat and fish in the old winter month called *þorri*. It was this “traditional” food more than others that proved a common aspect of transcultural performances, most of which were humorous and ironic in nature. The many ironic narratives and performances centring on *þorri* food included conversationally embedded personal experience narratives on how ordinary food customs “at home” become exotic performances abroad.

To take a representative example, one of our many informants, Áslaug Hersteinsdóttir, offers an articulate example of how performances of formerly commonplace food customs can serve as a

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<sup>21</sup> Klein 2001: 78.

<sup>22</sup> One of the few possible exceptions to this is Denmark, where the Icelandic Embassy reports around 8,000 expatriates.

tactic within transnational relations and integration. Áslaug has built a life for herself in Finland after stays in both Edinburgh and Russia.<sup>23</sup> From her first consecutive years in St. Petersburg and Helsinki, she remembers herself and other Icelanders as very preoccupied with national characteristics. After settling down in Finland, she quickly found herself in the dual role of representing Iceland to Finns and vice versa both through media and in her everyday life. In day-to-day conversations Áslaug would, for example, self-effacingly answer questions about Icelanders. She would stress their appetite for storytelling and tendency for exaggeration. According to Áslaug, this is especially true with regards to Icelandic food although, she asserted, the same does not apply to her. Nevertheless, her conversationally embedded personal experience narratives about the food she was brought up on, and how she later presented it, shed light on how ordinary food customs “at home” become exotic performances abroad. Having initially taken traditional food with her from home, she later sent for shark, and also smoked lamb, which she prepared for her flatmates in the traditional sweet white sauce. Her explanation as to why she did this is quite interesting, as is her regret in losing touch with the tradition:

Áslaug: I did it most likely..., I just decided to distress people. And since then, what’s happened to me is that I see this food so rarely now. I have been to *þorrablót*, but I’ve really stopped liking *þorri*-food like I did before. One has become so unused to it. I ate *svið* (singed sheep’s head) as a kid—I’ve often told this story—and the eyes were my favourite part.

Áslaug would later come to participate in many organized *þorrablóts*, both in Helsinki and Saint Petersburg. These affairs were often arranged by Icelandic associations in collaboration with temporarily stationed Icelandic businessmen. Áslaug claims that the businessmen were eager to socialize with Icelandic students and through them gain access to the local culture they felt isolated from. Often feasts such as these would take the form of national representations aimed at the host culture. The guest lists would include affluent locals who were presented with hired entertainment or presentations dealing with

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<sup>23</sup> This interview was conducted in June 2006. I wish to thank Áslaug, now living with her partner and two children in Helsinki, for her contribution to the research.

differences and similarities between the respective nations. The expensive imported cured and pungent meat, fish, and dairy products would, of course, be a central part of this representation, and comparable to the exotic fashion in which Áslaug herself presented the food to friends in her private life. This presentation of the traditional food as a curiosity is nonetheless a far cry from its commonplace consumption in Iceland (see above). But what is also interesting is the acute reflexive awareness of how foreigners receive the food and how Áslaug herself has begun to marginalize these traditional food practices in her own life:

Áslaug: I think it [traditional Icelandic food] is very uncommon. That it's not normal. And moreover from an island like this; way out in the ocean (lifts up her hand, pointing, looking up) where the natives eat shark and sheep's heads (hearty laugh).

In this clarification of how she effectively and quite deliberately “distressed” her dinner guests, she elaborates on the archaic and primitive image projected, something further illustrated by her self-effacing laughter and hand gestures as if pointing to the north on a wall map. Iceland's position on the global northern fringe of habitation only further exoticizes (and visualizes) her role and position in these transcultural exchanges. The fact that Áslaug willingly and ironically took on the role of the exotic native from the obscure northern island “way out in the ocean” in her encounter must also be put into context with her successful integration into Finnish society. The ironic performance can thus in fact be considered a stepping-stone in her integration process. Through the bewildering sensory experience and symbolic primitivism she presented, Áslaug upset the strategies within her host locality creating a new liminal space in which to operate and perform. The tactic was further mediated by the jocularly of her dinner guests' strong responses to the exotic narratives of food consumption in her folk culture. Having used this exotic representation as an entry point, she then slowly, and with some melancholy, went on to abandon the food custom on which her performance was based and so widened even further the



distance between the performance and banality, eccentricity and authenticity.<sup>24</sup>

### The Bankers' Þorablót

While a sense of melancholic nostalgia and self-awareness may be felt in Áslaug's ironic narratives, such sentiments are harder to make out in the kitsch and self-parody of the more formal yet carnivalesque bankers' *þorablót*. Nonetheless, the fieldwork revealed many other interesting aspects of how exotic representations, commodification, and identities interlink in everyday practice. A case in point is the *þorablót* of Glitnir Bank or, more precisely, its London branch. Our participant observation and interviews with leading architects of a global Icelandic banking expansion took place in the winter of 2007, a year now synonymous in Iceland with the destructive extravagance of its overblown banking sector. Indeed, the phrase "That is so 2007!" is now widely used in Iceland, connoting excess and garish wastefulness.

Glitnir Bank was born through a merger of Íslandsbanki (literally, *Iceland's bank*) with FBA Icelandic Investment Bank in 2000. According to its first director, the new name Glitnir, an insignificant character name pulled from Eddic prose, fulfilled all the requirements of a good Icelandic name:

It gives a positive message in the minds of Icelanders, has a historical connection, is both Icelandic and Nordic, it is easy to pronounce in most languages and it is spelled with international letters only.<sup>25</sup>

The positive transnordic yet international message had gone seriously sour by 2008 when the whole Icelandic bank crashed with a heavy foreign debt falling on the Icelandic state. Its reputation tainted with

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<sup>24</sup> The food narratives of Áslaug Hersteinsdóttir and other Icelandic individuals living abroad are also discussed in another article of mine; see Schram 2009.

<sup>25</sup> "Það hefur jákvæða merkingu í hugum Íslendinga, á sér sögulega skírskotun, er bæði íslenskt og norrænt í senn, er auðvelt í framburði á helstu tungumálum og inniheldur eingöngu alþjóðlega stafi." Ármannsson 2000 (my translation).

an image of recklessness, the failed bank was nationalized and its name changed back to Íslandsbanki.<sup>26</sup>

But in 2007 the bank seemed at top of its game. The annual midwinter party, then in its seventh year, played an extremely important role in the running of the bank and gaining access to the foreign markets and business talent, according to bank director Bjarni Ármannsson. Its cultural context, unlike Áslaug's private dinner party, is therefore to a large degree that of a marketing strategy—although many features of heritage, folklore, and everyday power relations come into play. In our interview, Bjarni stressed the need to get attention, to emphasize the bank's Icelandicness and convey a message of heritage with a sense of the wild. "Fast, smart, and thorough" is the bank's unspoken motto, he claimed. In the *þorrablót* this message was primarily expressed through borealistic imagery playing on Viking kitsch and paraphernalia, as well as ambiguous wordplay and an attack on the senses where the sights, tastes, and smells of the food associated with *þorri* are appropriated in a variety of ways. But the campaign was not contained to the party itself. Initially, prospective clients were sent invitation cards that right from the start sarcastically denigrated the traditions on display. In the feast's first year, when the bank was completely unknown, this involved enclosing a vacuum-packed piece of cured shark marked "Do not open." According to Bjarni, people could not resist and opened the package, letting out a stench that filled the office space containing up to two to three hundred staff members:

Bjarni: And everyone would say: "What is this?!" And throwing it in the trash wouldn't do any good either because the smell was just as strong there. So the first year everyone had heard of the party. The attendance was quite good and we've managed to carry through the concept.

The 2007 invitations indeed suggest an established dyadic or joking relationship. They came in a box containing a sheep's horn on a leather string and a card reading:

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<sup>26</sup> "Iceland Nationalises Glitnir Bank" 2008.

## BANKING ON BOREALISM

Feeling horny? No wonder! The time to grab your shovel, dig up last year's flotsam and roadkill and set about eating it with a narrow selection of Icelandic firewater is upon us again! So, grab your beard/braid your hair (as appropriate) and glimpse Valhalla at Glitnir's 7th London Thorrablot Party on 28th February 2007. On offer will be all the usual ambrosian delights of Viking cuisine, including esoteric parts of sheep, accompanied with some innovative intoxicating liquids from the frozen North. We are delighted to invite new friends, and old, to a party whose popularity over the years has depended on the guests' inability to remember what the food was like the previous year. See you there!

The presentation of food at the party itself was in the same vein. While the standing-room only was showered with fine wine and extravagant finger food, the guests were escorted one-by-one to the back of the room where they were dared to try the various dried, cured, or soured meat and fish. Each dish was marked by its original name, for example "Hrútspungur," followed by its descriptive and literal translation: "Ram's testicles." Each morsel was adorned with a toothpick and miniature Icelandic flag. The grinning of the Icelandic bankers and the grimacing of their foreign colleagues revealed the ironic character of the presentation. The bank director's annual, and evidently much awaited, speech affirmed the bank's annual successes and also played on the food's alleged lack in quality. But this time he turned the joke on his English guests. After giving an account of the bank's investments in Finland the director offered the following anecdote:

Bjarni: Looking at the food here I was thinking what was actually guiding our investment strategy. I was reminded what Jacques Chirac said about Finland: that they made the worst food in the world. Probably worse than the English. So you can see what's really guiding our investment philosophy: we invest in countries where there is bad food.

From this point participation from an otherwise business-like group of guests increased, as did the drinking, dancing, and brandishing of furry and brightly coloured Viking helmets, drinking horns, and the occasional plastic sword. The evening then culminated in the bank director's much-anticipated, seemingly appreciated, erratic and

wild-eyed performance of Steppenwolf's song "Born To Be Wild." So, how may these performances be contextualized and understood? Why has a quasi-traditional food event been practiced with such a display of irony and self-parody? Why, imagologically speaking, has the proverbial woollen cap been abandoned for a furry Viking helmet?

While food culture may be at the centre, these verbal and physical performances play most significantly on nationality. And it is within the transnational context that they gain their irony and ambiguous meaning. In one of the earliest studies of irony, Kierkegaard mapped out a particular way of engaging in public activity through verbal irony. His ironist rejects convention as illusory and acts on his rejection by following it without any true engagement. But by only playing at the practice, the actor gains sufficient distance from the immediacy of the ordinary and awakens his subjectivity and the conception of himself as a subject. He calls this the "infinite absolute negativity" of irony. It negates this or that phenomenon and establishes nothing, because that which is to be established lies behind it. Therefore irony is a qualification of subjectivity but also a suspension within it.<sup>27</sup>

So are these ironic *þorrablóts* simply an exercise in transcultural subjectivity? James W. Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber have stressed that in any given situation irony has the power to resist, blur, or redefine preconceived categories. I would suggest that within transcultural identity negotiations irony plays an important part in questioning and corroding categories of inclusion and exclusion. I would also argue that such performances can only lead these individuals, transcending the authenticity of their identity, to an ironical standpoint. But Fernandez, Huber, and others have also questioned the true force of the ironic trope in contexts such as these and whether insubordinate ironies actually do anything to change the objective circumstances of people's lives.<sup>28</sup>

What is interesting in this respect is Bjarni's admission that the self-irony of the *þorrablót* was designed to attract attention, gain access, and convey a message. While this is viable to a degree, I believe that various other dynamics are in place. Playing on—and in some cases

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<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard 1841.

<sup>28</sup> Fernandez & Huber 2001.

attacking—the senses, these individuals apply their tactics to gain voice, agency, and leverage in the otherwise firmly set power structures within their host cultures and the liminal relationship between the local and the foreigner. The self-parody of the event may also be seen as an attempt to defuse the tensions and distrust associated with a marginal national culture operating within a new host culture. Through the event, an ironic distance is created towards the “ethnic background”: an identity represented but simultaneously negated. But after these categories have been corroded, what is left other than the commodity, the comedy, and the futility Kierkegaard described as “absolute negativity”? Or can one build an identity on irony—having abandoned authenticity?

## Conclusions

Interlinking theory and ethnography, this study demonstrates how expressive culture and performance may corrode the strategies of boundary making and marginalization by tactically re-appropriating them. Embedded in the everyday life of expatriates and pitted against a backdrop of historical imagery and media representations, folklore is not only a differentiating cultural form but also a practice through which one may gain access to, and equal footing within, the perceived host cultures. Not only do emergent media images play on the exoticism of the North, but many Icelanders have themselves become active participants in portraying this perceived northern eccentricity through performances of tradition, “primitive” origins, and seemingly archaic food traditions. These individuals have re-appropriated exoticizing representations, turning them to their own ends. Thus vernacular practices have become tactics to gain access and influence within the strategies of new localities. Their self-representation and identities have acquired an irony as a result of opting for playful exaggeration over authenticity: an ironic, as opposed to “authentic,” identity.

In contemporary times marked by international market forces, tourism, and global media, Icelanders are not simply reluctant receivers of exotic representations but have actually become their active performers. However, unlike the disembodied media images of “the other,” these performances can in fact be seen as a step in the intricate communal processes of identity negotiation embedded in culturally specific contexts and sensory experiences. Turning these

representations to their own ends, individuals have re-appropriated exoticized vernacular practices abroad as a tactic to gain access and influence within the strategies of new localities. Yet through their playful exaggerations, they have also distanced themselves from any sense of authenticity that might be associated with these practices. In effect, they have negotiated new, ironic post-national identities, applying differentiation not to build walls, but to open doors.

Edging back from the brink of a global economic crisis, in which Iceland has had the world's attention as a choking canary in the coalmine, it must be pointed out that these performances go well beyond imagological identity negotiations. They in fact play a significant role in effecting people's objective circumstances: their associations, their status, and their social, cultural, and economic power. If these playful and ironic performances of identity and tradition are indeed an integral part of Icelandic business ventures, as the banker claims, these effects are colossal. In addition to a crashed banking system, Iceland has seen revolt if not revolution in the streets, the downfall of a long-standing neoliberal government, and the election of a centre-left administration set to complete a harsh programme with the IMF and an ominous international dispute on the payment of crushing foreign deposit guarantees that have fallen on the Icelandic state. Within these highly structured contexts of global capitalism it might well be said that these ironic images and performances have proved an unpredictable force both corroding and confirming inequalities of power.

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# Drinking in Iceland and Ideas of the North

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**Abstract** – It is hypothesized that ideas about the North as an extreme and turbulent force have been instrumental in shaping images relating to Icelanders’ drinking culture and the imagined position of alcohol in the community. In line with this understanding, the governing image of the position of alcohol in society has been of an excessive drinking pattern that is based on a special connection between alcohol and the national character. The objective of this study is to examine how specific preconceptions about the North have been linked to images of the drinking culture and to define emphases and conflicts surrounding these assumptions. Particular attention is paid to the image of the drinking pattern as it is represented abroad and how the image of the Icelandic drinking pattern is used in alcotourism. The sources used for this study are various types of written materials, newspapers, and advertisements, particularly from the last two decades. The method is analysis of text and discourse. The conclusions reveal that the image of Icelandic drinking culture is deeply rooted and has been instrumental in shaping the position on alcohol, although this does not preclude that the image is challenged. The image of drinking has an intrinsic value as it is used both to reject an old pattern and to justify a new one, yet images appear to have had little value as a tool for class distinction. On the other hand, preconceptions acquire practical value when used in promoting tourism.

**Keywords** – Iceland, images, the North, drinking patterns, alcotourism

For good is not, though good it is thought  
mead for the sons of men;  
the deeper he drinks the dimmer grows  
the mind of many a man.

Drunk I became, dead drunk, forsooth  
in the hall of hoary Fjalar;  
that bout is best from which back fetches  
each man his mind full clear.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Poetic Edda* 1928: 20. Era svá gott,/sem gott kveða,/öl alda sonom;/því at færa veit,/er fleira drekkur,/síns til geðs gumi.//Ölr ek varð,/varð ofrölvi/at hins fróða Fialars;/því er öldr bazt,/at aprt uf heimtír/hverr sitt geð gumi [14]. *Eddadigte* I. *Völuspá. Hávamál*: 17–18.

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## Introduction

In these verses from *Hávamál*, Odin, the greatest of the pagan gods and the god of wisdom, proclaims that he is well aware of the pleasures of drinking, but even the god has had a bad experience of excessive drinking, so he must caution against it. For a long time, contradictory ideas have been aspects of the discourse on alcohol. Hence, stereotypes of drinking cultures attributed to European nations have a long history in imagological studies. The 18th-century text *Der literarische Aspekt unserer Vorstellung vom Charakter fremder Völker* contains a brief description of peoples in Europe and their varying characteristics, where drinking is listed as the dominant vice of the Germans, a weakness that was associated with the northern nations and attributed to Tacitus's writings about Germania.<sup>2</sup> Most probably such a description was intended to be a guidebook for travellers, but it has also been suggested that the accounts were intended to entertain in the way ethnic jokes do today. Such images of peculiar drinking cultures do not necessarily correspond to realities, but images often have some factual basis even if they are social constructions.

In public discourse alcohol is usually seen as an irresistibly attractive but dangerous substance provoking conflicting views. Discussions of drinking are commonly organized around particular systems of thinking about alcohol. Room termed this way of thinking “governing images,” similar to the concept of discursive formation introduced by Foucault.<sup>3</sup> Room's main focus was on the discourses of problematic drinking, but in this study images of normalized drinking are under investigation.

Three images particularly relate to Icelanders' relationship with alcohol: the idea of an abstinent culture, a model of moderate drinking, and an excessive drinking pattern. One of these ideas, the conception of the abstaining Icelander, was particularly pronounced in the early 20th century when the temperance movement boomed. With the decline of the temperance movement in the latter part of the 20th century, the image of the dry Icelander seems to have faded

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<sup>2</sup> Zacharasiewicz 2009: 29.

<sup>3</sup> Room 1974.

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away. Social reformers who either gave up the idea of temperance or disapproved of it have promoted the idea of moderate drinking as a model. The third image of an excessive drinking pattern will be particularly addressed in this study. This idea of unrestricted drinking as an integral part of the overall culture and character of the Icelandic people has been the governing image of the Icelandic drinking culture.

It is hypothesized that the image of the North as an unrestrained, extreme natural force has served particularly well in shaping this image relating to Icelanders' patterns of drinking and the imagined position of alcohol in the community. Those elements of the North that are of particular significance in this context relate to closeness between subsistence and the natural forces, a harsh climate, and a proximity to nature. Fishing and farming were for a long time the main industries and were shaped by seasonal rhythms that required hard work when necessary. In the rural culture people were close to nature, but even if nature could be generous, it could also be rough, and the climate was harsh. It is from these preconceptions that the idea of excessive drinking originates. It was presumed people were tough in all their doings and that when they would drink, they would do so heavily, although it was not so often. Such a climatological view implies that the wine cultures in southern Europe would belie a mild climate.

The objective of this study is to describe how the governing image of drinking in Iceland corresponds with the idea of the North. In this study, the main emphasis of the analysis will be on two themes: the image of the Icelandic drinking pattern as it is represented abroad, and how the image of drinking is used by domestic parties in alcotourism. In this context the term "image" refers to the perception of a particular drinking pattern, as a learned cultural practice through socialization and cultural habits.<sup>4</sup> The concept of "drinking pattern" means the typical way a group drinks.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Imagology: A Handbook on Literary Representation of National Characters* 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Horverak & Bye 2007: 47.

Tracing the significance of images in the various areas of society that emerge at different times is a challenging issue.<sup>6</sup> Seeing that the traditional image of Icelandic drinking culture is based on a conception of society that has been greatly modified in the last decades, it may be a timely question whether the image of Iceland's drinking culture is changing. And how have the images of the position of alcohol in the community been used as commodities in promoting Iceland as a destination for tourists? How have alcoholic beverages been used as tools for image creation and distinction? In order to provide answers to these questions, an analysis will be presented of examples where excessive drinking appears as a governing image in books, booklets, publications, newspapers, and advertisements, primarily in the last two decades.

### Drinking in North and South

Although ideas about the North have changed throughout history, the perception of the North as a wild and even uncivilized force, yet one that is free, untamed, strong, and formative for all human life, is still common.<sup>7</sup> This understanding can be traced in Icelandic myths and sagas where nature and culture were sometimes presented as interconnected factors. Jenny Jochens writes about how geography and climate restricted availability of beer more in Iceland than in Norway, but that drinking was greatly treasured as one of the pleasures of Nordic living.<sup>8</sup> Óttar Guðmundsson's book *Tíminn og tárrið* (Time and the Tear), where Icelanders' relationship with alcohol is dealt with in a historical light, abounds with examples of the commonality of drinking in Nordic mythology and particularly in poetry from the 19th century.<sup>9</sup> In Ólafur Haukur Árnason's overview of the historical roots of the Icelandic alcohol policy, the emphasis is on attempts to curb alcohol sales to fight drunkenness, which is presumed to be an integral factor of Icelanders' drinking culture.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Imagology: A Handbook on Literary Representation of National Characters* 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Jochens 1993: 164–165.

<sup>9</sup> Guðmundsson 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Árnason 1992.

Even if these two authors do not directly link drinking to ideas about the North, it is an underlying theme for them both.

In modern literature, Icelandic authors have frequently used drinking and partying as themes in their books, without necessarily placing this in a Nordic context. Drinking in contemporary literature has often served to depict the lifestyle of modern citizens in a consumer society, such as in *101 Reykjavík* by Hallgrímur Helgason and *Sendiberrann* (The Ambassador) by Bragi Ólafsson. This representation of modern life and drinking in the North is even more striking in Icelandic films than in any other art form. Drinking scenes feature in almost every Icelandic movie, and the widely circulated screen version of *101 Reykjavík* is probably one of the most influential factors in recreating the image of drinking in the modern North.

Several attempts have been made to classify drinking cultures theoretically.<sup>11</sup> There are primarily two discernible approaches.

Anthropologists and ethnologists have used the method of examining an overall picture of a single community—which often, however, was only one village or tribe—and formulating measurements that explain the culture. This method has most frequently been used for studies in parts of the world outside Europe.<sup>12</sup>

Sociologists, particularly from the United States, have studied communities using sociological measurements such as the prevalence of temperance, various rules about drinking, and whether drinking is a part of the daily routine or only for special occasions, when drunkenness is expected and allowed. This method establishes four categories characterized by abstinence, constrained ritual drinking, banalized drinking, and fiesta drinking.<sup>13</sup> Abstinence is the rule in some Islamic states but not all, Jewish communities practice ritual drinking, banalized drinking is common in the Mediterranean countries, and Mexico is an example of a culture where fiesta drunkenness is allowed.

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<sup>11</sup> Room & Mäkelä 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Sulkunen 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Room & Mäkelä 2000.

Different variations on these efforts to classify the cultural position of alcohol exist; however, sociologists Room and Mäkelä have pointed to the limitations of these categories and the necessity of adding factors such as regularity of drinking and frequency of drunkenness.<sup>14</sup> Another factor that must be included in attempts to categorize drinking is how alcohol is linked to other aspects of social life.

European studies and discourse have often considered it sufficient to present drinking cultures as the diametrically opposed “wet” and “dry” communities. Wet communities are characterized by a weak temperance movement, high drinking rates, a large number of drinkers, frequent drinking—sometimes in substantially large quantities—and a high ratio of chronic alcohol abuse but few instances of alcohol poisoning. According to this theory, the Mediterranean countries are representative of the “wet” countries and the Nordic nations the “dry” countries. Yet this twofold division has not been found suitable for defining drinking patterns in individual European countries.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, in the minds of many there is an innate difference in the drinking patterns of northern and southern European nations, even though this cannot be pinned down in systematic categories. Such an opinion is based on the notion that customs and culture in the Nordic countries are completely opposite to those in the Mediterranean countries, so that drinking patterns must be, too. This view may be supported with the argument that, because of the wine production industry, there are vast economic interests at stake in the Mediterranean countries, whereas the alcohol industry is less important to Nordic economies.

Comparative studies of trends in drinking patterns in European countries from 1950 to 2005 have shown that differences between the drinking patterns in the northern and the southern part of Europe relate mainly to attitudes towards intoxication, frequency of drinking, beverage choice, and drinking with meals.<sup>16</sup> In the North, intoxication was approved of at special occasions, such as celebrations and festivities, but daily drinking and drinking wine with meals was rare.

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<sup>14</sup> Room & Mäkelä 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Mäkelä et al. 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Hupkens et al. 1993; Simpura & Karlsson, 2001; Mäkelä et al. 2006.



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Traditionally, strong spirits were the favoured drink, but in the latter part of the 20th century they were replaced by beer, and more recently wine drinking has become an addition to the total alcohol consumption. Frequent drinking, usually in the form of daily wine drinking with meals, has characterized the Mediterranean drinking pattern with its strict norms for drinking and attitudes to drunkenness. However, these cultural prototypes are becoming blurred with the diffusion of lifestyles, causing Italian youths to prefer beer rather than wine and middle aged Icelanders to increase their consumption of wine, to use simple examples.

Variations in drinking cultures are not only reflected in the various drinking patterns but also in the alcohol control measures that societies apply. Historical criteria have shaped Icelanders' position on alcohol. In the early 20th century there was a total prohibition of alcohol in Iceland. The ban was later lifted, sale of wine was permitted in 1922, and the sale of hard liquor was legalized in 1935. The sale of beer, on the other hand, was prohibited from 1915 to 1989, or for seventy-four years. Despite increasingly more positive attitudes towards drinking, Icelandic society still has a very strict alcohol policy. A state-run retail monopoly with a limited number of outlets is in operation for selling all alcoholic beverages with higher alcohol content than 2.25% by volume. Pubs and restaurants have to request liquor licenses from the police. Other measures include a ban on all advertising of alcoholic beverages, an age limit of twenty for buying alcoholic beverages, and high alcohol taxes, and the legal limit for drunk driving is set at 50 mg% BAC. Alcohol sales peaked in 2007 when they rose to 7.5 litres of alcohol sold per 100,000 inhabitants aged fifteen and over.<sup>17</sup> This is much lower than in the European Union member states, where the average adult drinks eleven to thirteen litres of pure alcohol per year.<sup>18</sup> In the last forty years, there has been a harmonization in alcohol consumption levels, with rises in central and northern Europe but a decline in southern Europe.

Images usually arise out of a relationship with others or because of cultural confrontations.<sup>19</sup> It has been pointed out that, in

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<sup>17</sup> "Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs", 2009: 325.

<sup>18</sup> Anderson & Baumberg 2006: 77–78.

<sup>19</sup> Leerssen & Beller 2007.

traditional analysis of text, descriptions of national characteristics are frequently shaped by standard ideas about North and South, fringe positions, and paradoxes.<sup>20</sup> Therefore the view of drinking in northern countries is to a large extent shaped by the perception of the North by those in the South. The southern view, in turn, influences the self-understanding and self-awareness of northern communities. This gaze of the others may be of significance for the community as it can shed light on familiar phenomena. Different interest groups may also see an advantage in emphasizing a specific image.

Little discussion has taken place about alcohol as a factor in the image creation of the North, or the formative effects of ideas about the North on the perception of drinking patterns in northern countries. Of course, there is the simple fact that vineyards cannot be planted in northern climates, so the distinction between North and South is in this respect based upon natural restrictions. Nordic alcohol research has revealed that Icelanders have been slower and more traditional than other Nordic nations when it comes to adopting a so-called southern European drinking pattern.<sup>21</sup> This is in line with the general notions that Iceland lagged behind in adopting novelties that were considered an inevitable component of a modern society. Although people in the Nordic countries have increased their wine drinking, and particularly the custom to drink wine with meals, they have not necessarily been drinking to intoxication more rarely. In recent years, research has been conducted into the growing uniformity of drinking patterns, changes to living conditions, and globalization.<sup>22</sup> In Nordic alcohol research, more recent studies have also focused on the relationship between traditional and modern drinking patterns.<sup>23</sup> Room and Bullock (2002) used the North–South dimension to pose the question of why violence is considered a consequence of alcohol consumption in northern Europe, but not in southern Europe.<sup>24</sup> However, they did not find a clear answer because on none of the items under examination was there a North–South gradient.

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<sup>20</sup> Leersen & Beller 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Ólafsdóttir, Guðmundsdóttir, & Ásmundsson 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Simpura 2001; Leifman 2001; Karlsson & Simpura 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Sulkunen, Sutton, Tigerstedt, & Warpenius 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Room & Bullock 2002.

Cultural conventions are not easily transferable, and the exalted descriptions of what residents of the North call the “wine culture” of the South are formed from a distance. In Greece, for example, much of the alcohol consumed is drunk in pubs by men, not at the family dining table.<sup>25</sup> Young people in France and Italy are adopting the beer conventions of the North and rejecting the wine consumption culture of their parents. Yet despite these changes, images of the alcohol conventions of Mediterranean nations have barely changed in daily discourse. Besides, the North–South dimension is still used to explain the difference between the northern liquor/beer culture and the wine culture of southern Europe.<sup>26</sup>

### Representing the Drinking Pattern Abroad

Traditional images of Icelandic drinking patterns have deep historical roots, as has been discussed above. The question is whether they can be declared obsolete and viewed as cultural relics. Much was made in older discourse of how foreigners viewed Icelanders’ drinking culture. Travel books written by foreigners visiting Iceland in the 19th century are often presented as examples of the astute perception of the visitor. Yet some of those authors specifically stated that they had never seen a drunken person in Iceland.<sup>27</sup> Those descriptions have been more easily forgotten than those that depict the extremes. Thus the image of drinking patterns was to a substantial degree formed by the perception of foreigners and foreigners’ views on Icelanders’ drinking culture. This discourse continued and visitors’ views on drinking continued to be news material. An example from the end of the 20th century is the coverage in *Morgunblaðið* of an English journalist’s writings on Iceland in the magazine *Bizarre* after having visited the country in 1998. The journalist was accompanied by an Icelandic photographer who took the pictures complementing the article.<sup>28</sup> “Elf settlements,” swimming pools, and traditional Icelandic food such as sheep heads and sour meat had not impressed the English journalist. But she was shocked at the price of alcohol and was puzzled over the peculiar drinking customs, and the

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<sup>25</sup> Gefou-Madianou, Karlsson, & Österberg 2002: 220.

<sup>26</sup> Mäkelä & Room 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Ísleifsson 1996.

<sup>28</sup> “Glöggt gestsauga” [Astute Eye of the Visitor] 1998: B2–B3.

photographer reports: “I think the nightlife and the crowd in the city centre on Saturday night was what amazed her most.” In the magazine *Bizarre*, the journalist wrote about her impression of Icelandic women going out: “Astró is crawling with drunken Viking girls who all look like Barbie dolls.”<sup>29</sup>

Foreign visitors’ image of and participation in the nightlife in Reykjavík has made news particularly if the guests are international celebrities. Reportage of a visit to Reykjavík and the screening of the American film *Hostel* produced by Quentin Tarantino and directed by Eli Roth is an example where a promotion of the film was intermixed with their accounts of the nightlife in Reykjavík.<sup>30</sup> Descriptions of the images of Iceland and Icelanders as they appear in the foreign media appear to be taken very seriously by Icelanders, who sometimes attempt to influence them. Icelanders abroad often actively participate in this image creation.<sup>31</sup>

The well-known Icelandic musician Björk is a good example.<sup>32</sup> She has made a name for herself as a progressive artist who is popular throughout the world, and she relates herself to the North to offset the image of multiculturalism and globalization. In her art creation she has worked not only with Icelandic artists but also Greenlandic choirs, which makes reference not only to Iceland but also the polar regions.

The North as an idea and a concept offers diverse possibilities for interpretation. Numerous studies have shown that many artists have used the North as a concept in their art. Somewhat surprisingly, Björk identifies herself with stereotypical Icelandic drinking culture to emphasize that her habits are consistent with the customs of the North. In an interview with the *Observer*, she says:

“I don’t like drinking with food, I think Iceland people are a bit old-school like that—we think if you drink with food then

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<sup>29</sup> “Á Astró er allt morandi af drukknum víkingastúlkum, sem allar líta út eins og Barbie-dúkkur.” “Glöggt gestsauga” [Astute Eye of the Visitor] 1998: B2–B3 (my translation).

<sup>30</sup> Jóhannsdóttir 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Ísleifsson 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Grace 2002.

you're an alcoholic...but if you drink lots, on a Friday night..."

"Then you're fine?"

"Yes. I think it's called 'binge drinking'. I don't see the point of drinking unless you end up dancing and letting go. I actually read somewhere that, if you look over a 40-year period, it's better for your body because then you get rid of so much stress. I'm a bit like, black and white, not in colour. But lots of drink, bit of dancing, bit of slapstick...is good! Thing is, you can't do that, that often. Twice a month would be good...but I can't wait, I think, fuck it!"<sup>33</sup>

Björk presents this picture to emphasize that she is old-fashioned, connecting herself to the idea of the idiosyncratic Icelanders with their deeply rooted excessive drinking. She further emphasizes her uniqueness by comparing herself to black and white, suggesting that her position on drinking is clear and to the point. When a representative of progressive music like Björk paints a picture of herself as a representative of binge drinking, that image is undeniably still valid.

Considering unrestricted drinking as normalized behaviour is commonly illustrated in newspapers interviews as was reported in the article "Then There Were Drinking Bouts."<sup>34</sup> In this article a twenty-five-year-old woman says that it is in the nature of Icelanders to drink to become intoxicated, but it is changing, she adds. This view is also prevalent among professionals. In his book *Tíminn og tárið*, psychiatrist Óttar Guðmundsson writes: "The feeling is prevalent in the Icelandic national character that alcohol and drunkenness must always go hand-in-hand."<sup>35</sup> Based on this understanding, drinking for the purpose of getting drunk is integral to the Icelandic national character.

From the psychiatrist's comment on national character, let us move to the domain of the sociologist. Helgi Gunnlaugsson, professor of sociology, describes the drinking habits of Icelanders as

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<sup>33</sup> Vernon 2007.

<sup>34</sup> "Þá voru drykkjur miklar" [Then There Were Drinking Bouts] 2004: 8–13 (my translation).

<sup>35</sup> Guðmundsson 1992: 123.

“shown to be exceedingly primitive” by international comparison.<sup>36</sup> This idea of primitivism is not new but was provocatively put forward by Halldór Laxness, who in *Dagleið á fjöllum*, published in 1937, alludes to his countrymen: “but uncivilized nations, as is well known, are highly susceptible to the thrall of alcohol, for example, Eskimos.”<sup>37</sup>

The idea of Icelanders’ ignorance of good manners has not only appeared in allegations that they cannot handle their liquor. Clichés are common: they cannot cook, cannot appreciate good food. They do not know how to dance or sing. They are also considered worse drivers than people in neighbouring countries, and road culture is regarded to be at a low level.<sup>38</sup> All these allegations have been used to show how far the Icelandic nation had to go in becoming civilized. However, not all of these assertions may sound familiar to young adults in Iceland today. Such deficiencies, including the lack of manners of how to drink, have typically been ascribed to nations undergoing a civilization process. Another feature of the discourse on Icelandic drinking culture is that it seldom takes into account diversity; rather, the tendency is to look at the drinking culture as unchangeable and uniform.

Nevertheless, an example of a new pattern and a changed image of Icelanders’ position on alcohol appears in this intriguing article by former consul Þórir Gröndal:

The change over the last quarter-century in how the nation handles alcohol is remarkable. In the past it was “King Bacchus” who ruled; now he is, at best, like an acquaintance or friend whom one might, or might not, include [...] Icelanders on package tours abroad have started to behave just like regular tourists. The new generation that now holds positions of power and influence in Iceland is the first in many centuries that is free from the bonds of Bacchus. They are the people who can talk about alcohol culture without blushing, go on wine tasting tours of France, drink only specific types of single

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<sup>36</sup> Gunnlaugsson 2001: 79.

<sup>37</sup> “en villipjóðum er sem kunnugt er mjög hætt við að falla fyrir áfengisbölinu, t.d. eskimóum.” Laxness 1962: 157 (my translation).

<sup>38</sup> “Reykjavíkurbreif” 2001: 28–29.

malt Scotch, and have more than one type of vodka in the cabinet.<sup>39</sup>

This description suggests that the image has changed: drunken Icelanders have become cosmopolitan citizens of the world. Civilization has succeeded.

## Alcotourism

Tourism studies and alcohol studies have been assimilated under the heading “alcotourism” by David Bell.<sup>40</sup> The term refers to the practice of travelling to drink, and to drinking while on holiday and while travelling. Drinking is often a part of tourists’ experience of a summer or winter holiday, but intoxication at the site visited can cause a public disorder and become a matter of control. Alcotourism includes a broad span of drinking places and events as diverse as stag parties and wine tasting. This research area has not been given much attention in tourism and alcohol studies.

Since the 1960s, cheap drinking has been among the many factors that attracted people from northerly countries to spend their holidays in southern Europe. With tourism as an increasingly important industry for the Icelandic economy it became essential to reach new target groups, one of them being the young and adventurous. In order to promote Iceland as an exciting destination for this marketing group, the image of the riotous and high-powered North can be an advantage, but the reality of high alcohol prices and restricted availability of alcohol has to be ignored.

Icelandair’s advertising campaign in the United Kingdom depicting Reykjavík as a nightlife city is an example of alcotourism marketing. Following this marketing, Reykjavík was often described as a “cool” city, and some Icelanders even thought Reykjavík was the number one “fun city” in Europe, when cities like Liverpool, Helsinki, and Tallinn were competing for the title.<sup>41</sup> The campaign

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<sup>39</sup> Gröndal 2001: B5.

<sup>40</sup> Bell 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Salasuo 2005.

also delivered the message that Icelandic women were always ready to “drink and party,” as literary scholar Heiða Jóhannsdóttir has discussed in her work.<sup>42</sup> This mix was also used in Icelandair’s advertising campaign in the Scandinavian countries, including that which appeared in *Politiken* in 2004. It included a picture of a girl in a bikini top with the upper part of her torso above water, while columns of steam rose in the background—the picture was perhaps meant to allude to the Blue Lagoon. Underneath, in big letters, was the caption: “Try an Icelandic cocktail.”<sup>43</sup> This was followed by a caption in smaller letters: “Take the most beautiful scenery, add a dash of adventure, mix with a good portion of relaxation, and you have an Icelandic dream cocktail.”<sup>44</sup> The text and picture suggest that the girl is the symbol of the cocktail cherry in the glass. The advertisement is marked not only with the Icelandair logo but also that of the Icelandic Tourist Board, showing that a public institution also supported the advertisement featuring the cocktail.

The response to the objectification of women in these advertisements elicited strong reactions from the feminist movement and also from interested parties in the tourism industry that attempt to target groups other than the British. A commentary in *Morgunblaðið* quoted Anton Antonsson, managing director of the Terra Nova-Sól travel agency:

It would be very dangerous if this nightlife image of Iceland were to become permanent. In any case, visitors looking for nightlife don’t stay long. It is those who tour the country for longer periods that create the most revenues, and we should try to hold on to them and to facilitate an increase in their numbers.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Jóhannsdóttir 2006.

<sup>43</sup> “Prøv en islandsk cocktail” [Try an Icelandic Cocktail] [Advertisement] 2004 (my translation).

<sup>44</sup> “Tag den smukkeste natur, tilføj et stenk eventyr og mix det med en pæn dosis afslapning, så har du en islandsk drømmecocktail” (my translation).

<sup>45</sup> “Það er stórhættulegt ef þessi næturlífsmynd af Íslandi festist í sessi. Þeir sem sækjast eftir næturlífinu stoppa hvort sem er stutt. Það eru hinir sem ferðast um landið um lengri tíma sem skapa mestu tekjurnar og við eigum að reyna að halda í þá og fjölga þeim.” “Allir leggist á eitt við að laða að ferðamenn” [Working Together to Attract Tourists] 2001: 17 (my translation).



Thus image creation by one interested party can lead to conflicts with another, as described by Ísleifsson.<sup>46</sup>

### Beer and Wine as Tools for Image Creation

An interesting question to consider is whether images of drinking patterns can be tools for people to show their social position and taste, as outlined in the theories of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu concerning class distinction.<sup>47</sup> The lifting of the ban on beer sales in Iceland in 1989, after seventy-four years of prohibition, definitely changed consumption culture. However, it also held great symbolic value. The stance on whether or not to allow the sale of beer reflected a generation gap. Opinion polls revealed that older women were opposed, and young men were in favour. Thus beer became the drink of the young and advanced—perhaps the social group that most frequently brings about innovation. It was a drink for a new era, and beer was presented as the antithesis to hard liquor, which belonged to the past. Hard liquor was seen as a symbol of the uncivilized North, whereas beer represented the culture and worldliness of the continent. Beer was not only a new product, but also a new tool for demonstrating good taste. However, as beer became popular with all social groups, it quickly lost its value as a tool for class distinction. The intoxicating characteristics of beer also caused beer drinking to lead to drunkenness. Research into drinking has shown that young men drink a vast amount of beer at once, presumably to feel intoxicated.<sup>48</sup> The heavy drinking of beer has thus served to reaffirm the image of unrestrained, as opposed to restrained, drinking.

The state liquor stores, which hold a monopoly on alcohol sales, have made a systematic effort to change their image over the last two decades. A new logo for ÁTVR (the State Alcohol and Tobacco Company of Iceland) was designed in 2001, depicting a cluster of grapes. The objective was to allude to an emphasis on wine sales, and the ÁTVR retail chain was subsequently renamed Vínbúð (Wine Store). In other words, a political decision was made to change the store's image and to revamp the image of alcohol. The logo also

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<sup>46</sup> Ísleifsson 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Bourdieu 1984.

<sup>48</sup> *Áfengisneysla á Íslandi* 2005.

delivered a message to customers about drinking wine with food, as well as about moderate drinking.

Wine is in many ways a convenient tool for changing an image. Specialist knowledge is involved in its marketing, newspapers commission wine specialists to write articles about wine, and discussions about wine are central to cooking programmes on both Icelandic and foreign television stations. Wine tasting courses and wine cellars imply a quest for knowledge and specialization, and with their knowledge of wines, consumers can demonstrate their superiority. Wine drinking, in itself, is not a useful tool to demonstrate one's social status. For wine drinking to become a marker for class distinction the consumer has to demonstrate that he or she is a wine connoisseur, preferring vintage wine and rejecting boxed wines. In subsequent years the demand for wine rose somewhat, but it was mostly the less expensive wines, particularly boxed wines, that became popular. Therefore, wine as a marker for social status shared the fate of beer as a somewhat failed tool for distinction because there was more demand for quantity than quality. Yet being a wine connoisseur has kept its status as a symbol of good taste and high social standing but has also acquired snob value.

In the case of Iceland it is not true to state that alcoholic beverages have symbolic value as markers of social class. It is interesting to observe how perceptions of drinking have little utility for class distinction within the community, which could be due to the social restraint of a small community seeking to strengthen its unity. Thus women are under pressure to imitate the imagined consumption patterns of men, and adolescents are under pressure to imitate adults. Rather than being a symbol of distinction, both beer and wine drinking can be valuable as symbols of unity, as both have eliminated the generation and gender gaps when it comes to their consumption. Beer became *the* main drink, and even though wine is often viewed as "ladies' tippie of choice," it is men who own the wine cellars.

## Closing Words

The belief in the unique relationship between alcohol—particularly intoxication—and the national character appears to have deep roots and to thrive. This relationship extends only to alcohol, however; the

allusion to illegal drugs like hash and amphetamines is not quite unknown but much less clear. Although certain groups hold the view that Icelandic hash-smoking culture is unique, the idea is not prominent. This is possibly the case because alcohol has been incorporated into the community, whereas efforts are still being made to exclude other drugs. Besides, the illegal status of the drugs presumably plays a role.

In international comparisons, Icelanders' drinking patterns are typical of those of other Nordic nations.<sup>49</sup> Icelanders do hold a unique position when it comes to alcohol, but contrary to the stereotypical image, it is not related to their drinking patterns. The uniqueness is in the beer ban during most of the 20th century, the high percentage of inhabitants who have undergone alcohol rehabilitation treatment, and the widespread prevalence of AA meetings.<sup>50</sup> Historical factors may explain this need for staging a uniqueness. Iceland's position in the North Atlantic and an autonomous culture create a framework for the Icelandic community, which, as a result of its small size, is perpetually struggling for individuality and independence.

The publicly stated objective of alcohol policy has long been to control drinking. Many of those who supported the sale of beer hoped it would lead to changes in the pattern of drinking. Most who held that vision believed that beer was the first step towards civilizing drinking habits. Later, one could observe the same expectations concerning wine—that it was the right tool for changing the drinking pattern. Similar ideas are known from other Nordic countries, and Börje Olsson in Sweden has written about “the dream of a better drinking arrangement” where the vision is that the Swedes should adapt a continental drinking pattern.<sup>51</sup>

The image of the Icelandic excessive drinking pattern is kept alive because of its value in the arts, daily life, and business. Other agents that probably contribute to the survival of this image are public health and alcohol policy advocates. Sulkunen has pointed out that images of

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<sup>49</sup> Mäkelä et al. 2006.

<sup>50</sup> Ólafsdóttir 2000.

<sup>51</sup> Olsson 1990.

alcohol influence policy but that they also depend on the social and cultural environment of policy making.<sup>52</sup> At a glance, one might assume that alcohol policy extends only to reality and pays no heed to images. Yet the policy makers or those who wish to influence alcohol policy are members of society and thus influenced by the representations of the prevailing drinking pattern. Alcohol policy has been shaped by an underlying desire for civilization; alcohol cannot be prohibited, but the momentum behind the policy is the hope that rules can be set for managing alcohol. By supporting the governing image of excessive drinking, it is possible to demonstrate the need for a more restricted drinking pattern. Such views have arisen in discussions about Reykjavík nightlife and serve to illustrate the status of the country's young people and the acute need for preventative measures.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, the same idea is also used for commercial purposes by other interested parties, to get young people into the pubs and clubs in the city centre, and even to attract foreign tourists.

Images can be remarkably tenacious and take a long time to change, as witnessed by the governing image of an Icelandic excessive drinking pattern. When this image was supposed to be fading out, due to introduction of beer and increased share of wine, it is brought in the light again by outer realities. Due to global warming, the North as a geographic and cultural area has recently gained a new economic and political status where there are vested interests involved. This may probably lead to an increased tendency to connect the overall culture of Icelandic society to images of the North. Such an inclination might strengthen the image of unrestricted drinking as a characteristic of the North as opposed to the controlled drinking in the South.

In general, Icelanders are very concerned about images of their culture and the reputation of their country. Iceland is among the countries that have practiced nation branding on the grounds that a good image may create favourable conditions for foreign investment, tourism, and trade. In this context the image of drinking in Iceland matters.

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<sup>52</sup> Sulkunen 1998.

<sup>53</sup> Ólafsdóttir 2003.

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# Nature, Nostalgia, and Narrative: Material Identity in Icelandic Design

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**Abstract** – This paper studies design objects in two tourist outlets in Reykjavík from the perspective of material culture studies and anthropology. The two cases are put into context with public discourse on Icelandic design in general, with a particular emphasis on the genre of product design. It discusses the rather recent development of Icelandic design as a cultural commodity, while looking at it as a cultural agent of identity formation. The paper highlights the relationship between product design and souvenir objects and points to issues of the past that seem to prevail, both public discourse and the production of Icelandic contemporary design.

**Keywords** – Material culture, design, souvenir, identity, Iceland

## Introduction

The Design Centre emphasises the importance of design in the culture and image of Iceland and the Icelanders.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is about objects, along with the images, identities, and ideologies they cannot escape from. It is an anthropological approach to the circulation of cultural commodities, a field with quite a long history where objects are studied as agents of social relations, as generators of power relations, and as loci of negotiations of images and identities.<sup>2</sup> Material culture studies have also dealt with manufactured objects as tangible forms of human relations in their widest form. Most recently, scholars within the fields of anthropology and ethnology have become more and more interested in how people attribute meaning to objects of everyday life, including issues

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<sup>1</sup> *Iceland Design Centre* 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Appadurai 1986; Clifford 1988; Errington 1998; Myers 2001; Phillips & Steiner 1999; Price 1989.

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of mass consumption, home decorations, gifts, art, souvenirs, and contemporary design.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I will discuss contemporary design in Iceland as it appears in tourist settings as well as written publications with particular emphasis on product design. It is the result of fieldwork conducted in Reykjavík over a period of several months in 2008 and 2010, with a case study of two outlets.<sup>4</sup> One is the museum shop at the National Museum, and the other is Kraum, a design shop in the heart of Reykjavík.<sup>5</sup> The two shops differ from each other in many respects, for instance, in the range of goods as well as the types of products on offer. However, of primary interest is what they share, which could be described as narratives of Icelandic nature and culture. The first shop is situated inside the National Museum building, which inescapably suggests a national context for the objects it displays. In addition, it is housed in a building that has particular historical connotations. The second is situated in the heart of the city centre, presenting itself as a fashionable shop exclusively for contemporary design. It is (like the museum shop) housed in a historical building that serves as a monument to the history of industry in Iceland (it is also the oldest building in Reykjavík, dated 1762). In both cases there is a strong attraction for tourists, and both shops embody a strong sense of the past.

In my discussion I will emphasize product design more than other subcategories of design. It is the most common type of design found in the two shops, though jewellery and fashion design are also quite common. I frame the particular branch of product design as souvenir objects, for the explicit reason that they are contextualized as such by

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<sup>3</sup> Miller 1987; Buchli 2002; Attfield 2000; Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell 2007.

<sup>4</sup> During the fieldwork, a discourse analysis was made of printed newspaper material as well as television material in the period 2007–2010, in addition to an analysis of published text in Icelandic on Icelandic design. Questionnaires were sent out by email to seven professional Icelandic designers, many of which were followed up by more in-depth interviews. Numerous other informal discussions were held with professional designers and other relevant stakeholders during the time of the fieldwork.

<sup>5</sup> These particular shops are used as a case study in this article for the distinct presence of contemporary design objects framed in a tourist setting. Numerous other outlets were included in the study, but these two were the most appropriate for the overall aim of the INOR project, offering interesting material for the study of Icelandic identity through design objects.

their promoters and because they are obviously directed at foreign tourists (though they also attract Icelandic buyers). By studying contemporary design as a cultural agent of identity formation, I will shed light on the postcolonial dilemma of identity formation in Iceland and the constant need to build an identity on a remote past. I seek to place the object, or what I would like to call “the design souvenir,” as a vehicle through which to explore the particular images and identities that it embodies. By treating Icelandic design as souvenir I intentionally blur the two categories into one (“design” on the one hand and “souvenir” on the other). The two phenomena have much in common, not just the way they are framed in the tourist market of cultural commodities in Iceland. Hence, I will dislocate design objects from the usual aesthetic or art-and-design historical and theoretical studies, and rather present them as just one of the many aspects of the material culture of everyday life.

## Design and Its Relation to Souvenirs

While studying the circulation of art and craft objects and their domestic, national, and international trajectories, special attention is given to the social relations that revolve around their production, presentation, and consumption when they move from one context to another. To understand the relationship between design and souvenir, it is useful to introduce briefly some of the relations between art and souvenir, since the two categories of art and design share so much.

Outlining the history of anthropological interest in art and aesthetics in non-Western societies, Raymond Firth notes how “exotic” art has frequently been regarded as fixed by conventions or unalterable styles, but that thanks to modern studies, these misconceptions have been discarded, giving way to theories that show that the alleged “traditional” has often been a product of an early contact with Western industrial influences.<sup>6</sup> When academic interest shifted from lamenting the supposedly contaminating contact with the West causing the degeneration in quality and aesthetic character of “primitive art,” scholars began to look in a more positive manner at the hybrid forms and changes in art genres, recognizing socio-political and economic factors in artistic production, including the significance

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<sup>6</sup> Firth 1992: 34.

of individual agency and innovation.<sup>7</sup> The term “tourist art” was coined in 1976 by Nelson Graburn in his study of “changing arts—of emerging ethnicities, modifying identities, and commercial and colonial stimuli and repressive actions.”<sup>8</sup> As Jules-Rosette notes, tourist art begins as a particular expression by the artist, and then its meanings expand with the scope of the audience.<sup>9</sup> The term has been used to signify the emergence of a new art making, by copying, imitating, or faking objects popular to the Western buyer, since the production is almost entirely aimed at foreign consumption or export.

The focus of debates in today’s anthropology of art is directed at the trajectory—or the “traffic”—of art objects in colonial and postcolonial settings, rather than their explicit meaning. Following the circulation of these objects, special attention is given to the social relations that revolve around their production, presentation, and consumption when they move from one context to another. Issues such as the production of value (aesthetic as economic value) and the commoditization of non-Western art in a global market of cultural goods have also been given much attention.<sup>10</sup> This has drawn attention to the emergence of new forms and the flexibility of previously existing ones, allowing for the development of the categories of “tourist art,” “souvenir art,” and “airport art.” In the context of this study, “design souvenir” should also belong to the same set of categories.

Although it can be argued that Icelandic design objects can hardly be treated in the same manner as tourist art in non-Western societies, with all its complex art-historical and colonial connotations, I find the comparison useful. In both cases the objects in question can be seen as the output of a *negotiation* between producers and consumers, where local identities and foreign expectations are materialized in certain products. After all, Iceland also carries its colonial past and is going through a post-colonial phase of identity construction, where narratives of the past are a leitmotif.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Graburn 1976; Layton 1981; Coote & Shelton 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Graburn 1976: 2.

<sup>9</sup> Jules-Rosette 1984: 230.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Jules-Rosette 1984; Steiner 1994; Marcus & Myers 1995; Errington 1998; Phillips & Steiner 1999; Thomas 1999; Myers 2001.

But what is a souvenir, then? As an object it is, of course, closely linked to tourism, where it can be seen as an interface between the producer's identity and the consumer's expectation or imagination of what that identity might be. In Susan Stewart's view, the souvenir plays a fundamental role in providing an authentic experience for the tourist:

The double function of the souvenir is to authenticate a past or otherwise remote present experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present. The present is either too impersonal, too looming, or too alienating to compare to the intimate and direct experience of contact which the souvenir has as its referent. This referent is authenticity. The location of authenticity becomes whatever is distant to the present time and space; hence we can see the souvenir as attached to the antique and the exotic.<sup>11</sup>

The souvenir as a cultural phenomenon has been studied mainly in non-Western societies, specifically in the context of art and craft objects that are made particularly for the tourist market.<sup>12</sup> Entailed in the study of souvenirs in relation to art and craft are complex issues that address questions of modernity, aesthetics, authenticity, historicity, and cultural heritage, and these are mingled in a thoroughly commodified and globalized market. In a similar way, Fred Myers notes how "art objects are bought, sold, and displayed as valuable because of the ways in which they are understood to represent or embody or instantiate carrying regimes of value."<sup>13</sup>

Material culture studies as a discipline seeks to study the interrelationship between people and the physical world at large. In sum, it is the kind of study that examines the relationship between human subjects and the objects they create as mutually constitutive.<sup>14</sup> In the same manner, design occupies itself with the relationship between people and the world that surrounds them, embodying the

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<sup>11</sup> Stewart 1993: 139–140.

<sup>12</sup> Clifford 1988; Errington 1998; Jules-Rosette 1984; Marcus & Myers 1995; Myers 2001; Phillips & Steiner 1999; Price 1989; Steiner 1994; Thomas 1991; Price 1989.

<sup>13</sup> Myers 2001: 53.

<sup>14</sup> Attfield 2000: 35.

Zeitgeist of each time period. Design is a complex and multifaceted term, embracing fashion design, graphic design, service design, product design, experience design, furniture design, system design, and architecture, amongst others. The output of such a variety of fields is extremely diverse and belongs to various spheres of culture (often overlapping), combining technical skills with creativity and innovation. In an attempt to distinguish design objects from other artefacts in a world of everyday material culture, Judith Attfield describes design as “the practice that produces ‘things with attitude,’ the material culture of innovation driven by a vision of change as beneficial.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, design is a dynamic and hybrid category; its multiple meanings shift constantly depending on its surrounding context. In this particular study, the tourist context will be emphasized more than other contexts of design, such as aesthetics, use-value, and design-historical or industrial contexts.

It is common to see high-quality design objects displayed next to mass-produced bric-a-brac and kitsch in Icelandic tourist or gift shops. Many professional designers lament this development and complain that the only marketing channel for their products is the souvenir shop. The tendency to create close links between souvenir and design is, however, not limited to the commercial sector. Another example is a recent design competition announced for an official city souvenir of Reykjavík, hosted by the Iceland Design Centre for the city municipality. Its purpose is to design a new and characteristic souvenir for Reykjavík, based on the city’s slogan of “Pure Energy”—referencing the energy of the city’s “nature, water, culture and creativity.”<sup>16</sup> This blurs the lines between the two categories and makes both ambivalent. Craft, however, is commonly known as tourist merchandise, especially in non-Western tourism, and design is constantly growing as a tourist trade in the Western world. Craft is very apparent in Icelandic tourism—in fact, it has flourished in the tourist market in the last few decades with a heavy emphasis on being

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<sup>15</sup> Attfield 2000: 33.

<sup>16</sup> Iceland Design Centre, <<http://honnunarmidstod.is/Frettirogvidburdir/Lesafrett/1630>>. Original text: “Keppnin er öllum opin og felst í því að hanna nýjan og einkennandi minjagrip fyrir Reykjavík. Verðlaunatillagan skal endurspegla vörumerki Reykjavíkurborgar, Reykjavík—Pure Energy. Vörumerkið vísar til þeirrar hreinu orku sem Reykjavík býr yfir í fleiri en einni merkingu: í náttúrunni, vatninu, menningunni og sköpunarkraftinum.”

handmade and from natural materials. Furthermore, publications on Icelandic design commonly refer to the close link between design and craft because industrialization came relatively late to the country, thus preserving traditional craftsmanship and cultural heritage. In addition, references to “authenticity” are attached to craft and design objects in the outlets in question, either in implicit or explicit ways. Judith Attfield describes authenticity as “the legitimacy of an object or experience according to established principles of fundamental and unchallengeable ‘truths,’” and how it “depends on particular, apparently unchanging belief systems of authoritative knowledge that distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic as a natural matter of course.”<sup>17</sup> In that way, the souvenir can play a fundamental role in providing an authentic experience to the tourist. Just as the search for an authentic experience becomes stronger in today’s world of mass tourism, so the search for the authentic artefact becomes critical. However, it is not my intention to discuss whether design souvenirs in Iceland are authentic or not, since I do not believe that such a debate would be plausible in the context of this study. Therefore, I choose to move beyond limiting binaries such as “authentic–inauthentic,” “true–false,” or “back–front” and follow Bruner’s standpoint of looking at tourist productions for “what they are in themselves: authentic—that is, authentic tourist productions that are worthy subjects of serious anthropological inquiry.”<sup>18</sup> This statement is, in many ways, in opposition to other former studies whose aim is to look “backstage” or uncover the staging of authenticity to unravel the “real” meaning of signs and interactions between hosts and guests, as Dean MacCannell proposes in his study *The Tourist*.<sup>19</sup> What is of interest, however, is the strong emphasis Icelandic designers and other stakeholders in the field seem to put on the importance of the representation of national cultural heritage, which is, in fact, the main driving force of the souvenir market on a global scale.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Attfield 2000: 78.

<sup>18</sup> Bruner 2005: 5

<sup>19</sup> MacCannell 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Public associations, trade unions, shop owners, politicians, education institutions.

## Historical Perspectives of Design in Iceland

Design is a relatively young profession in Iceland's cultural history, even though some of the earliest professional designers can be traced back to the turn of the 19th century. It has not enjoyed the same development as design in other Scandinavian or European countries, growing at a slower pace and bearing very loose connections to the sectors of production and industry. As an example of the field's young age, the Icelandic term for design, *hönnun*, was first used in the year 1963 by an engineering company, and in subsequent decades was generally attached to engineering and technical solutions.<sup>21</sup> However, the neologism was invented almost a decade earlier by the Vocabulary Committee of the University of Iceland (Orðabókarnefnd Háskóla Íslands), with its etymology in the word *Hannarr*, based on the Norse mythology of *Völuspá* (the prophecy of *Völva*).<sup>22</sup> The dwarf *Hannarr* had the skill of creating anything with his practical knowledge and craftsmanship. Hence, the relationship to craft and innovation is emphasized from the very birth of the term in the Icelandic language.

The profession's pioneers received their education and training in Germany and Denmark, creating a designscape built on craftsmanship and references to cultural heritage, as was often the case in Europe at the time.<sup>23</sup> As Arndís S. Árnadóttir states, Icelandic designers only occasionally participated in Nordic and European design exhibitions or fairs in Europe during the 1950s, and they received little support from the Icelandic authorities.<sup>24</sup> Only in the last few decades have Icelandic designers officially been promoted in the international context, and now institutions, museums, ministries, and professional associations systematically provide more and more domestic exposure. An important steppingstone for the profession's development was the establishment as late as 1999 of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Iceland Academy of the Arts, which

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<sup>21</sup> Gíslason & Stefánsdóttir 2007: 13.

<sup>22</sup> Magnússon 2000 (no page numbers; this reference is to the last page of the catalogue).

<sup>23</sup> Magnússon 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Árnadóttir 2003.



today is one of the mainsprings for the development of the field in the country.<sup>25</sup>

The Iceland Design Centre has, in the last few years, made a point of the importance of design for society as a whole, promoting design as “relevant in all sectors of the economy, from construction, production, the fisheries, tourism and food production to services and the knowledge industry.”<sup>26</sup> Judging from public discourse, Icelandic design seems to have not yet fully gained general support and understanding from the Icelandic authorities, since much of this discourse revolves around explaining and justifying its own existence. Discussing the position of Icelandic design versus Scandinavian design, Guðbjörg Gissurardóttir states that “Icelanders could be likened to the adolescent in the group: full of hormones, wracked by growing pains, and fighting vigorously for independence.”<sup>27</sup> Much of the discourse around the profession during the 1950s and the 1960s is still prevalent in today’s discourse, where questions about the nature of design or what design can contribute to society and the economy are as much an issue today as they were half a century ago, as is evident in the comprehensive catalogue to the exhibition *Mót*.<sup>28</sup>

Most published sources on Icelandic design emphasize the significance of the extremely fast and revolutionary socio-economic and cultural changes in the 20th century. It was an era of shifting social structures and a changing economy, in which a rural peasant society transformed into a global and modern cultural society in an unusually short period of time compared to other European countries. In that period, Iceland obtained its independence from Denmark, which in turn led to an era characterized by the need to define the nation’s identity as citizens of a sovereign country. A second wave of identity construction (usually feeding on nostalgia) has now hit Icelandic shores as part of mainstream reactions to globalization. It is clearly evident in many cultural spheres, such as music, fine art, literature, and contemporary design. This is reflected

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<sup>25</sup> The department awards BA degrees in graphic design, fashion design, product design, and architecture.

<sup>26</sup> *Iceland Design Centre* 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Gissurardóttir 2007: 11

<sup>28</sup> Magnússon 2000.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

clearly in recent exhibitions on Icelandic design, as well as being explicitly discussed in published exhibition catalogues:

In our ever-shrinking world, the uniqueness of each nation is becoming less tangible. We will only be able to set ourselves apart and create our own special status by being true to our inner consciousness, creative power, and heritage.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 1. Products made of fishskin and lambswool at Kraum shop.

In the same way, the majority of exhibition catalogues and other published material on the subject address the profession's young age, and most of them are occupied with addressing the question of the "character" of Icelandic design.<sup>30</sup> The search for identity seems to be at its peak and references to a cultural past and Icelandic nature are leading that search. Questions such as, "What is unique about

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<sup>29</sup> Gunnlaugsdóttir 2007: 7.

<sup>30</sup> Birgisson 2003; Elínardóttir et. al. 2007; Guðmundsdóttir & Sigurðardóttir 2005; Ingólfsson 2004; Magnússon 2000; Sigurðsson 2004; Ingvarsdóttir 2009.

Icelandic design?”<sup>31</sup> and “Can the Spirit of the Nation make itself known in an ice-tray, a clothes-peg, a pair of jeans?”<sup>32</sup> are exemplary of today’s discourse on Icelandic Design.

Some writers even go so far as discussing “the Icelandic design gene,” supposedly rooted in the unique “energy” of Icelandic designers; “boldness”; and “creative power.”<sup>33</sup> This demonstrates the fact that there seems to be some kind of a common will, a consensus, to attribute qualities and characteristics to “Icelandic design” as a natural category, with surprisingly little opposition or critique of homogenization, nationalization, or essentialism. It is important to note, however, that this discourse also surrounded many other fields of Icelandic culture up until the economic meltdown in 2008, where the success of Icelandic businessmen, for example, was explained by similar references. And even though Icelandic design is commonly understood to convey traits of international appearance, this very internationality also seems to be understood as an obstacle in fine-tuning the harmony, or the image-construction, of Icelandic design today.<sup>34</sup>

## Narratives of Nature and the Past

By choosing the two outlets, Kraum and the museum shop of the National Museum, I want to focus attention on the relationship between design and souvenir, and attempt to draw lines between this study and other studies that discuss the relationship between art and souvenir, particularly in non-Western societies, as described above. Both locations are successful tourist shops, where goods are obviously directed at the foreign buyer, although never excluding local buyers. In addition, many of the objects on display are explanatory, or even pedagogical, in their attempt to serve as mediators of what it means to be Icelandic. When browsing through the variety of objects on display in the two shops, there seems to be a remarkable consensus of content, or concept, of what is labelled as “Icelandic

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<sup>31</sup> Gunnlaugsdóttir 2007: 7.

<sup>32</sup> Ólafsdóttir 2005 (no page numbers).

<sup>33</sup> Gissurardóttir 2007: 12.

<sup>34</sup> Ingvarsdóttir 2009 (no page numbers).

design.” A vast majority of the artefacts bear explicit references to Icelandic nature and cultural heritage, often embodying narratives or storytelling in their packaging or label. This does not mean that all the objects look the same; indeed, most of them reflect a strong sense of the individual designer. The homogeneity that I refer to lies in the very subject matter on which a considerable amount of Icelandic designers seem to base their work. This subject matter could perhaps be best described as *the past*, with various representational forms and themes that draw on disappearing cultural forms, craftsmanship, and customs. References to Icelandic nature are also evident, either with direct references to certain geological phenomena and well-known locations in the country, or with the use of local material, such as wool, lava, or fish skin.

This is not only apparent when looking through the variety of goods in Reykjavík; it is also in most of the publications on Icelandic design. In this way, entire exhibitions have been curated around the two concepts of nature and heritage, such as *Ómur* (Resonance): “The pieces on display are shaped by landscape and cultural heritage, forces which are then renewed, developed and adapted to new demands and situations.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the majority of the designers interviewed for this study mentioned Icelandic folklore (tangible and intangible) when asked what they thought characterized Icelandic design. Some mentioned that it should be about the “awareness of where we come from, or who we are,” and others reported that Icelandic designers should build on their extremely rich cultural heritage, such as oral tradition and folk tales, specific local material, old craftsmanship, and nature. Those who think it is too early to say what characterizes Icelandic design still accept the idea that Icelandic design embodies an intrinsic Icelandic “tone” or “harmony.” In the same way, headlines such as “Unique Icelandic Currents” or “The Icelandic Harmony” are commonly found in newspaper material, and the claim for ethnic characteristics being presented in design is strong.<sup>36</sup> This development resonates well with the above discourse on the consequences of globalization and the flattening out of cultural differences. In addition, a considerable emphasis is placed on cultural heritage and

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<sup>35</sup> Ólafsdóttir 2005.

<sup>36</sup> *Fréttablaðið* 12 Mar. 2008: 22; *Fréttablaðið* 18 Nov. 2008: 8; *Morgunblaðið* 22 Nov. 2008: 8; *Morgunblaðið* 1 Mar. 2009: 18; Þórðarson 2005.

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the particularities of Icelandic folklore, material, and natural resources in the curriculum of the Iceland Academy of the Arts, resulting in a yearly course with the title “Icelandic Design Is a Special Harmony.” It is taught in collaboration with the National Museum, where students of product design work with the museum collection of folkloric objects with the aim of designing new products inspired by the old ones. Some of the products coming out of the course are chosen for production and are for sale in the museum shop.



Figure 2. Products at the National Museum shop.

Many of these are also available in other outlets around the country, including the international airport. In this way, one is left with an idea of the supposed origins of Icelandic culture, hardly escaping references to the past when looking at the array of products on sale.

As Judith Attfield notes,

originality is one of the most highly valued attributes in a world where technology enables the effortless production of

an infinite number of clones to be reproduced from the prototype.<sup>37</sup>

It is exactly this demand for distinction that the design souvenir fulfills, both on the producer's as well as the consumer's end. Just as Western tourists go to Africa to buy an authentic wooden mask, so they travel to Iceland to shop for an object that in some ways answers the desire to obtain an authentic Icelandic object. Being a part of the North, Icelandic products also fulfill the Western desire for an "untamed energy" that is often thought to be a Northern quality, portrayed by an undisciplined force where the remote and the exotic are materialized and embodied in design souvenirs. References to the cold, snow, and Arctic animal life are also indicative of this.

According to some salespeople, the most popular objects for foreign consumption are those made from traditional materials, such as fish skin and wool. Both materials form an intrinsic part of Icelandic cultural history and relate to the "primitive" survival of the Icelandic people in this harsh and ruthless country. Both have also suffered a status loss in Iceland's economy and culture, but are now experiencing an upsurge in their importance and significance in economic as well as cultural terms. This transition relates to the economic history of Iceland and becomes clearly evident during the current crisis, where traditional material and know-how have been revived and their cultural and economic value reconstructed. Design products from fish skin are reportedly the most popular commodity in one of the shops, and foreigners seem to be drawn to all kinds of objects made from the material, such as shoes with references to *sauðskinnsskór* (traditional Icelandic shoes), handbags, accessories, or even lamps made from entire dried bodies of codfish, while explaining to the salespersons that they have not seen anything like that elsewhere.

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<sup>37</sup> Attfield 2000: 80.

NATURE, NOSTALGIA, AND NARRATIVE



Figure 3. Cod lamps at Kraum shop.

Other examples of objects referencing nature and animal life are raven hangers, necklaces made from sheep horn, and whale tooth hangers.



Figure 4. Accessories made from sheep horn.

Furthermore, traditional Icelandic wool sweaters are a top priority when it comes to buying a souvenir in Iceland. The most popular ones are handmade by Icelandic women in a traditional fashion, or re-designed under the brand of Farmer's Market. In the latter case, an elaborate label is attached to the clothing explaining the uniqueness of the Icelandic sheep as a breed: The purity of the strain has been protected by centuries of isolation and a total absence of contact with other breeds of sheep. By the same token, the wool it produces has no counterpart anywhere.

Each collection bears the name of an Icelandic farm, and carefully states that it is "hand-knitted Icelandic wool." Ironically enough, those sweaters are hand-knitted in China, or, at least, were at the time of this study.

By using sheep wool, sheep horn, fish skin, and sometimes lava, designers use natural materials that represent "Icelandicness" in the sense that they are inseparable from the country's culture and nature. The history of the Icelandic sheep has often been treated as symbolic of the history of the Icelandic people, marked by isolation and endurance. In this way, the packaging or the labelling takes over the role of the "middleman," or the salesperson, where there is no longer a need for personal communication in trading as is the case in many non-Western tourist markets of cultural commodities. Another example of direct references to nature can be found in the recently launched product design company Heima, whose statement is to capture the various meanings embedded in its title: "home," "homeland," or the sense of "belonging."<sup>38</sup> Issues of nature, however, are not only important to Icelandic design; nature has also played an important role in Scandinavian design, as stated in an article on nature and identity in the book *New Scandinavian Design*.<sup>39</sup> In an interview with a lecturer in graphic design at the Iceland Academy of the Arts, Magnússon states that nature in Iceland has influenced designers differently from the other Scandinavian countries:

We did not only apply Modernism to nature the same way the Scandinavians did. There are no trees here to work with, and

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<sup>38</sup> Heima, <<http://heima.eu/info.html>>.

<sup>39</sup> Cabra & Nelson 2004: 94–97.



we never developed the same kind of craftsmanship or industrial techniques [involving wood and natural materials] (brackets in original).<sup>40</sup>

Magnússon also discusses the influence of light:

There is no question that light in Iceland is different from the other Nordic countries. It has to do with our climate. The light that plays across an island surrounded by the heavy seas and cloudy storms is very different from the light on the Scandinavian peninsula. In general, I have the feeling we dramatize light more than the Scandinavians do and have a tendency towards stronger contrasts—softness is not an Icelandic quality for sure!<sup>41</sup>

Another common trend in today's variety of design souvenirs references a culture of narrative, poetry, and folkloric tales, seeking to embody narrative in themselves, either in their own physicality or by explanations on their packaging and labels. These are explanations of where materials originate from, or they could be micro-stories of the origins of the symbolic object that inspired the new design object. Sometimes these are told directly by salespersons to possible buyers. In this way, design souvenirs tend to explain themselves by bearing references to other pre-existing forms in the cultural history of Iceland, thus creating a link to a remote past. These narratives could be understood as metanarratives, stories of the very existence of Icelanders as a nation. According to Edward Bruner, metanarratives are the largest conceptual frame within which tourism operates, and without being attached to any locality or to any particular tour they are usually taken for granted.<sup>42</sup> He explains how “metanarrative refers to a story that places a frame around all cultural performances.”<sup>43</sup> It is an abstract idea that is thought to be a comprehensive explanation of historical experience or knowledge.

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<sup>40</sup> Magnússon 2004: 95–96.

<sup>41</sup> Magnússon 2004: 95.

<sup>42</sup> Bruner 2005: 21.

<sup>43</sup> Bruner 2005: 206.

Narratives of the past seem to be as important for locals as for foreign buyers, since the claim of building on local cultural heritage and a disappearing past stands out in domestic media discourse on “Icelandic design.” Following this, the manager of Kraum reports in a newspaper interview that the shop “hosts what Icelanders care for the most: woollen sweaters, sheepskin, cod and salmon, apart from that fertile spirit that only exists in this country.”<sup>44</sup> Through design, Icelanders remind themselves of who they are and where they come from, in addition to safeguarding cultural heritage by revitalizing old and disappearing forms through contemporary design. In addition, narrative as a phenomenon in itself is a distinct characteristic of traditional Icelandic culture, where telling stories and reciting poems was the main leisure activity (and sometimes artistic form) in farms up until the industrial revolution and urbanization. Examples of objects in this style are included in the product series of Heima, where a considerable emphasis is placed on conveying cultural heritage with narrative text on the products’ packaging:

Our great grandfathers created beautiful shelves from simple wooden planks by carving decorations that covered the surface. The wood was usually from humble origins—either fire or driftwood. The shelves were then presented as a gift to loved ones, or maybe to soften up the parents of a future wife.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed contemporary design products as they appear in tourist settings in Iceland, as well as in public discourse. I have conducted the study within the realm of material culture studies and anthropology, pointing out resemblances between the trajectory of non-Western art in a global context and the trajectory of Icelandic design. Design as a distinct profession in Iceland is a young profession, having only recently taken root in the country’s culture and economy, and it carries a discourse of identity and nationality along with it. However, design artefacts in tourist outlets are not only directed at the foreigner, but also the local buyer. The claim for

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<sup>44</sup> Bogadóttir 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Heima, <<http://heima.eu/bookm.html>>.

identity, a common theme in today's globalized world of cultural commodities, begs for attention. One of the strongest themes of identity I have come to find in the Icelandic context is the narrative of nature and the past. This is practiced to such a degree that one has the feeling of being on a cultural tour around Icelandic history when browsing through the variety of design products. This could also be understood as a characteristic of a post-colonial dilemma of not knowing "who we really are," or as a reminder of "where we come from." After all, Iceland also carries its colonial past and is going through a post-colonial phase of identity dilemma. In this way, one can understand how design objects can be seen as vehicles for identity production, image-making, and as physical manifestations of what it means to belong to a group, or for that matter, to a nation.

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# The Use of English in Iceland: Convenience or a Cultural Threat? A Lingua Franca or Lingua Detrimental?

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**Abstract** – The Icelandic language has been the primary criterion for national identity and has played an important role in the image of Iceland within the Nordic countries. The article traces the role of how linguistic nationalism gained an indisputable position for the Icelandic language as the foundation of national identity in the country. During the period of independence struggle, Danish, the language of the colonizers, was considered to be enemy number one of the Icelandic language, but in recent times English has taken over that role. Equipped with the historical dimension of the role of Icelandic and Danish within the process of national identity-making in Iceland, the article aims to analyze the ongoing discourse on the alleged threat of English dominance in Icelandic society. Specific focus will be on the use of English as lingua franca in Icelandic businesses operating at an international level. In recent years the number of Icelandic corporations expanding their operation across the globe has multiplied. Recently some of these companies changed their official language of internal communication from Icelandic to English. This change stirred up great controversy, reflected in the media discourse and on blog sites on the Internet.

**Keywords** – Culture, identity, power, language, language policy, linguistic capital, symbolic power

## Introduction

In September 2007 a heated debate broke out in the Icelandic media over the role of Icelandic in Icelandic society on the one hand and the alleged intrusion of English on the other. The cause of the conflict were the words of Sigurjón Árnason, CEO of Landsbanki, who said in passing in an interview that it was perhaps

unavoidable for Icelandic financial companies operating abroad, to switch over to using English at their headquarters

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in Iceland. That would enable the bank to hire some foreigners to work in all kinds of detailed analytical jobs, where specific skills are required.<sup>1</sup>

The editorial of the *Morgunblaðið* daily responded immediately to Árnason's statement and said:

Is the Icelandic language an unusable language? Is it time to cease struggling to maintain a specific language in a society counting only several hundred thousand people? Is Icelandic a burden, hampering the success of Icelandic businesses? Has the Icelandic language become a yoke to the Icelandic nation? Or is the opposite true: As soon as Icelandic disappears, then all the specific characteristics of the Icelandic nation are lost and the nation will disappear into the ocean of nations [...]

And the editorial went on:

The Icelandic language is the foundation of Icelandic culture. That culture is the soil and foundation of the current welfare, which now rules in Iceland. Rather than assaulting the tongue, an offence in its defence should be carried out.<sup>2</sup>

A year later at the collapse of the Icelandic financial system, an article under the headline "A Blessing in Disguise" could be found in the same newspaper, which said, "With the collapse of the Icelandic financial system, the biggest threat to the Icelandic language is gone, at least for now."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Óhjákvæmilegt fyrir íslensk fjármálafyrirtæki í útrás að taka upp ensku sem vinnmál í höfuðstöðvum sínum á Íslandi. Þannig yrði þeim kleift að ráða útlendinga til starfa við ýmsa bakvinnslu sem krefst menntunar." "Enskan vinnmál á Íslandi? [English a Working Language in Iceland?] 2007: 13.

All translations from Icelandic are my own.

<sup>2</sup> "Leiðari: Íslenska eða enska?" [Editorial: Icelandic or English?] 2007: 44. Since its foundation in 1913, *Morgunblaðið* daily has been a staunch supporter of linguistic purism and nationalism. The paper has a regular column on the Icelandic language and language use.

<sup>3</sup> "Íslensk tunga hagnast best. Með falli íslenska fjármálakerfisins er helsta ógn íslenskrar tungu úr sögunni, að minnsta kosti í bili." Helgason 2008: 1.



Icelandic has never been spoken by more people than today, over three hundred thousand speakers. It is the mother tongue of more than 90% of the inhabitants of Iceland. Written Icelandic has never been more vibrant, with a flourishing publication of books, magazines, journals and papers, and thousands of bloggers expressing themselves on blog sites on the Internet. Yet many people worry about the prospects for Icelandic in a world where English is becoming increasingly dominant. A global lingua franca, like English, certainly makes it possible for people from different corners of the globe to work together on many different levels, providing tremendous advantages. But it also raises questions about whether this advantage might be a curse in disguise, which in the long run will squeeze the life out of a relatively small language like Icelandic. The quotations above echo these sentiments and are a part of an ongoing debate on the Icelandic language and its role and status in the process of national identity-making in Iceland.

Before addressing this topic, it is necessary to shed light on the “current state of affairs” in Icelandic society. Since the onset of this research in early 2008, Iceland has undergone some of its most sudden and intense economic turmoil in modern history. For the best part of the past decade, the Icelandic economy and the society as a whole were marked by unprecedented growth and expansion, followed by a higher standard of living. Icelandic businesses, particularly within the financial sector, which so far had operated only on the home market, entered the international business arena after privatization of the largest state-owned banks in 2003. In the forefront were businessmen nicknamed “útrásarvíkingar” (the word literally means a Viking who conquers new lands), who were regarded as national heroes in Iceland, living testaments to the brave and daring “Viking spirit.” Their achievements put Iceland once and for all “on the map” as a player amongst players of the rich and powerful, and simultaneously carried Iceland’s reputation to the farthest corners of the world.

This international “success” came, however, to an abrupt end in October 2008 when three of Iceland’s largest banks collapsed with immeasurable ramifications. All these banks had major international operations. The country has since witnessed unprecedented economic crisis, mass unemployment, social unrest, and political upheaval. Internationally the country’s name and reputation have suffered and

the name “Iceland” has become synonymous with financial blunder of disproportionate measures. The country is currently under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund.<sup>4</sup>

With a reputation in ruins—due, in the eyes of many, to irresponsible and reckless behaviour particularly by the leaders of these banks and other businesses—many Icelanders feel that their country’s image at the international level is in a shambles and will take years to repair.

Long before the economic collapse, the use of English at these companies’ headquarters had stirred up considerable controversy in Iceland, which is part of a much older debate about the role and status of the Icelandic language within Icelandic culture and society, a discourse that pertains to the production and reproduction of national culture and identity as well as the image and representation of the country at home and abroad. Within that discourse, the role of the Icelandic language, and more recently the use of English, loom large.

This paper will put this discourse into a historical and contemporary perspective, starting with linguistic nationalism in Iceland, reflecting on the status and fate of Danish—the language of the colonizer—and continuing to the present with the ever-increasing presence of English. The historical dimension is necessary in order to answer the following questions that will be addressed in subsequent sections: does the use of English in Icelandic businesses pose a threat to the Icelandic language and/or the image of the Icelandic culture? Is there a conflict of interest between the Icelandic business sector and the “gatekeepers” of culture and language? If so, is anyone’s claim to power at stake?

In line with the anthropological approach emphasizing the relation between culture, history, language, and identity, whether of individuals, groups, or nations and their relations to power, this paper rests upon critical theory looking at language as a locus of social order, power, and individual consciousness.<sup>5</sup> It is worth emphasizing that within the critical theory discourse, the discipline’s agenda has

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<sup>4</sup> Danielsson & Zoega 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu 1991; Gal 1989; Ortner, Eley, & Dirks 1994.

shifted from the search for structures to theories of practice that allow for an exploration of the interplay between both structure and agency.<sup>6</sup> In the spirit of Bourdieu's *The Outline of Theory of Practice* (1977), this anthropological approach to practice therefore regards the notion of history as central. Here, notions of power and hegemony are also pivotal in order to understand how culture is continually produced and reproduced over time. This understanding of culture, power, and history has, in turn, shed light on anthropological studies of language. Central to the critical theory approach towards language is the concept of language as a symbolic capital and the source of identity formation, an understanding which is of great importance to the present discussion.<sup>7</sup> In this approach, language is viewed as a combination of discourse, symbolic capital, and a site of identity formation and negotiations. By applying the approach of critical theory to analyze the alleged threat of the dominance of English on the image of Iceland, language, culture, and national identity, Michel Foucault's notion on discourse and power will also be applied.<sup>8</sup>

The methodology of the research is a combination of discourse analysis of spoken material, such as conferences and on radio programmes, and textual analysis of written material as it appeared in the printed media and scholarly writings. Formal and informal interviews were conducted with representatives within the companies using English as a lingua franca and with linguists. Two-thirds of the ten interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### Country, Nation, Language— Historical Roots of the Holy Trinity

In the spirit of linguistic nationalism, language, nation, and country have in Iceland been regarded as inseparable entities. Frequently cited by the country's leaders, this notion is echoed in the poem by Snorri Hjartarson, "Land, þjóð, tunga, þrenning sönn og ein."<sup>9</sup> For the national leaders and the general public alike, the Icelandic language is

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<sup>6</sup> Ortner et al. 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu 1991; Gal 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Hjartarson [1952] 1981: 72.

the cultural symbol that makes them a nation, distinguishable from other nations. This notion has its roots in the fight for independence when the Icelandic language became a political tool used in order to consolidate and construct the Icelandic nation.<sup>10</sup>

Traceable back to the German Romantic philosophers Herder and Fichte, linguistic nationalism had a great impact upon language policy in Iceland, as was the case in many parts of Europe.<sup>11</sup> In Iceland, however, its impact was greater than in most places. At the core of linguistic nationalism lies the idea that nations possess an immutable character and that national cultures are more or less self-contained entities with definite and clear-cut boundaries.

In line with Herder's ideas, the early Icelandic nationalists firmly believed that language carried within it the "spirit of the nation," which for them was the language of the settlers. According to the nationalistic myth, all misfortune the "nation" had experienced was more or less due to evil foreign influences or stemmed from people within who were ready to sacrifice the well-being of the nation for the achievement of their own good, culminating in submission to a foreign political power.<sup>12</sup> The same attitude was applied to foreign linguistic influence, which was considered to pollute the alleged purity of the language and consequently the "true spirit" of the nation. Equipped with the arms of linguistic nationalism, the emerging intelligentsia and political leaders in the 19th century began the struggle for independence by heralding a campaign against all foreign words, particularly Danish.<sup>13</sup>

Danish, the language of the former colonial power, had for centuries been the language of the administration and most of the public administrators had been Danes. In the 19th century this gradually changed and Icelanders took over. Moreover, Danish was abolished as the official language of administration, followed by a campaign aimed at uprooting all usage of Danish within the

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<sup>10</sup> Þórarinsdóttir 1999; Hálfðanarson 2003; Ottósson 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Berlin 1992; Barbour & Carmichael 2002; Blommaert 1996, 2006; Caviedes 2003; Hálfðanarson 1993, 2003; Spolsky 2004; Þórarinsdóttir 1999, 2004; Wright 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Aðils 1922.

<sup>13</sup> Ottósson 1990; Þórarinsdóttir 1999.

administration as well as all traces of Danish from the vocabulary. This act was both a symbolic and an actual challenge against the colonial power.<sup>14</sup> The linguistic agenda of purism simultaneously produced a new language of authority, as the leaders within the independence movement took it on themselves to coin new Icelandic terms for the fast-growing political concepts emerging.<sup>15</sup>

A formal institution, on a par with language academies in Europe, called the Icelandic Language Institute (Íslensk Málstöð) was not formed until the early 1960s. Nevertheless, the impact of purism had reigned supreme in the country since the dawn of nationalism and was further established through the emerging institutions of the newly founded state in the early 20th century. More recently, the Icelandic Language Institute and another body called the Icelandic Language Committee (Íslensk Málnefnd) have both been very active in protecting and safeguarding the boundaries of the Icelandic language.<sup>16</sup>

In the discourse on national identity-making, demarcation of boundaries between “us” the Icelanders and “them” the non-Icelanders or non-Icelandic was—and is, albeit to a lesser degree—of utmost importance. The image of a pure language, uncontaminated by foreign influence, was high on the political agenda throughout the 20th century, as reflected in the emphasis in the school curriculum as well as within the dominant discourse.<sup>17</sup> The dissemination of this perspective was very successful. So much so, that throughout the 20th century it became a matter of loyalty to the national cause to protect the language from possible contamination, such as grammatical errors, and to secure the language borders from unwanted foreign words—referred to as “stains” (*slettur* in Icelandic) on the mother tongue—seeping into the language from abroad. If words were not considered to have “earned citizenship in the Icelandic language,” they were considered to be exceptionally dangerous by the staunchest

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<sup>14</sup> Ottósson 1990.

<sup>15</sup> Ottósson 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Icelandic Language Committee (n.d.)

<sup>17</sup> Ottósson 1990.

followers of linguistic purism.<sup>18</sup> In a way, a “pure” Icelandic word became synonymous with a “pure” Icelander. From the onset of public education in the early 20th century, the doctrine of purism was the guiding principle of the school curriculum and other public institutions, and then individuals followed suit. The linguistic border control was further enhanced by the official implementation of neologisms, which started in the 19th century as part of the political agenda of the nationalistic movement.<sup>19</sup> A large quantity of the modern vocabulary in Icelandic is thus coined. The mastering of Icelandic, which is free of foreign “stains” and/or grammatical errors, provides the speaker with a form of what Bourdieu has called linguistic capital—a form of symbolic capital that can be converted into economic and social capital.

For a long time the purists’ argument ruled without criticism.<sup>20</sup> In recent decades, the stronghold of language purity has lessened, but the idea of Icelandic being the primary criterion for nationhood is still strong. A recent study, where interviewees were asked what they thought made them Icelanders, confirms this view as the majority maintained it was the Icelandic language that to them was the most important criterion and the most salient national characteristic of Icelanders.<sup>21</sup> This view speaks of the success of the nationalist agenda and its emphasis on the importance of a separate language. Embedded within this view is the idea, traceable back to Fichte, that only people with their own language have a natural right to

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<sup>18</sup> “Vandað mál er hreint mál” [...] Varðveisla hreinleika málsins er þannig landvarnarmál, þar sem heyja verður þrotlaus og miskunnarlaus baráttu. Það dettur engum í hug að veita erlendum manni sem rekið hefur á fjörur okkar, þegar í stað íslensk þegnrettindi. Á sama hátt megum við ekki þegar í stað viðurkenna erlend orð, er slæðzt hafa inn í íslenzku, bera annarlegan svip og eiga erfitt með að laga sig eftir íslensku málkerfi.” “‘Good language is pure language’ [...] The protection of language purity is thus a matter of national defense where a relentless and merciless battle needs to be fought. No one would ever dream of granting immediate citizenship to a foreigner who has happened upon an Icelandic shore. In the same manner, we cannot immediately accept foreign words that have seeped into Icelandic, have a strange appearance, and are difficult to adjust to Icelandic grammar.” Halldórsson 1971: 28.

<sup>19</sup> Barbour & Carmichael 2002; Blommaert 1996, 2006; Caviedes 2003; Spolsky 2004; Þórarinsdóttir 1999, 2004; Wright 2004.

<sup>20</sup> To criticize it was considered tantamount to heresy, as adherence to the doctrine was at the heart of a national belief, sacred to very many Icelanders, in fact akin to a form of secular religion, supported by the state. See Þórarinsdóttir 1999, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Óladóttir 2007.

sovereignty. Hence in the minds of most Icelanders the very existence of the Icelandic nation-state rests upon the notion of a separate language, and to them that language has clear-cut boundaries and is preferably pure and uncontaminated from foreign influences. These ideas are central, not only in the process of national identity-making within Iceland, but also within the intertwined and ongoing process of the construction of the country's image amongst its inhabitants as well as its image presented abroad. The antagonism towards foreign linguistic influences—first Danish, then English—can be better understood in light of these ideas.

Ever since Danish was eradicated from the public sphere in the late 19th century, it has had a peculiar position in Icelandic society. On the one hand, it represented the language of the colonizer and acquired negative connotations of repression, subjugation, and power abuse. Using Danish in Iceland and Danish words within Icelandic, no matter how long they had been used, became stigmatized.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, knowledge of Danish was an asset, and it remained the primary lingua franca and linguistic capital in Iceland well into the middle of the 20th century. Danish opened the doors to both secondary and higher education and was a key to international relations with Denmark and other Nordic countries. So while knowledge of Danish was an obvious asset, paradoxically any traces of it within the borders of the Icelandic language were despised. Until 2006 Danish was the first foreign language learnt in school, when English replaced it after a yearlong controversy both in the parliament and amongst the public. Now pupils start learning English in the fourth grade (age nine), whereas teaching of Danish starts in the seventh grade (age twelve).<sup>23</sup>

The history of English usage in Icelandic society is relatively short in comparison with the long presence of Danish, yet English has replaced Danish as Icelandic's enemy number one in the eyes of all those who act as gatekeepers of the linguistic borders of Icelandic, as will be discussed shortly. Moreover, like Danish was before, English has become the lingua franca for communication with the outside

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<sup>22</sup> Halldórsson 1971; Ottósson 1990.

<sup>23</sup> *Aðalnámskrá grunnskóla—erlend tungumál* 2006.

world for most Icelanders and, last but not least, a definite linguistic capital with guaranteed high international value.

### A Different Linguistic Landscape— The Intrusion of English

In recent decades the use of English as a *lingua franca* on the international level, whether in politics, businesses, the entertainment industry, or any other kind of international relations, has been ever increasing.<sup>24</sup> This has also been the case in Iceland, but there is more to the impact of English in the country.

One of the most powerful cultural influences upon Icelandic society and culture in recent times derived from the American NATO base in Keflavík. The base was in operation for over fifty years from 1951 to 2006 when it closed. The presence of the American base was one of the most hotly debated political issues in Iceland during the entire Cold War period. The troops were confined to the base, but civilians sometimes lived outside of its borders. Icelanders opposing the base lamented the cultural impact of its presence, not least the impact of English and the American entertainment culture. Tremendous controversy reigned over the issue of NATO, the base, and “The Yankee” radio (broadcasting from the early 1950s) and TV channel (broadcasting from 1960) in Iceland. Many leading figures in cultural politics felt that these broadcasts were an “invasion into the Icelandic cultural jurisdiction,” a threat that was amongst other things seen as having “polluting effects” upon the language.<sup>25</sup> The American TV channel at the base went on cable—at the request of Icelandic authorities—in the early 1970s, but radio broadcasts continued until the base shut down in 2006. Aside from the influence of English through the American base, Anglophone programmes have been, and still are, dominant in the foreign material broadcast on the Icelandic state television channel (established in 1966) as well as on other privately owned television channels entering the market after the abolition of the state monopoly on radio and television broadcasting

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<sup>24</sup> Crystal 2003; House 2003; Lindgren 2004; Pennycook 1998, 2003; Spolsky 2004; Wright 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Vilmundarson 1964.



in 1985.<sup>26</sup> Non-Icelandic programmes have always been subtitled, never dubbed as is customary in some other countries. Films, whether shown in cinemas or available on DVD, are likewise subtitled. American and English-language material dominate that market.

Other events have added to the increased impact of the English language in Iceland.<sup>27</sup> In 1994 Iceland entered the European Economic Area (EEA), which is based on the same four freedoms as the European Union: the free movement of goods, persons, services, and capital among the EEA and EU countries. Along with the intensifying impact of globalization, facilitated by improved communication technology and international communication, Iceland's membership in the EEA of the free flow undoubtedly played an important role in opening the country's borders in many senses. Of particular interest is the impact of free flow of people and financial capital spurring the aforementioned economic expansion.

Until the 1990s Iceland had been one of the most homogenous nation-states in the world, culturally, religiously, and linguistically. Since then and especially after the turn of the millennium, the country has undergone radical changes due to a sudden and unprecedented surge in immigration. In less than a decade the number of immigrants tripled, nearing one-tenth of the overall population in 2009.<sup>28</sup> The most important magnet for this increase was the increasing demand for labour caused by the economic growth. The presence of immigrants has altered the linguistic landscape. Around eighty percent of the immigrants come from Europe, with Poles by far the largest

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<sup>26</sup> See "Útvarpslög" [Broadcasting Act] (n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> The rise of English as a lingua franca has "a big impact on the institutions of the European Union, and even on European integration. The EU recognizes an official language for every country, and translates all main public documents into all 20 of those languages. But civil servants and committees within the EU's institutions use three main working languages: English, French and German. French has long been fighting a losing battle against the English for 'market share' among the three, with German far behind. The arrival of more countries favoring English will threaten to render French almost as marginal as German." "Europe: After Babel, A New Common Tongue; The European Union" 2004: 33.

<sup>28</sup> "Mannfjöldi eftir ríkisfangi og fæðingarlandi 1. janúar 2009" [Population by Nationality and Country of Birth, 1 Jan. 2009] 2009.

group, constituting almost half of all immigrants in the country.<sup>29</sup> The number of languages now spoken in Iceland is estimated to be over one hundred and fifty. This sudden surge in immigration has simultaneously called for two things relating to language and language use. First, it called for the teaching of Icelandic as a second language, which had been inadequate for years due to lack of funding, causing severe criticism until the government responded in 2007 by increasing financial support for teaching Icelandic as a second language.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, it called for the use of English as a lingua franca in everyday communication between locals and migrants. Using English as a language of communication might seem unusual, as with few exceptions, it is not the first language of those who use it. However, it underscores the fact that English comes closest to being the global lingua franca that speakers of diverse languages can use in their interaction, no matter how rudimentary their knowledge may be.

From the mid-1990s immigrant workers with no knowledge of Icelandic, and often with only a bare minimum of English, had steadily increased in low-skilled jobs such as cleaning and caring within hospitals and homes for the elderly. A decade later, during the economic boom, almost half of the labour force in the construction industry were migrants. Moreover, the number of immigrant workers with no knowledge of Icelandic and only rudimentary English increased exponentially in frontline positions, particularly in restaurants and low-price supermarkets in the Reykjavík metropolitan and other booming areas. The use of English as the lingua franca was, however, not the official policy of the companies involved, but stemmed from shortages of Icelandic-speaking workers. These awkward circumstances evoked some controversy. Yet they did not arouse equally heated feelings and debates—neither amongst scholars nor laymen—as when the Icelandic international companies officially announced that they would use English as a language of communication amongst its workers in writing and/or speaking.<sup>31</sup> These different reactions call for another analysis.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Innflytjendur og einstaklingar með erlendan bakgrunn 1996–2008” 2009.

<sup>30</sup> *Íslenska með breim—er líka íslenska* 2008; *Stefna ríkisstjórnarinnar í málefnum innflytjenda* 2007; Skaptadóttir 2007.

<sup>31</sup> See “Neita að láta erlent fólk afgreiða sig” [Refuse to be Served by Foreigners] 2007: 1; “Útlensku starfsfólki sýndur dónaskapur” [Foreign Staff Subjected to Rude

It was the free flow of capital between EEA and EU member states granted by EEA membership that facilitated the operations and investments of Icelandic companies abroad, where the newly privatized banks played a major role. Simultaneously, international operations of firms within other sectors, such as in biotechnology, Internet games, and specialized industrial productions, to name a few, also increased. Immigrants and Iceland's increased participation in international business are only part of the picture, and increased tourism intensified the impact of the English language as well.

Everyday life in Iceland is highly influenced by and exposed to English because of its dominant role as an international lingua franca and its powerful impact through various kinds of entertainment media and the Internet. In higher education and science, a large proportion of textbooks across most disciplines at the university level are in English. Moreover, all universities offer courses taught in English, some only selected courses, while in others whole programmes are available.<sup>33</sup> The state-run University of Iceland, the largest university in the country, is the only university to implement a specific language policy concerning the use of Icelandic, emphasizing its use in teaching, research, and within the administration.<sup>34</sup> University professors in favour of offering courses in English argue that it attracts international students and prepares the Icelandic students for participating in international relations, thus making them more competitive.<sup>35</sup> Due to its massive spread and impact, understanding of English is very common. Further adding to the increased impact of English was the international expansion of Icelandic companies, where more and more businesses adopted English as the lingua franca for their staff members. With headquarters in Reykjavík, many

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Behaviour] 2007: 8; "Leiðari: Tvítyngdur hversdagsleiki" [Editorial: Bilingual Everyday Life] 2007: 14.

<sup>32</sup> At this point one can only speculate as to why the use of English between immigrants and native speakers of Icelandic has spurred much less conflict. One reason might be fear towards being accused of anti-immigrant sentiment if one openly expresses criticism towards immigrants. Another probable cause might stem from the assumption that immigrants are only staying temporarily in the country. Interestingly, a debate on the responsibility of Icelanders in this equation—the common tendency to speak only English to immigrants—has yet to occur.

<sup>33</sup> Geirsdóttir 2006: 20–21; Jóhannesson & Blöndal 2007.

<sup>34</sup> "Málstefna Háskóla Íslands" 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Ágústsson 2006; Einarsson 2006b; Leifsson 2006.

companies were running branches in several countries in Europe and around the globe. Staff members were mostly a mixture of locals and international teams. Annual reports began to appear in English along with Icelandic and sometimes in English only. Electronic mail and reports were frequently in English—and other relevant languages depending on matter and place. This ever increasing presence of English within Icelandic society has stirred up controversy and heated feelings.

### A Tug of War

The use of English in Icelandic society is clearly a part of a global development. The power and dominance of English has been hotly debated amongst both scholars and laymen in many countries around the globe, Iceland included. The discourse is to some extent part of the colonial legacy and the possibility to acquire an education in one's mother tongue. The bone of contention within this discourse has not least been about whether the dispersion of English and its ever increasing use will seriously weaken or lead to the extinction of small languages like Icelandic.<sup>36</sup> An echo of this sentiment is found in the writings of Icelandic scholars and laymen alike.<sup>37</sup> In line with this, a proposition on Icelandic Language Planning, based upon propositions contributed by the Icelandic Language Committee, was passed by the Icelandic Parliament, the Althing, in April 2009. The proposition suggests that

in times of ever increasing international relations, when the use of foreign languages, particularly English, becomes an ever larger part of Icelandic society, it is vital to secure the status of the Icelandic language.<sup>38</sup>

The proposal also suggests that the Icelandic Language Committee should work towards safeguarding the value of Icelandic in this

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<sup>36</sup> Crystal 2000; Errington 2003; Phillipson 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas; 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Kvaran 2004a, 2004b; Jóhannesson 1998, 2002; Gylfason 2002; “Staða íslenskunnar sem þjóðtungu verði lögfest” [Icelandic a National Language by Law] 2007: 4.

<sup>38</sup> “Á tímum hraðvaxandi alþjóðasamskipta þar sem notkun erlendra tungumála, einkum ensku, verður æ ríkari þáttur í íslensku samfélagi er brýnt að tryggja stöðu íslenskrar tungu.” *Tillaga til þingsályktunar* 2009: 1.

changed environment, ensuring the continuation of its usefulness in all areas of Icelandic society.<sup>39</sup> A specific chapter on the use of Icelandic in the labour market is to be found in this sixty-four-page document.

Another side of the discourse on English as a lingua franca concerns whether knowledge of English is the key to social mobility and improved living standards.<sup>40</sup> A Gallup poll, conducted in Iceland in 2002 on the view on language policy and the influence of English, revealed that there was a strong relation between knowledge of English and income, i.e., those who use English at work have a significantly higher income than those who do not. “English seems to be a key to a higher living standard rather than Icelandic,” according to the linguist Kristján Árnason.<sup>41</sup>

The discourse in Iceland on the use and impact of English is also, as already mentioned, a part of the discourse on the Icelandic language within the ongoing and intertwined processes of national identity-making on the one hand, and the making of the image of the country on the other. Over the years, the discourse has been characterized by arguments in the spirit of purism and protectionism. On the one hand, there have been warnings against unwanted changes within the language (structure and grammar), and on the other hand, warnings against foreign influence, in the past Danish and nowadays English. Among the staunch supporters of language protection today are many of Iceland’s most prominent figures.<sup>42</sup>

In recent years, the rigorous boundaries of language protection have weakened, yet concerns over “the state of the Icelandic language” occur every so often, causing heated debates. A conference, an article, an interview in a newspaper or other media may be the light

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<sup>39</sup> *Tillaga til þingsáhyktunar* 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Crystal 2003; Tollefson 2006.

<sup>41</sup> “Tengsl milli enskukunnáttu og lífskjara” [Link between Knowledge of English and Higher Income] 2006: 7.

<sup>42</sup> Former president Vigdís Finnbogadóttir is one of them, but she has also fought for the importance of teaching foreign languages. The Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute in Foreign Languages, hosted at the University of Iceland, was founded in the honour of her language interest.

that ignites the fire. In January 2006 a conference called *The State of the Icelandic Language* stirred such heated arguments.<sup>43</sup> Another whirlwind blew in September 2007, the catalysts being two short articles in the *Morgunblaðið* daily.

In looking first at the conference, the speakers maintained that Icelandic was at a crossroads with hidden and visible dangers lurking all around. A literary critic argued that the language was under such threat—in terms of structural changes in grammar, influenced chiefly by English—that if nothing was done, it would be gone in a hundred years' time. Others argued that it was not too late to react and rescue Icelandic from extermination, granted it was done by joint forces.<sup>44</sup> Dozens of articles appeared in the press in response to the conference, some of which concerned the presence of English, which was threatening in the eyes of many, while others found that fear quite unsubstantiated. A former minister of education and a staunch gatekeeper of the borders of language, culture, and national identity wrote, "People were filled with enthusiasm over the necessity of saving the Icelandic language, the mother tongue itself, the primary characteristic of Icelandic nationality."<sup>45</sup> He then accused historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson of being an enemy of the Icelandic language, as Hálfðanarson had argued in a radio interview that Icelanders would continue to be Icelanders whether they spoke Icelandic or English, maintaining that national identity was not necessarily based upon a language. Hálfðanarson answered this accusation by refuting the allegation of wishing death upon the Icelandic language and pointed out that many Icelanders speak incorrect Icelandic, some because they are not interested in learning the version of Icelandic the purists favour or because they might be immigrants. Insisting that Icelandic had changed over time and would definitely continue to do so, Hálfðanarson concludes by saying that the minister's argument is a good example of the pitfalls the discourse on the state of the Icelandic language so often falls into, because the

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<sup>43</sup> The conference was sponsored by the Writers' Union of Iceland (Rithöfundasamband Íslands) and the Icelandic Publishers Association (Félag íslenskra bókaútgefenda).

<sup>44</sup> Huldudóttir 2006: 20–21.

<sup>45</sup> "Menn fylltust eldmóði um nauðsyn þess að fylkja liði til bjargar íslenskrí tungu, sjálfu móðurmálinu, frumeinkenni íslensks þjóðernis." Gíslason 2006: 25.

language so often becomes a political symbol in the eyes of people, rather than being a living instrument of communication.<sup>46</sup>

Let us now look at the two—very short—newspaper articles appearing in the autumn of 2007 also causing a frenzy over Icelandic in newspapers, radio shows, and blog sites. The first one contained an interview by the foreign correspondent of the *Morgunblaðið* daily in London with Sigurjón Árnason, then the CEO of one of Iceland’s largest banks. In the interview he argued that it might be necessary for the bank to shift from Icelandic to English at the bank’s headquarters in Reykjavík. (His words are cited at the beginning of this paper). The bank was currently operating in several countries abroad and was the last of the Icelandic banks operating internationally to issue its annual report in English. The second article that caused havoc was written by Ágúst Ó. Ágústsson, a young MP of the Social Democratic Alliance, *Samfylkingin*.<sup>47</sup> Writing on the Icelandic financial system, he suggested in passing that it would be worthwhile to consider whether the public administration should become bilingual, as it would make Iceland more accessible to foreign investors and facilitate international relations.

Ágústsson’s suggestion of a bilingual administration triggered disputes over factual and/or fictional bilingualism (Icelandic and English), reviving an older controversy when a conference report from the Icelandic Chamber of Commerce on the future of Iceland had argued that Icelanders lived with an unusual paradox: Icelandic is the foundation of the nation’s sense of political independence, yet simultaneously it is one of the greatest obstacles in international relations.<sup>48</sup> The report, which argued for the importance of enhancing teaching of English in Icelandic schools, was fiercely criticized for provoking debates on whether Iceland was already bilingual or should aim at becoming so or not.<sup>49</sup> Linguist Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir pointed out that using the term “bilingual” in this context was a misnomer, as

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<sup>46</sup> Hálfðanarson 2006: 36.

<sup>47</sup> Ágústsson 2007.

<sup>48</sup> *Viðskiptaþing: Ísland 2015* [Annual Business Forum: Iceland 2015] 2006.

<sup>49</sup> See Einarsson 2006b; Leifsson 2006.

the proposition called for the need to be fluent in other languages, not necessarily the need to be bilingual.<sup>50</sup>

Both articles appearing in late September 2007 spurred great controversy in the media and on blog sites. On October 1st, Ólafur R. Grímsson, the president of the republic, even felt prompted to respond to this in his speech at the commencement of the parliament. He stated,

There is no sensible reason for pushing Icelandic aside so that the universities and corporations can rank among the best in the world. It is questionable to argue that Icelandic could not continue to be on par with the world languages in fields of science and business.<sup>51</sup>

*Morgunblaðið* responded to these articles in its editorial (see quotations on first page) and issued a special edition on language and society.<sup>52</sup> The following headlines appearing in *Morgunblaðið* tell a story: “Is English Becoming the Second Official Language in This Country?”<sup>53</sup> “English for Business—Icelandic for the Public,”<sup>54</sup> “English a Working Language in Iceland?”<sup>55</sup> Most articles echoed a fear towards English where Icelandic would be pushed aside and asked whether it was feasible to offer courses or programmes in English in schools, particularly at the university level, and whether English was good for

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<sup>50</sup> The debate also resonated of debates on “the state of knowledge of English” in Iceland, where many claimed that Icelanders’ knowledge of English was overestimated. That was also the view of two English scholars specializing in bilingualism interviewed for this study. Interview with Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hulda K. Jónsdóttir, 18 Feb. 2009.

<sup>51</sup> “Ræður 2007” [Speeches 2007] 2007. See also Jóhannsson & Blöndal 2007. The President is here referring to the goal of the University of Iceland set in 2006 to rank amongst the one hundred best universities in the world; see “Stefna og markmið” [Policy and Goals] n.d.

<sup>52</sup> Jóhannsson & Blöndal 2007; “Staða íslenskunnar sem þjóðtungu verði lögfest” [Icelandic a National Language by Law] 2007: 4.

<sup>53</sup> “Er enskan að verða hitt opinbera málið hérlandis?” [Is English Becoming the Second Official Language in This Country?] 2007: 22.

<sup>54</sup> Blöndal 2007.

<sup>55</sup> “Enskan vinnumál á Íslandi? [English a Working Language in Iceland?] 2007: 13.



international relations either in the form of EU membership or in terms of business relations and further growth.<sup>56</sup>

A Gallup poll conducted in 2002 asked respondents if they agreed to English becoming the language of communication at an Icelandic workplace, and over 80% said no. At the same time they argued that they would not mind working in an English-speaking environment in order to improve their knowledge of English. Linguist Árnason wonders whether these conflicting views might indicate that people might oppose the influence of English on a societal level but approve of it when it profits them personally.<sup>57</sup> Hanna Óladóttir's research on Icelanders' views towards Icelandic presented similar conflicting opinions.<sup>58</sup>

### Whose Business Is It Anyway?

Those who have expressed fear of the domination of English are nevertheless well aware of the necessity for Icelanders to have a good understanding of English. However, they want to keep its presence and influence on Icelandic society and language in check.<sup>59</sup> Amongst those are representatives of various language policy bodies who have expressed grave concerns over the influence of English in Iceland. "English is now regarded as the second official language in the country. We in the Committee consider this to be one of the greatest dangers to the Icelandic language," said the vice-chairman of the Icelandic Language Committee and author Þórarinn Eldjárn in an interview. And he warned that if English was to be considered the only suitable language in which to conduct business in Iceland, it would run the risk of leaving Icelandic merely as a kitchen language, thus risking a great devaluation of its use in a broader social context.<sup>60</sup>

A closer look at the businesses in Iceland using English as a working language shows that this practice has clear boundaries. All

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<sup>56</sup> Einarsson 2006a.

<sup>57</sup> Árnason 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Óladóttir 2007.

<sup>59</sup> See for example Jóhannsson and Blöndal 2007.

<sup>60</sup> See interview by Huldudóttir 2007 with the vice-chairman of the Icelandic Language Committee and author Þórarinn Eldjárn.

the companies involved have a common denominator: their headquarters are based in Iceland, where the workforce is a mixture of Icelanders and others. All are, or have been, operating internationally with branches around the globe, ranging from four to forty countries worldwide.

In interviews with representatives of several of these companies, either in the media or conducted especially for this study, it appeared that in spite of their otherwise different fields of operation, all corporations had annual reports, staff meetings, e-mails and, depending on the situation, spoken communication within their company conducted in English. This practice was applied regardless of whether the firm employed only some hundred or over ten thousand people. All company representatives insisted, however, that on occasions when all attendants at meetings are Icelanders, or the foreigners present are fluent in Icelandic, staff meetings and other spoken communications are conducted in Icelandic. Using English in electronic mail was in some cases the rule, while some companies seemed to play it by ear depending on whether the information needed to be sent to a non-Icelandic speaker later on, in which case information through electronic mail was written in English. With the exception of the now defunct financial firms, all the companies have the greater part of their clientele outside Iceland. Let us look at the companies concerned, first the ones that specialize in the production of various goods and then the financial firms.

A multiplayer online game company established in 1997 fits the description given above. Their product is an online game in English, and English is its working language. Two-thirds of the staff—around two hundred—work at the headquarters, and a little over one-third of the employees are non-Icelandic speaking, coming from various European countries, the Americas, and Australia. Other workers are based at the company's workstations in the U.S. and China. In an interview conducted for this study, a company representative said that in cases where communication was between Icelanders only, it was conducted in Icelandic, but if there was one person who did not speak Icelandic, English was the *lingua franca*. Asked if this policy had stirred any controversy or opposition amongst the Icelandic workers, she said:

No, not at all, they just slide in smoothly. They take it for granted, this is the case here and they know it. I have never detected anything you could call opposition towards this, neither amongst Icelanders nor others, the Danes, Norwegians or Swedes that work here. You know, it's English here and that's fine.<sup>61</sup>

Spoken communication is in Icelandic between Icelanders, but they switch to English as soon as there is anyone present who does not understand. The company has nevertheless supported the learning of Icelandic for their foreign staff in Reykjavík. The company's representative maintained that although she worked in an English-speaking environment, she had no fear of Icelandic becoming a kitchen language. "I am never more Icelandic, than when I walk out of the workplace at the end of day. I just walk out of this cover, out of this exotic kind of wonderful workplace and into Icelandic." On the other hand, she expressed concerns over the English-speaking frontline workers at supermarkets, restaurants, and other workplaces whose business it is to serve an Icelandic-speaking clientele. She was critical of the lack of concern by the owners of these companies to teach the foreign labour workers Icelandic and had herself, on several occasions, experienced not being understood while speaking Icelandic when asking for assistance at a supermarket. "The owners need to pep up the Icelandic courses for these workers," she said, and added, "It's so different in here where we are almost like aliens," and here she laughed, "living aliens. But then again our game is in English for an English-speaking clientele."<sup>62</sup>

A global company in orthopaedics is another case in point. Around 1,600 people are on the payroll and thereof three hundred at the headquarters, the rest at branches in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. In Reykjavík the personnel is a mixture of locals and foreigners. In an interview, a company representative was asked if the Icelandic members of the staff had expressed opposition towards the use of English, and she replied, "No not at all, I've never noticed that. It's just something you expect at a company like this one." Then she added,

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<sup>61</sup> Interview, 23 Mar. 2009.

<sup>62</sup> Interview, 23 Mar. 2009.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

It is considered to be quite normal amongst the Icelandic-speaking staff to use English words—i.e., “staining”—particularly professional terms while speaking Icelandic and nobody would ever try to correct that. But if you were giving a talk in Icelandic or preparing any kind of representation of the company in Icelandic, you would not do it.<sup>63</sup>

Other Icelandic international companies using English as a working language are a manufacturer of generic pharmaceuticals, a biopharmaceutical firm, and a company specializing in food processing equipment. They range in size from a couple of thousand employees to over ten thousand, and all of them have operations around the globe. They all use English as a working language in order to ensure that workers are on an equal footing when it comes to international communication, and also “to capitalize on the possible synergies between our various units,” to use wording from a recent bulletin from one of the companies.<sup>64</sup>

What about the financial firms? At the headquarters of Glitnir bank the international department served as the umbrella for all human resource issues within the bank, with the same rule regarding the use of English applying there as in the companies above and the other banks; i.e., all communication was conducted in English in order to ensure that everyone, including the non-Icelandic speaking staff, would understand. The bank had branches in three Nordic countries where most of the staff members were locals speaking their own language between themselves, but conducted all formal communication in English. In an interview, a representative from the human resources department said that the use of English at the bank’s operation in Iceland had pertained mostly to the headquarters. At the various branches around Iceland this was not at all the case, but dissemination of information was increasingly given in English and staff titles were rapidly being filed in English along with Icelandic. Asked if the staff at the domestic branches were annoyed because of this increased use of English, she said:

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<sup>63</sup> Interview, 20 Apr. 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Bulletin issued 4 Sept. 2008, signed by the CEO of the company and sent to the author via electronic mail, 20 Apr. 2009.

No I don't think it was so much towards English as such, I think there was full understanding of the necessity of using it. Although some of us are more fluent in it than others, which causes some annoyance. But it was more like a tension between "us" and "them." The personnel at the domestic branches was not so much part of this international scene as we at the headquarters were. I think they are quite relieved now, that they feel as if we have kind of landed, we were flying quite high, you know. The bank has now taken a complete U-turn as you know. But I, and many in my department, miss the international environment, although we do not miss the splurging and spending."<sup>65</sup>

It was the announcement by the financial firms—in the words of the CEO of Landsbanki—to use English as an official language that spurred the most recent controversy over English versus Icelandic. Ironically, all these big Icelandic banks, Landsbanki, Kaupthing, and Glitnir, as well as Straumur, went bankrupt in the autumn of 2008. The cause for their economic failure, however, hardly stems from their use of English. Other Icelandic companies who adopted English as a *lingua franca* still remain in business but have after the economic crisis threatened to move their headquarters from Iceland, not because they feel uncomfortable using English but because of Iceland's unstable currency and weak economy.

## Conclusion

On the surface, the discourse on language and culture is about linguistic "border control" and cultural "gatekeeping," but in essence it is a manifestation of culture as a locus of struggle where conflicting interests seem to collide, raising questions about what powers come into play in the reproduction of culture—and here more specifically, national culture, identity, and image—over time.

This article sheds light on the influence of linguistic nationalism in Iceland with its concomitant antagonism towards foreign influences and how it has shaped people's perception of Icelandic national identity and image. It shows how Danish, the language of the former

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<sup>65</sup> Interview, April 8, 2009.

colonizer, had, especially after the onset of nation-making, epitomized evil foreign influences, to be replaced by English in more recent times. For that reason a specific emphasis was placed on the controversy of the ever increasing influence of English in Icelandic society. The discussion shows that the impact of English within Icelandic society took off with the presence of the American NATO base and has in recent decades increased to the extent that exposure to English is both visible and audible on countless levels, through the entertainment media (television, films, music), the Internet, and at the levels of higher education (mostly in form of textbooks). The article also shows that basic knowledge of English is widespread in the country although competence in English might be overestimated, as some of our interviewees and participants in the Icelandic/English debate have argued. The article underscores the fact that Icelandic has never been spoken by more people than it is today, bringing to the fore a parallel growth: on the one hand, in the number of speakers of the Icelandic language, and on the other, the increasing impact of the English language. The latter is a part of the ever increasing use of English as a global lingua franca.

In light of these developments, the article asked if the use of English in Icelandic businesses posed a threat to the Icelandic language and/or the image of the Icelandic culture. The answer to that question depends on how the boundaries of language and culture are defined. If one shares the view of those who are loyal supporters of the nationalist doctrine, the answer is definitely yes. For those with a more relaxed attitude towards either language change and/or English loan words as opposed to coined words, the answer is less definite and might even be in the negative. However, contrary to the fear expressed by many of the loyal supporters, who at times speak as if the use of English as an official language has become standard practice across the board in Icelandic businesses, this article shows that notion to be unfounded. This practice is and has been strictly confined to businesses operating on an international level. The exception is the use of English as a lingua franca in workplaces where non-Icelandic speaking immigrants or foreign workers have been numerous. In these cases no official policy on English as a working language has been stated. This practice has, however, not stirred up equally heated debates or antagonism as the former case. Asking why the responses towards the official application of English as a working language on the one hand and the unofficial application on the other

are harsh and mild respectively can only be answered with speculations. One might hypothesize that the relatively mild response to the latter is due to the sensitivity of immigration and the often connected volatile issues of xenophobia and prejudice.

The article also asked if there was a conflict of interest between the Icelandic business sector involved and the “gatekeepers” of culture and language and, if so, whose power is then at stake? The article shows clearly that there is a tug of war, a conflict of power between those on the one hand who regard it to be their sacred duty to protect the boundaries of the Icelandic language and, on the other hand, those who are of a different opinion and do not consider this kind of protection to be vital for the future of Icelandic identity or culture, nor for the image of the country. For the defenders of the nationalist agenda, their passionate protectionism is a reflection of the aspect of linguistic nationalism as secular religion in Iceland. Another and related explanation lies in power or conflict of power. In the spirit of critical theory, we can say that the gatekeepers of language and culture in Iceland are threatened because the cultural hegemony their power rests on is threatened. It is threatened as the linguistic territories of Icelandic within the borders of Icelandic culture are now unclear or blurred as opposed to being clear-cut (whether that clarity ever existed except as an ideal is another matter). And this brings us back to the affirmation stated at the beginning, concerning the discourse on language being only superficially about linguistic border control and cultural gate-keeping, but in essence a manifestation of culture as a locus of struggle where conflicting interests collide. This, in turn, raises questions about what powers come into play in the ongoing process of the reproduction of culture: national culture and identity and the image of a country over time. We may conclude this discussion by referring to Bourdieu’s notion on symbolic power as it relates to language. He has argued that words as such, or linguistic utterances, have no power, but rather “the power of language comes from outside”; i.e., it is the social position of the speaker and his or her occupation or status that gives the linguistic utterances authority.<sup>66</sup> This power presupposes the acceptance or recognition of those who are subjected to this power. Bourdieu has also noted that “the language of authority never governs without the collaboration of those it governs.” The language of authority resides “in the social conditions of

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<sup>66</sup> Bourdieu 1991: 109.

production and reproduction of the distribution between the classes of the knowledge and recognition of the legitimate language.”<sup>67</sup> The gatekeepers of Icelandic language and culture have not exercised their power through physical force, but their power is transmuted into symbolic form and thereby given the legitimacy it would otherwise not have. The practice of symbolic power, or more precisely, the condition for its success, rests on the acceptance and the belief of its legitimacy by those who are subjected to it. In the case of the border control of language in Iceland, it seems as if belief in that legitimacy is cracking.

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<sup>67</sup> Bourdieu 1991: 113.



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# The Gender-Equal North: Icelandic Images of Femininity and Masculinity

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**Abstract** – This article explores the somewhat imaginary notion of the gender-equal North that signifies a crucial element of national identity in the Nordic countries. Attributes of this are various attempts to export the Nordic gender equality model. One of its trademarks is the notion of the “decent” Nordic man or the caring father, but a negative spin-off is the growing division between “us—the Nordic” and “gender-unequal immigrants.” I then focus on Iceland, where I propose a three-phase timescale based on prevalent but often contradictory gender images and correlated discourses on equality from the 1970s to the present. I name the period from 1970 to 1999 “a women’s/feminist era,” during which Iceland made some noteworthy contributions in terms of women’s empowerment that attracted international attention. I label the era from 2000 to October 2008 “the era of masculinities.” Its defining features are two conflicting images of masculinity: the caring father and the risk-taking “Business Viking.” As for the period from post-October 2008 and the economic crash to the present, it is tricky to pick a defining label. In terms of visible gender images, it is nevertheless tempting to pinpoint the nation’s most prominent figure, i.e., Iceland’s prime minister, a lesbian woman in her sixties, so maybe this could be termed an “intersectional era.”

**Keywords** – Nordic gender equality, Icelandic gender images

Various scholars have maintained that a general consensus about the value of “gender equality” constitutes a crucial element of national identity in the Nordic countries.<sup>1</sup> It has even been suggested that there is an unofficial competition going on regarding which of the Nordic countries is the most gender equal, although there is no agreement on what exactly gender equality means or how it should be put into practice.<sup>2</sup> This conflicting image construction, where gender images and their role in society are put into the forefront, is an interesting aspect to examine within this research project about

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<sup>1</sup> Tuori, 2007: 21; Holli, Magnusson, & Rönnblom 2005: 148.

<sup>2</sup> Rönnblom 2005: 247.

Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, “The Gender-Equal North: Icelandic Images of Femininity and Masculinity,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson with the collaboration of Daniel Chartier, Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, “Droit au Pôle” series, and Reykjavík: ReykjavíkurAkademían, 2011.

images of the North; North in my study refers to the Nordic countries. Central questions are: what characterizes the so-called Nordic gender equality, which is looked upon as some kind of role model in other parts of the world, and how does Iceland fit into that picture? And what, if any, are the negative side effects of upholding and exporting an uncritical image of the gender-equal North? A central idea to look at within this framework is the notion of the “decent” Nordic man or the caring father, which now stands as a unifying symbol for gender equality in all the Nordic countries but has, to some extent, replaced deep-rooted images of strong and independent Nordic women as prime tokens of Nordic gender equality; it signaled a shift in equality work from a strict focus on women’s rights to also emphasizing the rights of men, and men as valid subjects of equality work.<sup>3</sup>

In the second half I will look at Iceland with a sharper focus on actual gender images and examine to what extent they both shape and are shaped by Nordic gender equality discourses. I will propose a three-pronged division in Icelandic contemporary history, based on prevailing gender images and correlated discourses on equality. Hence, I have labelled the era from 1970 to 1999 a “women’s” or “feminist era,” while I have termed the period from 2000 to October 2008 “an era of masculinities,” or to use the phrasing of the *Times*, “the age of testosterone.”<sup>4</sup> As for the period from post-October 2008 and the economic crash to the present, it is tricky to select a well-defined label. Salient themes in the general discussion, however, have been to blame men and excessive risk-taking masculinities for the collapse while highlighting women’s roles in the cleanup process and societal restoration. A vital example is the fact that the nation’s most prominent figure, i.e., Iceland’s prime minister, is now a lesbian woman in her sixties. Therefore, it is tempting to speculate whether the present era could be labelled as intersectional.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is safe to say that the focus in equality work has shifted again, this time from gender equality to broader notions of diversity, multiple discrimination, or human rights. Those changes are the subject of my PhD research, but they will not be discussed further here.

<sup>4</sup> Boyes 2009.

<sup>5</sup> The term *intersectionality* originates from feminist theories of how various social categories like race, ethnicity, nationality, class, disability, gender, age, sexuality, and correlated systems of oppression intersect and intra-act and mutually construct one another.



“The Nordic Countries—A Paradise for Women?”

The Nordic welfare state has been a crucial component in the construction of the image of the gender-equal north. Hence, in the 1980s the Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes introduced the concept “women-friendly welfare states” in her analysis of Scandinavian countries and made the claim that “Nordic democracies embodied a form of state that made it possible to transform them into ‘women-friendly societies.’ ”<sup>6</sup> In 1994 the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council published an anthology entitled *The Nordic Countries—A Paradise for Women?* The book was published in three languages, and the English version was made available at the UN Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995. The title was meant to be somewhat ironic, as underscored by the question mark at the end.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the message it contained cannot be disregarded, particularly if we consider the publishers of the book and the time and place of its distribution. Accordingly, “a ‘passion for equality’ is often pointed out as a special marker of Nordic societies.”<sup>8</sup> Nordic feminists have repeatedly been asked by their colleagues to evaluate if their countries are in fact the paradise for women they claim to be and whether there is indeed such a thing as a Nordic feminism.<sup>9</sup>

Needless to say, Nordic governments have been eager to promote such positive representations, and for decades the Nordic Council of Ministers has projected the image of “world leadership in gender equality.”<sup>10</sup> It is important, though, to note that the Nordic boast of gender equality is not unique in the world. In a 2009 publication on gender equality, Québec’s authorities proudly declared that they were “often cited as an example of equal opportunity for both sexes on the world stage” and as a follow-up modestly asked whether “Québec really is the Mecca of gender equality others believe it to be.”<sup>11</sup> As for the Nordic countries, it has been suggested that there is an ongoing

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<sup>6</sup> Hernes 1987: 15.

<sup>7</sup> Fougner & Larsen-Asp 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Holli, Magnusson, & Rönnblom 2005: 148.

<sup>9</sup> Haavind & Magnusson 2005: 227; Fehr, Jónasdóttir, & Rosenbeck 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Magnusson, Rönnblom, & Silius 2008: 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Equal in Every Way* 2009: 57.

competition vis-à-vis which of the Nordic nations is “the most gender equal country in the world,” where the competing teams are primarily Finland, Norway and Sweden, closely followed by Denmark and Iceland.<sup>12</sup> The most recent forum for such a competition is the Global Gender Gap Index, which was introduced in 2006 by the World Economic Forum. It

benchmarks national gender gaps on economic, political, education and health based criteria, and provides country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions [...] and over time.<sup>13</sup>

Not surprisingly, three of the Nordic countries have topped the Global Gender Gap Index. Sweden was in the lead in 2006–2007, followed by Norway in 2008. Astonishingly, Iceland took a big leap in 2009 and again in 2010 and claimed the top spot, though it had been in fourth place in the previous indices. Finland, however, has either been in second or third place, while Denmark has tagged along as country number seven or eight on the list.<sup>14</sup>

Historically, Sweden has gone farthest in terms of declaring itself “the gender equality champion internationally.”<sup>15</sup> In the mid-1970s equality between men and women, or *jämställdhet*, became a policy area of its own and “reflects a long history of equality as the key moral principle for Sweden” and now stands as “an allegory of Swedish modernity.”<sup>16</sup> A breakthrough moment in that respect was the declaration of Sweden as the most gender-equal state at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. More importantly, in terms of long-term effects, was the admission of Sweden, together with Finland, to the EU in 1995. The Nordic delegations were particularly committed to pursuing gender equality measures and incorporating the notion of “gender mainstreaming” in EU documents because “the female populations of the Nordic countries were fearful that EU membership would entail the lowering of their

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<sup>12</sup> Rönnblom 2005: 247.

<sup>13</sup> *The Global Gender Gap Report* 2009: 3.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Global Gender Gap Report* 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Towns 2002: 157.

<sup>16</sup> Dahl 2004: 52.

existing gender equality standards.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, from the onset, gender equality has been presented as a priority policy area for Swedish work within the EU.<sup>18</sup>

A salient theme in Nordic equality discourse is the notion of gender equality as a win-win situation that will benefit all, women and men alike. From the onset most gender equal legislations in the Nordic countries have been couched in gender-neutral terms, although the underlying goals are usually to improve the status of women.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, official Nordic gender equality politics have generally “privileged harmonious and consensual ways of conceptualizing gender equality issues.”<sup>20</sup> Popular representation of this is the travel metaphor and “the cherished image of ‘the road towards’ gender equality,” which is presented as a linear process where the ultimate goal, “the gender-equal democracy,” is just around the corner. Closely connected are utility-based arguments that outline why gender equality is so important to “achieve.” Utility-oriented models, which are not uniquely Nordic, highlight the social and economic benefits of equal participation of women and men, and the many ways women will enrich the public sphere. In other words, “gender equality is transformed from a basic right to a supplementary good”<sup>21</sup> and “the object of equality policies” is to facilitate “greater economic competitiveness and productivity rather than social justice per se.”<sup>22</sup>

Another prevalent theme is the argument that gender equality is something that is already in place, as something inherently Nordic, and therefore barely political. Hence:

“Gender equality” as it is represented [...] seems to be synonymous with a certain “gender order”, typical of Finland and other Nordic countries. Equality is therefore less about

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<sup>17</sup> Squires 2007: 46.

<sup>18</sup> Towns 2002: 162–163.

<sup>19</sup> Hernes 1987: 16; Flóvenz 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Haavind & Magnusson 2005: 232.

<sup>21</sup> Skjeie & Teigen 2005: 187–188.

<sup>22</sup> Squires 2008: 58.

politics or anything that “should be done”. Rather, it is a claim about something “we are”.<sup>23</sup>

Such harmonious discourses conceal the fact that there might be “conflicts of interest, either between women and men ‘in general’ or between women and men in different sectors of society.”<sup>24</sup> This construction of gender equality goes hand in hand with the neo-liberal notion of politics as commodities, not as conflicts of interests and/or groups.<sup>25</sup> In short, such views ignore the power issues at stake and the fact that equality might not always be an unlimited resource; to give a concrete example, the claim for more women MPs inevitably means that some men will have to give up their seats.

### “We—the Nordic” and the “Gender-Unequal Immigrants”

Paradoxically, the notion of the gender-equal North, which has helped to produce a unifying Nordic identity, has simultaneously created divisions within states. Hence, gender equality is increasingly being used as a marker to create divisions and draw lines between “us”—“the-gender-equal-of-Nordic-ethnic-decent”—and “others”—“the-gender-unequal-immigrants.”<sup>26</sup> Ann Towns demonstrated that for the gender-equal state of Sweden in the 1990s, “gender equality became a salient terrain of differentiation” that contributed to the creation of a “hierarchical categorization of the population of Sweden into ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants.’”<sup>27</sup> Along the same line, feminist/post-colonialist scholars have voiced a strong critique of the Swedish gender equality model as it “neglects the discrimination against, and marginalization of immigrant women.” Further, they have criticized “feminist scholarship for ignoring the diversity of women and the intersection of gender and ethnicity.”<sup>28</sup>

As for the situation in Finland, Salla Tuori analyzed

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<sup>23</sup> Tuori 2007: 30.

<sup>24</sup> Haavind & Magnusson 2005: 232.

<sup>25</sup> Rönnblom 2005: 247–248.

<sup>26</sup> Tuori 2007; Towns 2002; Haavind & Magnusson 2005: 32

<sup>27</sup> Towns 2002: 157–158.

<sup>28</sup> Borchorst & Siim 2008: 219, citing de los Reyes et al. 2003.

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how gender equality—as an ideology and as a set of practices—is deeply embedded in the production of otherness in the Finnish context. [...] [since] “advanced gender equality” is often described as something inherently *Finnish* [...] [which] is seen to stem (at least partly) from the Finnish history, the agrarian and economically poor past when women and men were working side by side.<sup>29</sup>

Multiculturalism, on the other hand, is “understood as an element that comes outside of Finnish society”<sup>30</sup> and hence constitutes a threat to the social order. Through equality training, “migrant women” (and some migrant men) are taught “to unlearn the supposedly more patriarchal gender order in which they live” and become “more like us”—more gender equal.<sup>31</sup>

Although little research has been done on the matter of gender equality versus immigration in Iceland, I confidently state that the dividing lines between “us” and “them” are not constructed around questions of gender equal/unequal identities. The main explanation for that is not the tolerant nature of Icelanders, but the makeup of the immigrant population. On 1 January 2009 the vast majority, or about 85%, of immigrants in Iceland originated from other European countries; of these, 46% came from Poland, where Catholicism is the main religion. The second-largest portion of immigrants came from countries in Asia, in particular the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, Iceland has only a small Muslim population, in contrast to the Scandinavian countries, where Muslims mostly embody the image of the unequal immigrant. Still, it should be noted that negative gendered stereotypes concerning immigrants have a strong hold in Icelandic society. Examples of this, on the feminine side, are images of Asian women as victimized and oppressed mail-order brides or prostitutes,<sup>33</sup> while the most popular masculine stereotype is that of the foreign (mostly eastern European) criminal and rapist.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Tuori 2007: 22.

<sup>30</sup> Tuori 2007: 22.

<sup>31</sup> Tuori 2007: 32.

<sup>32</sup> Þórarinsdóttir et al. 2009: 23.

<sup>33</sup> Svavarsdóttir 2000: 77–83.

<sup>34</sup> On this see for example Tryggvadóttir 2006 and Stefánsdóttir 2007.

## Gender Equality as a Nordic Commodity and an Export Model

An important element linked to the image construction of the gender-equal North is the commitment to educate other nations and export the successful Nordic equality model. Such a mentality regards gender equality as a field of expertise, or a commodity, that could and should indeed be exported. Hence, in Finland

gender equality is [...] a field in which “we” as a nation are in the forefront, and it is seen as an export commodity, something to deliver to other parts of the world, including other parts of European countries.<sup>35</sup>

A more daring example of the same attitude can be seen in the following quotation from the Swedish government:

We in Sweden have come a long way in an international perspective, yes furthest in the world. We like to share our experiences; we gladly export our Swedish model of gender equality. But our first place must not let us believe that we have finished, there is a lot of work yet to be done in several areas.<sup>36</sup>

A more modest demonstration of this line of thought was outlined in a sub-headline of an annual report of the Nordic Council in 2006, which stated: “Equality in the Nordic countries—a role model for other nations.”<sup>37</sup> In the same report it was stated that equality matters and environmental issues should be the main concerns of the Nordic Council and in terms of the former, two priorities were highlighted. The first is the very Nordic vision that it should be possible for fathers to attend to their children and families, and the second is an ambitious goal of implementing an action plan to fight against trafficking and sexual slavery, which perhaps constitute the most serious threat to the otherwise positive image of the gender-equal

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<sup>35</sup> Tuori 2007: 22.

<sup>36</sup> See Rönnblom 2005: 247.

<sup>37</sup> *Ár endurnýjunar* [A Year of Renewal] 2006: 13.

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North, although the problem is far from being uniquely Nordic or restricted to the Nordic countries.<sup>38</sup>

Iceland has only recently jumped on the bandwagon of presenting gender equality as an exportable knowledge-based commodity. A turning point in that respect was in 2007, “when gender equality became the third pillar of Iceland’s international development cooperation.”<sup>39</sup> These new emphases were put forward by Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, the minister for foreign affairs in 2007–2008, and she repeatedly highlighted gender equality and women’s empowerment worldwide as something that Icelanders should put on the agenda in international relations. She illustrated her case in a speech at the University of Reykjavík on 24 October 2007 where she discussed the role of Iceland in the international community. There she highlighted three areas where Icelanders were in the lead and had something to contribute to the wider world. The first was the control and the use of fishing grounds; the second was the utilization of sustainable resources; in particular in the field of geothermal energy; and third she mentioned

the empowerment and the use of women’s energy in Icelandic society, the high employment rate of Icelandic women over the decades, is very special; we have an important story to tell regarding equality matters, which among others covers the election of the first democratically elected female president in the world, and an interesting history of women’s political parties. In this area, as with the other two, we have an honour to keep.<sup>40</sup>

But actions speak louder than words. A breakthrough in terms of Iceland’s interest in gender equality and women’s rights internationally was the establishment of the Gender Equality Training Program (GET Programme), which is “a cooperation project between the University of Iceland and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, as part of the government’s development cooperation efforts.” It builds on the experiences of other United Nations University programs already in place in Iceland, and a three-year pilot phase was launched in

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<sup>38</sup> *Ár endurnýjunar* [A Year of Renewal] 2006: 10.

<sup>39</sup> GET Programme 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Gísladóttir 2007 (my translation).

December 2008; the first fellows arrived in the autumn of 2009. The main target group is professionals working for government and civil organizations in developing countries and post-conflict societies undergoing reconstruction.<sup>41</sup> So, while Sweden and Finland have mostly geared their gender equality efforts towards other EU nations, Iceland appears to be mainly aiming towards developing and/or post-conflict countries outside of the EU, which perhaps have further to go in terms of achieving women's empowerment and gender equality. Hardly any critical discussion, however, has taken place among feminist scholars and gender equality specialists as to whether the Icelandic equality model of relatively high fertility rates and high workforce participation of both women and men, coupled with fairly low numbers of women in power positions—i.e., in the parliament, in local governments, and in the business sector—is really worth exporting.

### The “Decent” Man—A Token of the Gender-Equal North

A vital component in the Nordic gender equality recipe is the emphasis on the alleged balance between work and family life. Resulting policies relate to fairly long paid parental leave and state-subsidized child care, which have enabled women's full participation in the labour market and men's active involvement in caring for children and families. Indeed, one of the trademarks of Nordic gender equality is the involvement of men in gender equality discourses and the image of the “decent” Nordic man. This construction has to some extent replaced “age-old ideas about Icelandic [Nordic] women's strength and liberty,”<sup>42</sup> which can be traced back to origin stories about the Viking times, where “women's strength and innovation [was] explained by legacies of generations of hard working farmers' wives [...] left alone for long periods of time while men were travelling,”<sup>43</sup> or more recent Icelandic tales of “women in fishing communities of the North Atlantic” whose independence and strength was seen to derive from their participation in production and

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<sup>41</sup> GET Programme 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Björnsdóttir 1996: 107.

<sup>43</sup> Dahl 2004: 107.



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the fact that they took care of the household while their husbands were away fishing.<sup>44</sup>

In 1995 the Nordic Council of Ministers launched the first Nordic conference on men and gender equality. The event attracted about 500 people, 75% of whom were men, and they discussed diverse themes, such as men and family life, men's role as fathers, men and sexuality, and men and violence.<sup>45</sup> As a follow-up, the Nordic Council of Ministers issued a press release where they emphasized that the role of men in equality work should be placed on the agenda of the UN's women's commission, which was to be held in Beijing later that year.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, a plan of action on men and gender equality was included in the Nordic cooperation equality program for 1995–2000,<sup>47</sup> and the Nordic Council of Ministers selected “men and gender equality” as one of three main targets areas for Nordic cooperation on gender equality for the period 2001–2005.<sup>48</sup> At the EU level the Finnish EU presidency highlighted the important role of men in promoting gender equality by organizing a conference on Men and Gender Equality, which took place in Helsinki in 2006.<sup>49</sup> The spotlight was again put on men at a UN women's conference that took place in New York in March 2009, where the Nordic Council of Ministers hosted a one-day seminar entitled “The Caring Role of Men in Light of Equality Perspectives.”<sup>50</sup> On that occasion, Norway's equality minister, Anniken Huitfeldt, emphasized that “equality is a project for both genders” and pointed out that “positive progress has been made on male roles and men's participation in the struggle for equality in recent years,” despite the fact that “gender equality has long been associated with women and their struggle for financial independence, equal pay and freedom from repression and violence.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Skaptadóttir 1996: 91.

<sup>45</sup> Dammert 1995: 12.

<sup>46</sup> Dammert 1995: 122–123.

<sup>47</sup> *Men and Gender Equality* 1998.

<sup>48</sup> “Nordisk likestillingssamarbeide 2001–2005” 2001.

<sup>49</sup> Varanka, J., Närhinen, A., & Siukola, R., eds., 2006: 11.

<sup>50</sup> “Widespread Interest in Nordic Gender Equality at the UN,” 2009.

<sup>51</sup> “Nordic Call for Gender Equality at the UN,” 2009.

A crucial ingredient of contemporary “Nordic” masculinity is the notion of the involved and caring father, which has systematically been promoted by various policies, most importantly generous parental leaves and implementation of some form of “daddy’s quota” in all of the Nordic countries.<sup>52</sup> In terms of earmarked “fathers’ quotas,” Iceland took the lead with the *Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave* no. 95/2000, which came into effect in three stages from 2001 to 2003. It grants fathers, as well as mothers, a three-month independent right to maternity/paternity leave that is not transferable. Furthermore, parents have a joint entitlement to three additional months, which they can divide between themselves as desired. The official goal of the act is twofold: “to ensure children’s access to both their fathers and mothers [...] [and] to enable both women and men to co-ordinate family life and work outside the home.”<sup>53</sup> Another, and more subtle, objective was that the parental leave laws would contribute to ending discrimination within the labour market and close the gender pay gap by distributing the “cost” of childbirth more evenly between women and men.<sup>54</sup>

Although expectations concerning equality within the labour market and closure of the gender pay gap have not been realized, the implementation of the laws have nevertheless been a success. Since it came into full effect in 2003, about 88% of fathers have taken advantage of their right to three months’ paternal leave.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it has been estimated, based on available statistics from the Social Insurance Administration from 2001 to 2006, that by the end of 2008 about 37,000 fathers had utilized their right to paternity leave.<sup>56</sup> So nowadays new fathers are supposed to want to take time off to care for their newborns, or as an Icelandic man put it, “now you are regarded as weird if you don’t use the paternity leave.”<sup>57</sup> An unfortunate result of this was that in 2004 the Childbirth Leave Fund

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<sup>52</sup> Valdimarsdóttir 2006: 17–32.

<sup>53</sup> *Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave* no. 95/2000.

<sup>54</sup> Valdimarsdóttir 2006: 9.

<sup>55</sup> Eydal & Gíslason 2008: 38.

<sup>56</sup> Stephensen 2009. It is important to note that 37,000 does not refer to the number of individuals but to the number of paternal leaves that have been utilized. Numerous men have had more than one child during the period in question and thus have been on paternity leave more than once.

<sup>57</sup> Gíslason 2008: 104.

came close to bankruptcy, as more men with higher salaries were taking paternal leave than anyone had predicted. To secure the fund's financial viability an indexed ceiling was placed on the payments, so the amount paid during parental leave could not exceed a fixed maximum.<sup>58</sup>

It goes without saying that such drastic changes in men's behaviour and organization of daily life have enhanced changes in attitudes. Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir's research on the division of domestic labour and childcare between mothers and fathers demonstrated how both men and women use "the aura of gender equality" as a filter through which they verbalized their share of household tasks and childcare. Both were eager to believe that they were doing their fair share even if in reality a different picture emerged.<sup>59</sup> Yet Ingólfur Gíslason has pointed out that in spite of the strong entry of fathers, "the ideal of the good mother" still has a strong resonance in Icelandic culture. Consequently, "mothers who 'allow' the father to use a part of a sharable period or all of it [the extra three months' parental leave] are [...] often stigmatized."<sup>60</sup>

To conclude on a critical note, fathers have surely been incorporated into the role of parenting, but mothers are still seen as the main caregivers, hence, as parent number one. Furthermore, representatives from women's movements have pointed out that the paternal leave law is the most expensive equality act that has ever been undertaken in Iceland.<sup>61</sup> So instead of viewing it only as a success story, it can also be regarded as an indication of a shift in equality work, namely a shift from focusing primarily on women's rights to the rights of men, children, and families. But this move ties to a more sweeping transformation from the feminine to the masculine in Icelandic equality/gendered discourses, which will be the subject matter of the second half of the article.

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<sup>58</sup> Eydal & Gíslason 2008: 35.

<sup>59</sup> Pétursdóttir 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Gíslason 2008: 96–97.

<sup>61</sup> Here I am referring to open interviews with representatives from women's movements that I conducted for my doctoral dissertation in 2007 and 2008.

## Gendered Iceland. A Historical Overview in Three Parts

In this section I will narrow my focus and concentrate on the relation between equality discourses and dominant gender images in Icelandic society, examining how they fit into the larger Nordic picture portrayed above. I will propose a new three-stage division in Icelandic contemporary history, based on prevalent but often contradictory images of masculinity and femininity from the 1970s to the present; special attention will be paid to the impact of feminist movements. To start the discussion, I present three snapshots, one for each era, which portray a feminist demonstration, a national celebration, and a protest rally, all of which somehow captured the essence of the gendered imagination at the time. Of course, such periodic divisions are bound to be flawed as subjective phenomena like images and mentalities rarely match up to strict timelines. The periods that I propose thus have blurred boundaries and constant overlaps.

### *The women's/feminist era—1970–1999*

#### Snapshot 1—24 October 1975

Women's Day Off: About 25,000 women gathered in the centre of Reykjavík to protest and demonstrate the significance of their work contribution in society. That day about 90% of the female population in Iceland refused to work, cook, or look after children and as a result Icelandic society was brought to a standstill. So, in workplaces male bosses and other male employees had to step in and do traditional women's tasks, such as being cashiers, answering phone calls, or serving food. In addition, many husbands and boyfriends had to bring their children to work, or else stay home to take care of them.<sup>62</sup>

I maintain that in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, discourses on gender equality were all about women's rights; consequently, feminist debates often played a central role in the everyday discourse, and Iceland made some noteworthy contributions in terms of women's

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<sup>62</sup> For more on the Women's Day Off see for example Ástgeirsdóttir 2006: 22, Rudolfsdóttir 2005.

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empowerment that attracted international attention. Hence, I label the period from 1970 to 1999 “a women’s/feminist era.” What characterized the era was the presence of strong and visible feminist movements, first the Red Stockings in the 1970s and then the Women’s Alliances in the 1980s and 1990s. By combining the two I part from Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir, who had earlier distinguished between “women’s liberation” of the 1970s and “new women’s slate” of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>63</sup>

What marked the dawn of the feminist era was a demonstration on 1 May 1970 when the Red Stockings appeared for the first time in public, marching in the Labour Day parade carrying a huge female statue with a ribbon that stated: “A human being, not a commodity.” The Red Stockings were a radical, feminist movement and their main requests were to be seen and treated as equal to men. They demanded equal pay and to enter work fields that had traditionally been monopolized by men, under the slogan that women could do anything that men could do.<sup>64</sup> They fought strongly against all kinds of stereotyping of women, and one of their main targets was beauty contests where women were put on stage and judged like cows. Another central issue was the right over one’s body, and women’s right to abortion was maybe the most inflammatory and controversial topic at the time. The feminist line of reasoning succeeded, however, and abortion was legalized in Iceland in 1975, the International Year of Women. Another big triumph for the Red Stockings and for Icelandic women in general was the aforementioned Women’s Day Off in 1975. When the United Nations proclaimed 1975 an International Women’s Year, Icelandic women’s organizations decided to draw attention to the ongoing struggle for women’s rights and their enormous contribution in terms of daily work. Representatives from the Red Stockings came up with the radical suggestion that women should go on strike for a day, and the idea was agreed upon after the word “strike” had been replaced with a more conservative notion of “a day off.”<sup>65</sup> Hence, 24 October was declared “a women’s day off.” This feminist action was the largest rally that Iceland had ever seen, and it created a new awareness about the status

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<sup>63</sup> Kristmundsdóttir 1997.

<sup>64</sup> Kristmundsdóttir 1997: 145–151.

<sup>65</sup> Rudolfsdóttir 2005.

of women in society; subsequently, the parliament issued the first Equal Status Act in 1976.

The next breakthrough in terms of women's status was the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, a single woman and a mother, as the president of Iceland in 1980, the first woman in the world to be elected as a president in a democratic election. Finnbogadóttir did not run the election under the banner of feminism, but nevertheless, having a woman as a president for sixteen years had a huge impact on the self-image of Icelandic women and girls.<sup>66</sup> A generation of young Icelanders grew up believing that presidency was a "woman's job" and, in the spirit of the Red Stockings, it was the ultimate proof that Icelandic women could take on any kind of work.

It is important to note that in terms of political representation, Icelandic women were still scoring extremely low. Hence, prior to 1983, women had never exceeded the 5% limit as members of parliament, compared to 26–34% in the other Nordic countries.<sup>67</sup> So from 1971 to 1983 only three out of sixty MPs were women.<sup>68</sup> What characterized the 1970s more generally was a drastic increase in the number of women who worked outside the home, so the Red Stockings' quest for the right to work had turned into an obligation. Women were, nevertheless, still largely responsible for doing the housework, which for most women meant that they were working a double shift. The establishment of the Women's Alliance in 1982 was to a large extent a response to these new situations.<sup>69</sup> They first ran for parliamentary election in 1983 and gained three seats; in addition, six women were elected from the other political parties, so the number of women MPs rose from three to nine, or 15%.<sup>70</sup> The party ran again for elections in 1987, 1991, and 1995, but their biggest victory was in 1987 when they got six women elected, or 10% of the votes.<sup>71</sup> Their influences extended far beyond their actual political size, however, and the fact that they existed forced the other political parties to bring more women into politics. The Women's Alliance

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<sup>66</sup> *Gender Equality in Iceland* 1995: 25.

<sup>67</sup> Ástgeirsdóttir 2006: 31.

<sup>68</sup> Jónsdóttir 2007: 206.

<sup>69</sup> Kristmundsdóttir 1997: 156.

<sup>70</sup> *Gender Equality in Iceland* 1995: 26.

<sup>71</sup> Jónsdóttir 2007: 192.

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stressed the differences between the sexes, and their campaign was a massive celebration of femininity and motherhood.

During the 1980s attention was also brought to issues of violence against women. Grassroots movements were established around issues like a shelter for battered women, a crisis centre for victims of incest, and a rape ward at the general hospital. These movements worked alongside women politicians so the unspeakable things of the private world were brought into the open, and discussed in public places, including parliament. To summarize, the Women's Alliance was formally abandoned in 1998, when its members joined two other leftist parties that were being formed, i.e., *Samfylking*, or the Social Democratic Alliance, and *Vinstri græn*, or the Left Green.<sup>72</sup>

In spite of the various achievements in terms of women's rights or gender equality listed above, another and somewhat more contradictory female figure came to the fore during the feminist era of the 1980s and 1990s, namely the image of the Icelandic beauty queen. In spite of the Red Stockings' protests against beauty pageants in the 1970s, the phenomenon reached new heights in the 1980s. The nation's success hit its highest point in 1985 and 1988 when two Icelandic women won the Miss World title. Needless to say, that inspired a great national pride, and the term "beauty ambassador" was invented to describe the important role that these young women played when they travelled the world as the holders of the Miss World title. Furthermore, the cliché that Icelandic women were the most beautiful women in the world now became an everyday phrase that was used to promote the country at home and abroad.<sup>73</sup> I have argued elsewhere<sup>74</sup> that in the 1980s and 1990s the Icelandic beauty queens took over the symbolic space previously occupied by the 19th-century Mountain Woman<sup>75</sup> as a central nationalistic trope, embodying the

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<sup>72</sup> An anonymous Icelandic referee pointed out that the establishment and success of the Icelandic women's slate, which often is regarded as a sign of strength of Icelandic women and as a symbol of the equalitarian nature of Icelandic society, could also be interpreted as a surrender or a sign of anger towards the political parties, which had systematically kept women out of official politics and the parliament. For me that is an important insight, worth holding on to.

<sup>73</sup> Þorvaldsdóttir 1998: 18–19.

<sup>74</sup> Þorvaldsdóttir 2001: 496.

<sup>75</sup> The image of the Icelandic "Mountain Woman" that was created in the 19th century serves as a central national symbol. The Mountain Woman embodied the image of

best of both the nation and the country. Hence, oddly enough, during the feminist era, a female president, women politicians, and “beauty ambassadors” all stood side by side as representatives of the nation, each highlighting different but celebrated aspects of Icelandicness and femininity.

*The era of masculinities or “the age of testosterone”—2000–2008*

Snapshot 2—27 August 2008

The homecoming of the Icelandic “silver boys”: Around 40,000 people gathered in the heart of Reykjavík to celebrate the return of the Icelandic men’s handball team that won the silver medal in the 2008 Olympics. Looking back, this “National festival for national heroes,”<sup>76</sup> where the athletes appeared on stage together with politicians from all the political parties and with much-loved singers and entertainers, somehow marked the end of an era. This momentum, when nationalized masculinity was manifested, was perhaps the last time that the Icelandic nation could celebrate and sincerely believe that we were the best in the world, as little over a month later the Icelandic economy collapsed and consequently the “Viking nation” lost its self-respect and international trust.

An interesting shift in the nation’s mentality occurred around the year 2000 with the dawn of the new millennium and the celebration of the 1,000th anniversary of Leifur Eiriksson’s voyage to North America. Simultaneously, the Icelandic government launched a new marketing effort to promote Iceland and Icelandic products abroad under the slogan *Iceland Naturally*. Key themes in the marketing campaign were an emphasis on purity and origins. That is, natural purity and purity of origin. As a result, images of Vikings and Viking culture were brought back to life and Iceland witnessed a reinvention of various Viking-related events, sights, and festivals across the country. A striking

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Iceland as a mother and as a beautiful, young, and unspoiled bride. Symbolically the struggle for Iceland’s independence from the Danish monarchy was thus the struggle to set the Mountain Woman free. The Mountain Woman continues to be a central figure in the national celebration on 17 June, as she steps out and delivers a nationalistic poem. She no longer carries the weight of independence but symbolizes a continuum between Icelandic past and present, and by putting her on a pedestal Icelanders express their respect for Icelandic culture, history, and tradition.

<sup>76</sup> “Þjóðhátíð fyrir þjóðhetjur” [A National Festival for National Heroes] 2008.



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feature of the millennium Viking culture was a strong masculine overtone, coupled with a new mantra that was repeated over and over again, namely that Iceland and Icelanders were, or should aim to be, the best in the world. One attribute of this “mentality” was a drastic shift in dominant gender images where the feminine was set aside and the masculine put at the centre. Two highly celebrated but contradictory masculine figures became tokens of the era, that is, the aforementioned image of the caring father, which still has a strong footing in society, and the image of the risk-taking *útrásarvíkingur* or “Business Viking” who hijacked Icelandic society and drove it to ruin in the autumn of 2008.

Interestingly, equating Viking culture and masculinity does not need to be the rule. An example of this comes from Jämtland in northern Sweden, where the feminine side of a “Viking past” was highlighted when stories about “Viking women’s strength, creativity, and innovation” were used to mobilize women’s entrepreneurship and launch an EU-sponsored project called “*Söka Gammalt, Skapa Nytt*.”<sup>77</sup> So there, a return to their Viking heritage resulted in an attempt to empower women by recasting discourses of entrepreneurship as part of Swedish tradition and heritage. “Viking capitalism” à la the Icelanders, however, was a male endeavour.<sup>78</sup> The Icelandic “Business Viking” travelled the world and bought up international companies and estates on a scale that had previously been unimaginable. National leaders adored him and painstakingly praised his accomplishments both at home and abroad. An example of this was a speech given by the president of Iceland, as a part of a lecture series organized by the Icelandic Historians’ Society, at the National Museum of Iceland on 10 January 2006:

The phenomenon of overseas expansion stands as a striking achievement and a promise of a more powerful period of growth and development than we have seen to date, not only in commerce and finance but also in science and the arts: areas where thought and culture, tradition and innovation, are the prerequisites for progress.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Translates as “search the old, create the new,” Dahl 2004: 103–111.

<sup>78</sup> I am indebted to Bergman 2009 for this concept.

<sup>79</sup> Grímsson 2006: 1.

The president then enumerated ten qualities that have contributed to Iceland's success story abroad, most of which are rooted in our culture, our society, and heritage. One of the traits listed was

the heritage [...] the Settlement and the Viking Age, which give us our models, the deep-rooted view that those who venture out into unknown territory deserve our honour, that crossing the sea and settling in a new country brings one admiration and respect.<sup>80</sup>

Consequently, I want to suggest that during the masculine era from 2000 to 2008, the Icelandic “Business Viking,” dressed in a suit, overtook the symbolic space previously occupied by Icelandic beauty queens. In other words, he was the new Mountain Woman, the central nationalistic trope of the new millennium, which embodied the best of the nation and the country.

A more negative by-product that sprang from an atmosphere which glorified hypermasculinity has been termed “the sexualization of the public sphere,”<sup>81</sup> although it was in no way unique for Iceland or the North, but became a characteristic of an era worldwide. In the Icelandic context, women or the feminine became objectified as a selling point, and advertisements like “Miss Iceland Awaits” or “one-night stands”—to quote some infamous Icelandair ads—were examples of this.<sup>82</sup> Another illustration of this “sexualization” was the sudden increase of sex clubs in Iceland, which started around 1995 but reached their peak in 2000, when twelve such clubs were operating in Iceland, mostly in the capital area. For the sake of comparison, in 2000, twelve to thirteen such places were running in Copenhagen, the old metropolis, where the population was much greater.<sup>83</sup>

Yet in spite of the masculine overtone of the era, feminism was far from being dead. On the contrary, the spring of 2003 has been called the feminist spring in Iceland because of the establishment of

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<sup>80</sup> Grímsson 2006: 6–7.

<sup>81</sup> Magnússon 2003: 13–14.

<sup>82</sup> Grétarsdóttir 2002: 391, quoting an Icelandair e-mail to subscribers of Lucky Fares, 29 Jan. 2001, and an Icelandair ad that appeared for a short while in England in 1998.

<sup>83</sup> See Atlason & Guðmundsdóttir 2008.

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the Feminist Association of Iceland, or FAI.<sup>84</sup> The FAI brought feminism back into public discourse, and some of the problems highlighted were: the gender pay gap and ways to close it; the need to increase the number of women in power positions; and violence against women and its treatment by the judicial system. Last but not least, they fought strongly against the overall sexualization of society, prostitution, and trafficking. Astonishingly, that was the battle that was met with the strongest opposition and often outspoken hostility.

It is suitable to end the section on the era of masculinity by examining how images of the caring father and the “Business Viking” interrelated or contradicted one another. Ólafur Þ. Stephensen, a former editor-in-chief at *Morgunblaðið*, Iceland’s biggest newspaper, mixed the two in a speech at the Gender Equality Forum on 16 January 2009: the title of his talk was, “Can Business Vikings Change Diapers?”<sup>85</sup> There he pointed out that since the parental leave came into full effect in 2003, over 85% of fathers have taken advantage of their three months’ leave. He posed the compelling question of whether the infamous “Business Vikings” perhaps counted for the 15% who did not utilize their entitlement, because they were too busy doing their risk-taking and making excessive investments to allow themselves the luxury of taking three months off to care for their offspring. Stephensen asserted that although officially all new parents were entitled to parental leave, regardless of their status within companies, there was “an understanding” that key players in prosperous firms were not expected to go on leave for three months to attend to a newborn.<sup>86</sup> Of course, there were some noteworthy exceptions: one of them was when a bank manager and a leading figure in “the Icelandic expansion” went on paternity leave for three months in 2003. By doing so he presented a dual image, that of a cutting-edge businessman and a family-oriented, caring father, and through the latter he obtained admiration and goodwill from the nation.

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<sup>84</sup> Einarsdóttir 2003.

<sup>85</sup> Stephensen 2009.

<sup>86</sup> Stephensen 2009.

*Post-October 2008 or the economic collapse*

## Snapshot 3—20 January 2009

The Saucepan Revolution: It started at noon on an ordinary Tuesday when MPs returned after Christmas break, and it lasted into the night, when a bonfire was lit, and for several days and nights to come. The Icelandic public had gathered in front of the parliament house to protest the financial meltdown and demand the resignation of the Icelandic government and the National Bank's CEO. The crowd created a cacophony with everything from pots and pans to whistles and musical instruments and, backed up by the beats of drums and kitchen gadgets, people shouted "*vanþaf ríkisstjórn*" or "incompetent government."<sup>87</sup>

The era of masculinities or "the age of testosterone" came to a drastic end in October 2008 with the bankruptcy of three of Iceland's major banks and a subsequent economic collapse. In the immediate aftermath foreign media underlined the active role of Icelandic women in "cleaning up the men's mess" both in terms of business and politics.<sup>88</sup> An indication of this was the establishment of a Facebook group called "Women's Emergency Board" in October 2008. The group was politically active for several months and highly visible in the "saucepan revolution," but it slowly faded away in the spring of 2009 after the administration had resigned and an interim centre-left coalition, lead by Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, a Social Democrat and a lesbian woman in her sixties, had taken over. Sigurðardóttir thereby became Iceland's first female prime minister and the first openly gay prime minister in the world. Interestingly, the fact that she was a lesbian had never been an issue in Iceland, and it would probably have gone unnoticed if it had not been for the attention of the foreign press. As for the alleged "active role of women," it is worth noting that in the parliamentary election that took place on 25 April 2009, where the Social Democratic Alliances and the Left Green gained majority, the number of women MPs

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<sup>87</sup> For more on the Saucepan Revolution, see for example Jonsdottir 2009 and Bergman 2009, along with numerous blogs.

<sup>88</sup> Ertel 2009; see also Sunderland 2009.

reached new heights and rose from 33% to 43%; moreover, for eleven months or from October 2009 to September 2010 the government had an equal number of male and female ministers, all of which contributed to the fact that in the midst of an economic crisis, Iceland claimed the top spot at the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index in 2009.<sup>89</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

The image of the Nordic countries as “the most gender-equal countries in the world” has strong resonance both inside and outside the Nordic region. This collective self-image of a world leadership in gender equality has been actively promoted by authoritative bodies like the Nordic Councils of Ministers,<sup>90</sup> and it has been triggered by indices like the *Global Gender Gap Report*, where the Nordic countries have taken turns being in the lead. Moreover, gender equality has been presented as an export commodity, but such endeavours have taken different forms in different countries. Hence, EU members Sweden, Finland, and Denmark have mostly geared their efforts towards the other EU nations while Iceland's aim is to promote gender equality in developing and post-conflict countries. A negative side effect of the glossy equality image, however, is the fact that gender equality is increasingly being used as a marker to create divisions and draw lines inside nations, i.e., between “us”—“the Nordic”—and “the gender-unequal immigrants,” although such lines vary between countries due to different immigrant populations. A common denominator of Nordic gender equality, however, is the image of the “decent Nordic man” and/or “the caring father” that has been actively promoted by various policies, most importantly generous parental leave policies in all the Nordic countries. In that respect Iceland took the lead in 2003 with a three-month, non-transferable daddy's quota, which for many symbolized Iceland's greatest success in equality work.

As for Icelandic gender images, I proposed a three-layered periodic division based on prevalent but often contradictory images of masculinity and femininity. I labelled the era from 1970 to 1999 a

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<sup>89</sup> “Kynjabilið minnst á Íslandi” [Gender Gap Narrowest in Iceland] 2009.

<sup>90</sup> Magnusson, Rönnblom, & Silius 2008.

women's/feminist era; one of its defining features was the presence of strong and active feminist movements. Some great achievements were made in terms of women's rights at the time, although the notion of being a gender equality champion had not emerged. I termed the era from 2000 to October 2008 "an era of masculinities." During that time, two masculine images played a central role. The former was the image of the caring father, which I maintain still has a strong resonance in how we are as a nation. The second image of the flamboyant "Business Viking," however, collapsed with the economic meltdown along with the Icelandic banking system and the national economy. The current period, which I labelled "the post-economic collapse" or more optimistically "an intersectional era," marked the end of "Viking capitalism." Bold statements were made in the aftermath of the economic collapse worldwide about the end of consumerism, the end of capitalism—or the "end of masculinities." Now two years after the crash, none of those forecasts are likely to come true. In Iceland, some noteworthy achievements have been made in terms of gender equality, though—in particular regarding the political representation of women. To sum up: during the women's/feminist era Iceland became the first country in the world to elect a female president; during the era of masculinity all the national leaders were men in suits. In the era post-October 2008, Iceland hit the world news for breaking records in terms of equality achievement—this time for choosing a lesbian woman in her sixties to be prime minister. Hence, one can speculate whether the economic collapse and the alleged "end of masculinity" will enhance a new approach to equality in line with recent intersectional developments in the other Nordic countries, where emphases on diversity or multiple discrimination have been replacing one-dimensional gender equality policies.

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# Staging the Nation: Performing Icelandic Nationality during the 1986 Reykjavík Summit

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**Abstract** – The 1986 Reykjavík Summit, where U.S. president Ronald Reagan and Soviet general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev held an impromptu meeting to discuss nuclear disarmament, suddenly thrust Iceland, a small marginalized island nation, into the world media spotlight. This article examines the way in which the summit as a global media event became a platform for a tremendous promotional effort where Icelanders, determined to make optimal use of this unique opportunity, performed and staged a variety of national narratives, emphasizing images linked to their heritage, their perceived exoticism, and uniquely Nordic and Northern traits. The article furthermore reviews the opportunistic mode and commercial imperative of the summit as a media event and analyzes a number of the conceptual configurations that the foreign press employed to encapsulate and represent Iceland as a symbolic host country for the peace negotiations of the summit.

**Keywords** – Reykjavík Summit, images of Iceland, nationalism, media representations, geopolitical worldview

Setting the 2008 banking and economic collapse aside as an unexpected negative manifestation of a nation's aspiration towards international media exposure, few moments in Icelandic history have produced such a sudden, unprecedented, and welcome opportunity for national promotion as the Reagan–Gorbachev nuclear arms control summit, which was held on less than two weeks' notice in Reykjavík in the autumn of 1986. While the event proved to be an important steppingstone in the history of Cold War superpower relations, its implications for Icelandic history were of an entirely different order, involving signification associated with national promotion.

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## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

After the announcement of the summit, Iceland was thrown overnight into the centre of the world stage, where the attention of the international media was to remain fixed on the nation and its inhabitants during the summit, as well as the days leading up to it. News organizations from around the world covered the event, with close to 3,000 media personnel arriving in Iceland as the summit approached.<sup>1</sup> In terms of media exposure, global political importance, and complexity of preparation, the summit was unmatched by anything else taking place in Icelandic politics and culture at that time. The problems involved in hosting the event on such short notice were considerable, but the opportunity to present the nation to a world audience presumably curious to know more about the place chosen by the United States and Soviet leaders for their unexpected additional round of discussions also provided unmistakable advantages.

A brief recount of the historical context that preceded the decision to organize a summit in Iceland is called for here. When Gorbachev came to power as general secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union was marked by a deep rift and mutual suspicion. His first meeting with Reagan on arms control in Geneva in November of 1985 turned out to be inconclusive, and Reagan's subsequent threat to withdraw from the SALT II treaty, which placed limits on strategic arsenals, was seen as a provocative gesture by European states. The ensuing geopolitical situation, with the Soviets still in Afghanistan and the two superpowers hardly on speaking terms concerning the nuclear threat, was regarded as having reached an extremely dangerous point.<sup>2</sup> Gorbachev, who had initiated the disarmament talks, saw the growing European anxiety over nuclear arms as an opportunity to mend relations with the continent. He thus began to give talks where he openly spoke of the impossibility of defending against nuclear arms. He insisted that the only security lay in political settlements. Partly due to the success of Gorbachev's publicity push, Reagan agreed to the Reykjavík Summit, while also believing that flaws in their economy rendered Soviet power tenuous and their ambitions less than global. Reagan's tendency to personalize politics, and the fact

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<sup>1</sup> Magnússon 1986: 17.

<sup>2</sup> Graebner, Burns, & Siracusa 2008: 91.

that he found Gorbachev personally likeable, lent a friendly and informal tone to the talks. In Reykjavík, the two leaders came close to an agreement to completely abolish nuclear weapons. That Reagan walked away from such an opportunity, on account of the Soviet demand that Strategic Defence Initiative development (also referred to as the “Star Wars” plan) be confined to laboratories for five more years, has been viewed as one of the great failures of statesmanship in recent decades.<sup>3</sup>

Occurring at time when it can be argued that Icelanders were entering a new phase of self-confidence as a fully modernized participant in a globalized world, economically prosperous and ready to make their mark, the summit event provides an important opportunity to explore the way in which Iceland and Icelandic nationality were staged in the media spotlight. In what follows, I will look closely at what sort of national images were projected and promoted through the event, and how Iceland was situated within the North–South geopolitical framework, as well as an East–West paradigm that had become central in the material as well as cognitive mapping of the world during the Cold War. The 1986 Reykjavík Summit will thus be the focus of this paper, although not in the traditional way of assessing the political significance of the arms control negotiations. Rather, I will explore the media attention directed at the host country of the summit; how its peculiarities and characteristics were highlighted, manipulated, and presented to an international audience; and what all this meant for the international promotion and image construction of Iceland as a nation and Reykjavík as a place.

### The Reykjavík Summit as Media Event

“Reykjavík?—what a surprise!”, “Iceland?”, “Iceland!” were the exclamations that could be heard from all over the room during the White House press meeting called on 30 September 1986 to announce the decision to hold a nuclear arms control summit between Ronald Reagan, the president of the United States, and

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<sup>3</sup> Matlock 2004: 215–251; Graebner, Burns, & Siracusa 2008: 89–113.

Soviet general secretary Michael Gorbachev in Reykjavík, Iceland.<sup>4</sup> While the press likes to think of itself as being rarely caught off guard, this spontaneous outburst of surprise provides a wonderfully unguarded indication of the way in which the unconventional location of the meeting appealed to the media, a fact which subsequently shaped the coverage of the event. The announcement of the Reykjavík Summit was a catch for the media, not only in the primary sense that the leaders of the two world superpowers were to meet unexpectedly, adding an extra round of talks to the already scheduled summits in Washington and Moscow in 1987 and 1988, but also that they were meeting in a highly unusual place, which in its obscurity and remove from the centres of political power countered and even renewed the standard image and protocols of international diplomacy.

During the summit, a system of exchange came into being where the performance of national characteristics went hand in hand with enormous media attention, each seeming to influence and magnify the other. The intensity of the foreign media's gaze, and the enthusiastic national response, can be seen to have blurred the lines between what Joep Leerssen, in his discussion of national images, calls the auto image, namely national self-perception and group identity, and the hetero image, the opinion of others. In order to articulate the dynamics of national identity, performance, media saturation, and geopolitics that proved instrumental in creating the meaning of the summit, and constructing the image of the host country, it is necessary to look more closely at the logics of the media event itself.

The Reykjavík Summit can be explored in general terms as a media event, employing Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's conceptualization of the phenomenon. Dayan and Katz focus on the ceremonial aspects of moments of mass communication, particularly those that are broadcast live. They suggest a three-part model for interpretation where the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of televised media events are examined. The first part of the model, the syntactic aspect, invokes the structural conventions as well as the technical realities of producing coverage of media events. Media events are announced beforehand in a manner that allows the media

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<sup>4</sup> A clip from the White House press meeting is featured, for example, in the programmes *Dagsljós: Leiðtogafundurinn á Höfða* [Dagsljós: Reykjavík Summit at Höfði], RÚV, 1996, and *Leiðtogafundurinn* [Reykjavík Summit], RÚV, 2006.



time for preparation, and its backers time for promotion and publicity, while still keeping the schedule tight enough for the event to occur before excitement starts to wane. The coverage of a media event involves an interplay between the familiar studio setting and the remote site of occurrence, which again involves spatial/technical considerations and frequently highlights the “live”-ness of the broadcast, its immediacy that is then usually presented with considerable reverence and ceremony. The semantic aspect of the media event involves its immanent meaning and the manner in which organizer and media agents frequently arrive at a joint consensus about how the event should be communicated, a meaning which is usually proposed in some fashion by the organizer and then shared by the media (that a royal wedding should be treated, for example, as a “Cinderella story,” or that a presidential election is really about “race”). A media event is thus assumed to have a set of core meanings, which it is the responsibility of the media to communicate in a sufficiently coherent fashion. The third element of their model, the pragmatic part, deals with the various economic and business-related issues that influence decisions about what to cover and the calculations involved in the process of “marketing” media events, as well as the criteria for success and failure.<sup>5</sup>

While the Reykjavík Summit was essentially a step in the ongoing nuclear disarmament process that called for negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was structured in a way which facilitated a full-scale media event. The summit was, for example, set up as a round of one-on-one talks at a specific time and place, fostering a sense of spontaneity and intimacy that ran counter to the fact that most of the decisions made and the things said at the summit were prepared in advance in consultancy with various governmental agencies.<sup>6</sup> In important ways, the summit was an event governed by the laws of political image-play and manipulation on behalf of the organizers, no less than the media. The timing and short notice of the Reykjavík meeting had puzzled political analysts just as much as the location. While a variety of issues influenced Reagan’s acceptance of Gorbachev’s proposal, the decisive factor for Reagan’s immediate political interests lay in the upcoming mid-term congressional

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<sup>5</sup> Dayan & Katz 1994: 25–53.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Gorbachev 2007; Reagan 1991. See also Hollyway 2007; Matlock 2004.

elections for which the Republican Party was fighting to retain key seats. The meeting provided Reagan with an opportunity to focus attention away from domestic problems to the broader, more popular issues of peace and the curbing of international fear of the threat of nuclear war, thus working on the “new Reagan” image of the peacemaker.<sup>7</sup> Gorbachev also seemed quite intent on exploiting the summit for maximum media attention, in spite of advance announcements on both sides that the summit was to be an informal preparatory meeting for Washington. The Soviets surprised the Americans on a number of occasions with bold media statements during the meeting of their intention of achieving significant and unprecedented results in nuclear disarmament.<sup>8</sup> The previously unannounced appearance of the dazzling Raisa Gorbachova in the company of her husband, and her subsequent high-profile public appearances and tours to sites of interest in Iceland—which the *New York Times* referred to as a “public relations coup”—furthermore demonstrated the way in which the Soviets were intent on catching the eye of the world media.<sup>9</sup>

The unexpected scheduling and short, although not too short, notice, as well as the unusual location, were aspects of the summit preparation that can be attributed to the syntactic construction of a media event. Iceland was something of a curiosity and an unwritten page in the international community, and the press welcomed the opportunity of exploring new grounds and having a fresh backdrop for the perennial stalemate in the relations between the two nuclear arms superpowers. One might even argue that these factors revitalized the media attention granted to the arms negotiations and their previously somewhat disheartening pace and tone. In terms of what Dayan and Katz refer to as the pragmatic side of media events, the summit enjoyed undisputed priority in the international media. Most importantly, however, the choice of location appealed to the semantic construction inherent in the media event, which proved a particularly rich site for symbolic connotations and the creation of a core meaning or “concept” for the Reykjavík Summit as the event that broke the ice in the Cold War stalemate.

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<sup>7</sup> Graebner, Burns, & Siracusa 2008: 144.

<sup>8</sup> Magnússon 1986: 43, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Dowd 1986: 12.

The organizers named various practical reasons for choosing Iceland for the summit. Factors such as manageable border control, due to geographic and population factors, and possibilities of securing the meeting and dwelling places of the leaders within the short timeframe given for preparations were factors that made Iceland's capital suitable for the summit.<sup>10</sup> However, the symbolic connotations of the choice of location must not be underestimated. The geographical location and qualities of the Arctic island did not only signal remoteness and natural isolation (and thus protection from intruders), but also, and on a different level, strategic centrality on a world stage marked by the warring military empires in the East and West.<sup>11</sup> In its pre-summit speculation on the choice of Reykjavík as a meeting place, the BBC news program *Panorama* cited Soviet foreign minister Shevardnadze's description of Reykjavík as "small, quiet and favourable for results," in contrast with the meeting in Geneva the year before where the "media circus" surrounding the summit had infuriated the general secretary.<sup>12</sup> The remoteness of Iceland, and the challenges it would face in accommodating between two and three thousand media and press members expected to fly in for such an event, would presumably prevent another full-scale media circus or at least tone down the interference inherent in public exposure.<sup>13</sup> Such explanations, however, are hardly plausible, as the location was unlikely to deter the international media from arriving in Iceland and covering the event, especially given the fact that Iceland's stakes in making arrangements to facilitate a large-scale media event were high. However, statements such as the ones cited above did reflect the overall attitude towards the meeting, as signalled by both leaders, which was that of a small-scale preparation for the more formal Washington summit and an opportunity for the leaders to test the waters and find, as well as express a will for, a common communicative ground before entering into dialogue in Washington where pressures for substantial agreements and treaties on arms reductions would be too high to allow for failure.<sup>14</sup> In this light, the

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<sup>10</sup> Holloway 2007: 80–81; Magnússon 1986: 10–11; Hermannsson 2000: 136.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of how the Cold War worldview marked by the parameters of East vs. West, see for example Arndt 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Bennett et al. (Producers) 1986.

<sup>13</sup> See also Magnússon 1986: 11.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

selection of Iceland as a meeting place can be regarded not only as an attempt to minimize distractions and formalities, but also as a figurative construction and articulation of an image where U.S. and Soviet leaders demonstrated a willingness to counter and reverse the hostile stance of non-communication that had given rise to the deadlock in the nuclear arms race in the past. As such, Iceland was symbolically positioned midway between the United States and the Soviet Union, indicating an openness on behalf of the superpowers to “meet midway,” or as Gorbachev was later reported to have explained to his aids: “It’s a good idea. Halfway between us and them, and none of the great powers will be offended.”<sup>15</sup>



Figure 1. Soviet general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. president Ronald Reagan pose for the camera in front of a scenic window in Höfði House, with the symbol of Reykjavík neatly positioned between them. Photographer: Rax / Ragnar Axelsson. Copyright: Morgunblaðið / Rax.

This was in fact not the first time that Iceland’s symbolic centrality in the Cold War–determined global map had been exploited. A similar use of Iceland as a host nation to communicative and peaceful gestures between the East and West had occurred when grand master Bobby Fischer played the reigning world champion Boris Spassky in a world championship chess match in Reykjavík in 1972. The intense

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<sup>14</sup> Matlock 2004: 176.

<sup>15</sup> Matlock 2004: 207.

media exposure of the match, and Fischer's victory, which in the West was widely interpreted as the symbolic triumph of the "free world" over communist totalitarianism, put Reykjavík's name on the media world map, possibly for the first time.<sup>16</sup> Icelanders certainly hoped for a repetition of such a success, albeit on a grander scale, in relation to the Reykjavík Summit, and it can be stated that the initial perception of the summit as a failure devastated the heavily invested Icelanders, who were hoping to become associated with a historical event ending the Cold War.<sup>17</sup>

The notion of Iceland as a nation of peace based on its history of military impartiality was furthermore emphasized in various ways in relation to the summit. Given the fact that the Iceland, a NATO member state, played host to the United States' important military base in Keflavík, such a construction was not without its problems. Nevertheless, in a press appearance upon his departure to Iceland, Reagan expressed his gratitude to Icelanders for consenting to host the event and for working so hard to prepare for it, thus demonstrating their "genuine peace interest."<sup>18</sup> The fact that Iceland had no military and insufficient police manpower to ensure the security of the two leaders, three hundred volunteers, trained for sea and land rescue missions, were stationed around Höfði, the meeting centre for the summit, which became a gesture of quite theatrical dimensions, naturally catching the attention of the media. This is evident in a summit report on London Weekend Television in which the lack of reportable news during the highly secretive talks leads the reporter to supplement his reportage segment by offering a pictorial view of the rescue squad volunteers, wearing their bright orange seafarer's outfits, stoically guarding the most powerful men on the planet.<sup>19</sup> While the British reporter commented on the scale of the event in relation to Iceland's small police force, it was the Icelandic media that provided the desired interpretation of the full symbolic meaning of the volunteers' presence. In a commentary column, Björn Bjarnason, assistant editor of *Morgunblaðið* newspaper, reflected on the "impressive sight" of members of rescue squads taking on a role that

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<sup>16</sup> On the associations between the Fischer–Spassky chess match and the Cold War, see Edmonds 2004 and Johnson 2007.

<sup>17</sup> See for example Valsson 2009: 361.

<sup>18</sup> Magnússon 1986: 42.

<sup>19</sup> Frost (Presenter) 1986.

would otherwise and in other (presumably less “peace-loving”) countries be filled by armed soldiers.<sup>20</sup> Icelandic officials also stressed the peace aspect in their comments to the media. When asked by the BBC why he thought Iceland had been chosen for the summit, Icelandic prime minister Steingrímur Hermannsson described Iceland as a “peaceful country” that had not “had any problems with terrorism”, adding that by hosting the meeting Iceland hoped to be able to contribute to world peace.<sup>21</sup>

The image of Iceland as a neutral and thus fertile ground for peace negotiations was somewhat challenged by the BBC *Panorama* report, which highlighted the significance of the Keflavík NATO base for American military interests in the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> Some commentators in fact named Iceland’s strategic position in the North Atlantic as a contributing reason for the interest on behalf of not only the U.S., but also the Soviets in strengthening diplomatic relations with Iceland via the summit.<sup>23</sup> Such underlying interests and complexities regarding Iceland’s relations with the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were downplayed if not obscured in the general image of the event in the global media, in which the remoteness and diplomatic “innocence” of Iceland was emphasized. As will be demonstrated in greater detail below, the story of the isolated, informal, and peaceful nation, flattered at suddenly being able to play a role in the development of world peace, became the dominant one in media representations of the summit. Thus what had previously been seen by the superpowers as the strategic geographical position of Iceland was transformed, through the work of figuration and image construction, into a symbolic location of peace, communicative possibilities, and openness to a new era in relations between the East and West.

### Staging a Nation, or, the Doorknob Dilemma

The media event has become a central concept in a critical tradition within media and cultural studies where the influences of spectacular

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<sup>20</sup> Bjarnason 1986: 32.

<sup>21</sup> Bennett et al. (Producers) 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Bennett et al. (Producers) 1986.

<sup>23</sup> Magnússon 1986: 15.

media on the political landscape of contemporary society are assessed, focusing among other things on the staging and representation of “reality” in media as well as the way in which the medium itself alters and shapes the events being mediated.<sup>24</sup> Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image*, originally published in 1961, is an early and now classic statement on the various levels of manipulation involved in the staging of events that are intended for mass mediation and how the demands of programming lead to the institutional creation of what he terms the “pseudo-event.” A pseudo-event identifies the communicated “version” of an event—that is, reality in its mediated form, subtly divorced from the “real” contours of the actual occurrence—and how the fact of its mediation may change the meaning of what takes place and can also change the way events take place, turning them into performance and spectacularizing them, which for Boorstin threatens to empty them of content. One way this happens is through the movement away from “hard” facts and the truly “news-worthy” to secondary or inconsequential issues highlighted in order to produce content.<sup>25</sup>

Boorstin’s theory of the pseudo-event offers a particularly rich perspective on the media coverage of the Reagan–Gorbachev meeting in Reykjavík because, while the meeting of the two leaders was set up as a media event, the progress of the actual talks was kept secret. For Boorstin the categorical imperative of news organizations is that content must continually be produced for distribution among the growing number of dissemination vehicles, and the pressure to continually produce content, meet deadlines, and have an interesting “angle” influences and shapes the news commodity to an extensive degree. In the face of what was declared by the summit organizers as a news blackout, media personnel were frequently left to their own devices in terms of coming up with “reportage” from Iceland. Margrét Árnadóttir, who was a reporter for the Icelandic State Television at the time of the summit, recalls the situation in which the foreign reporters and journalists found themselves, most of them

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<sup>24</sup> The literature on this subject is vast. Among scholars who have explored how the mediation of the image supersedes the real itself are historians and media scholars such as Dan Nimmo and Douglas Kellner, cultural critics Susan Sontag and Neal Gabler, and poststructuralists such as Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard.

<sup>25</sup> Boorstin 1992: 3–44.

having arrived in Iceland at least three days in advance to cover the big event:

The foreign reporters [...] had already mopped up every bit of news-worthiness one could possibly find in the days before the meetings even began. They had deadlines to meet and they simply had to come up with some material.<sup>26</sup>

The situation faced by the reporters during the summit would, in Boorstin's terms, present a particularly clear example of the contradictions inherent to the media event as such. The political importance of the arms negotiations taking place, and the hopes they evoked for the solution of the nuclear war threat, could by no means be reflected in a mediated form by simply focusing on the two leaders and the meeting venue during two long days of intense meetings in Höfði. While Reagan and Gorbachev, as well as their aides and security, were occasionally seen entering or emerging from the meeting venue, the media personnel stationed outside would find themselves mostly focusing on the doorknob of the closed doors of the Höfði house, from which the leaders, it was hoped, would emerge with some positive news, perhaps announcing the end of the Cold War. This "empty" space of designated prime-time news coverage had to be creatively and spontaneously filled by the reporters stationed in Iceland. This, in a sense, led to the construction of the summit as a "pseudo-event"—a televised and mediated version of the summit that existed in only a tangential relationship with reality.

The demand for interesting visual material and images to provide content created a unique space for the promotion of Icelandic history and culture, since the somewhat symbolic host nation of the summit became the most obvious subject to turn to. Former CNN reporter Ralph Begleiter recalls producing news material on as diverse subjects as the weather in Iceland and the wrestling career of the Icelandic prime minister's father. "We had a lot of trivia," Begleiter remembers, adding on a more reflective note that the media did in fact, in his view, serve an active and important role during the summit, since the ability to uphold a mediated "image" of an exciting event had the effect of soliciting and sustaining the attention of media audiences:

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<sup>26</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.



“We in the media helped to build up expectations about the outcome of the summit.”<sup>27</sup> Begleiter’s remark provides an insight into the workings of the principles of the media event that reporters must adhere to, that is, in ensuring a diligent provision of content, whether with trivia or not, thus substituting the uneventful reality of the event with the representation of “eventfulness.”

In the abundant space of airtime and newspaper columns to be filled, various national narratives were constructed. An interaction between the external and local perspective appeared in the constructions of the foreign media on the one hand and the promotional efforts of Icelanders themselves on the other. As far as the international media were concerned, the conceptual framework, or what Dayan and Katz would refer to as the semantic aspect, of the event undoubtedly produced an imperative to draw upon the notion of the remoteness of the summit host country. Here the Arctic geographical location of Iceland was emphasized, even if such standard constructions would be combined with more diverse or critical perspectives. A feature article on Iceland that appeared in the *New York Times* on 1 October, the day after the announcement of the summit, followed the above-mentioned structure of framing its profile of the country in terms of remoteness and isolation. Setting the tone in a headline which read, “Iceland, Proud, Isolated,” the article began by sketching a narrative of a country almost untouched by civilization until suddenly looked upon favourably by the mighty world leaders.

Iceland, which is being thrust into the global spotlight as the venue for the Reagan-Gorbachev meeting next month, is among the world’s most isolated nations, and proudly so. President Vigdis Finnbogadottir once attributed Iceland’s rich cultural life and the preservation of its language Old Norse, the vernacular of the Viking sagas, to “this luck that for centuries we were so forgotten.” In less than two weeks, however, this isolation will be briefly shattered when Ronald Reagan, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, their delegations and a press brigade of a perhaps a couple thousand people descend on Reykjavik, Iceland’s capital 175 miles south of the Arctic

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<sup>27</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

Circle. For Iceland, the meeting between the two world leaders will present a formidable challenge.<sup>28</sup>

The article goes on to touch upon diverse aspects of Icelandic culture and nature, as well as discussing the challenges and attention that the summit is likely to bring to “small Reykjavik.” Moving from the mapping of Iceland as northerly and remote, the article pictures Iceland’s central position in the Cold War worldview, mentioning its strategic position, its NATO alliance, and the Fischer–Spassky chess match, as well as providing a map that displays Iceland as a centre point between the U.S. to the left and the Soviet Union to the right, thus positioning Iceland in the East–West worldview paradigm. The article demonstrates the competing constellations of national narratives and spatial contexts that are inevitably at play in national cultural representation. ABC correspondent Peter Jennings followed the same line of reasoning when he began his broadcast from in front of the Icelandic parliament with the following greeting:

Good morning from this ancient and isolated island in the North Atlantic. It’s quite late in the evening here and life is so placid and calm that even the international press corps are obliged to calm down.<sup>29</sup>

An article in *Time Magazine* concluded its discussion of Iceland, which touched upon Soviet–U.S. relations as well as its medieval literary heritage, by reiterating the narrative of Iceland’s retrieval from oblivion, pointing out that “its very remoteness” had thrust it “into center stage” in an ironic twist of fate: “In attracting the two leaders, Iceland’s Spartan isolation may have been its major selling point.”<sup>30</sup>

The nordicity and remoteness that frequently framed the media representation of Iceland as the summit host country draws upon exotic notions of the North. As Peter Stadius points out in his mapping of various conceptions of the North throughout the ages, Iceland has traditionally been included in the imaginative paradigm of the Arctic *far North*. This notion of the North, which has existed in

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<sup>28</sup> Lohr 1986: 10.

<sup>29</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Millington & Wilentz 1986: 36.

Western mental mapping since classical times, has predominantly been perceived “through a semi-mythological *imaginatio borealis*, subsisting perhaps largely as the idea of something extremely cold, exotic and remote.”<sup>31</sup> The removal of the far North from central and later more northerly European centres of power would imbue civilizations of the North with something of an unspoiled innocence, a notion that carries in various ways into the popular summit media narrative of “the world” suddenly “descend[ing] on Iceland.”<sup>32</sup> The notion of Iceland as an “exotic” and mythological place was further highlighted by the many articles and reports that touched upon the Icelandic folk tradition of belief in ghosts, elves, and hidden folk (*álfar og huldufólk*), with the headline of a *Vancouver Sun* report on the Reykjavík Summit, “Land of Hidden Folk Welcomes the Role of Summit Host,” providing the most concise example.<sup>33</sup> Steingrímur Hermannsson recalls in an interview that the most common inquiry he received from reporters and journalists during the summit was whether he believed in the existence of elves as the majority of Icelanders did.<sup>34</sup> According to a NBC profile report on Hermannsson, the prime minister was quite diplomatic in his answers, and no more willing to disturb the delicate balance between the human and other-worldly in Iceland than he was to openly take sides in the Cold War strife, which cut across Iceland like a highway over an elf-inhabited rock: “Hermannsson says he’s never seen an Elf or a ghost but won’t deny their existence.”<sup>35</sup>

Rumours that the summit meeting place itself, Höfði, was in fact a haunted house hit a home run with the international media. Jón Hákon Magnússon, a media and public relations manager during the summit, remembers the sensation that the story about ghosts in Höfði caused in the press, earning the event the media nickname “summit of the haunted house.”<sup>36</sup> While most reports managed to

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<sup>31</sup> Stadius 2005: 14–15; Stadius 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Dowd 1986: 12.

<sup>33</sup> “Land of Hidden Folk Welcomes the Role of Summit Host” 1986.

<sup>34</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Brokaw (Reporter) 1986.

<sup>36</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006. Magnús Óskarsson, the city official in charge of selecting the meeting place for Reagan and Gorbachev, also recalls how the story of Höfði as a haunted house caught on among the international media; see Óskarsson 1997: 180.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

squeeze in a mention of the ghosts sharing the negotiation table with the world leaders, an article in the *Los Angeles Times* engaged Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the president of Iceland, in a detailed discussion about the ghost that haunted her official residence. The ghost, apparently an 18th-century broken-hearted sweetheart of the Governor of Iceland named Apollonia Schwartzkopf, would roam the house at night, sometimes keeping the president awake:

Sometimes she comes up the stairs and walks in the corridors outside my room. And I say to her: "Please, Apollonia dear, be very welcome."<sup>37</sup>



Figure 2. Höfði House, the meeting place of the summit, was rumoured to be haunted.  
A 1986 Herblock Cartoon, copyright by The Herb Block Foundation.

Here the president can be seen to express a similar diplomatic approach to her supernatural co-inhabitant as the prime minister upon being asked about ghosts and elves.

The above examples provide an opportunity to consider which national characteristics and narratives the media actively subscribed to in their construction of a national image, but also the role that

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<sup>37</sup> Wallis 1986: 18.

Icelandic representatives came to play in the process of negotiating those images. In this context Icelandic representatives were generally more eager to uphold a de-marginalized image of their nationality, and here again the notions of “northernness” came to the forefront, although in a different conceptual context. The somewhat marginalizing and fantastic notion of the far North in European mental mapping can be contrasted with more recent 19th-century conceptions of the North, in which neo-Romantic and racial theories contributed to the project of shifting the core of European power from the southern Greco-Roman region to the rapidly industrializing countries of northern Europe.<sup>38</sup> Here the North, with its harsh forces of nature and wilderness, is associated with strength, purity, and freedom, and its culture is associated with a revival of the classicism of the Hellenic Greeks.<sup>39</sup> The national promotional efforts organized by Icelandic authorities would stress such a positive image of Iceland, in which the following aspects would be particularly promoted: the Viking and medieval literary heritage, the “purity” of the language and of Icelandic natural food products, and the inherent strength and beauty of the Icelandic people, the former often explained as a result of surviving the harsh northern climate and the latter with the unspoiled countryside and fresh air, as well as the Nordic Viking racial lineage.<sup>40</sup> A revealing example of efforts on behalf of Icelandic officials to promote certain aspects of its culture and heritage can be found in a bold attempt that seems to have been made to provide the media with “story suggestions” for their coverage. A leaflet prepared for foreign journalists by the Icelandic government with suggestions of “story ideas” caught the attention of a *Los Angeles Times* journalist, who cited some of the suggestions made in the leaflet, perhaps on account of its presumptuousness:

an interview with Halldor Laxness, the Icelandic winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature; an article on Snorri Sturlason, the medieval author of some of Iceland’s famous sagas, and an interview with Holmfrídur Karlsdóttir, the 22-year-old reigning Miss World.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See for example Ísleifsson 2002, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Ísleifsson 2002: 121.

<sup>40</sup> Þorvaldsdóttir 2001; Jóhannsdóttir 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Meisler 1986: 15.

The attempt made here to influence the image construction of Iceland reveals an interesting act of making connections between past and present, where on the one hand the medieval cultural heritage of the “Golden Age” is emphasized and on the other hand a splendid “embodiment” of Icelandic Viking heritage, the blond Icelandic beauty queen, is presented to the media.

An international media centre set up in Melaskóli elementary school in connection with the summit became the base for promotional campaigns for Icelandic nature and culture. The Trade Council of Iceland arranged for the promotion of Icelandic food and produce, and various attractions were brought in. Hólmfríður Karlsdóttir made herself available for interviews at the centre, after being urgently summoned back to Iceland from her Miss World tour abroad to contribute to the promotion of Iceland at the summit. According to Guðmundur Magnússon’s account, Hólmfríður was among the three Icelanders who enjoyed most attention by the foreign media, the others being Prime Minister Steingrímur Hermannsson and President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the world’s first democratically elected female president.<sup>42</sup> Jón Páll Sigmarsson, the Icelandic 1985 champion of the World’s Strongest Man Competition, was also called upon to participate in promotional events. According to the *Los Angeles Times* journalist, press members were invited to enter their business cards in a lucky draw, from which the Icelandic strongman was to draw lucky winners of prizes that included salmon products, Icelandic wool sweaters, and a trip to Iceland in the summer.<sup>43</sup> The above-mentioned Icelandic heads of state furthermore came to embody the strength and beauty of their people. The photos taken during a photo-op of the elegant and blond Vigdís Finnbogadóttir in a becoming red coat, taking a friendly stroll outside the presidential residency with the tall and broad-shouldered President Reagan, were among the most iconic images of the entire summit. The prime minister furthermore came to both perform and accentuate the image of inherent national strength (as well as casualness) during one of his many moments of media exposure, as he was filmed and interviewed during his daily swim in one of

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<sup>42</sup> In their biographies, Steingrímur Hermannsson and Vigdís Finnbogadóttir describe their encounters with an enthusiastic media at the summit. See Eggertsson 2000; Valsson 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Meisler 1986: 15.

## STAGING THE NATION: PERFORMING ICELANDIC NATIONALITY

Iceland's geothermal public swimming pools. A segment introducing Hermannsson, who is shown in his bathing suit diving into and swimming across the pool, opens with the reporter's voiceover: "We are right on the edge of the Arctic circle and it can be a tough place to live—it helps to be strong..."<sup>44</sup> In a cut to the now fully dressed prime minister standing at the poolside, a brief interview follows, in which Hermannsson explains the possible reasons for his nation's inherent strength. Drawing upon a social-Darwinist climate theory, he points out that Icelanders through the centuries have been faced with extremely "harsh weather and climate," which may have caused only "the strong ones" to survive.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 3. The photo taken of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and Ronald Reagan became one of the most iconic images of the Reykjavík Summit. Photographer: Rax / Ragnar Axelsson. Copyright: Morgunblaðið / Rax.

The active performance of a national identity aligned with Northern conceptions of strength, purity, and "Arian" beauty can be linked to the broader nationalistic mood that characterized the 1980s as a period of national self-discovery and aspirations to achieve a more central position in the world stage.<sup>46</sup> Here, the Icelandic Miss

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<sup>44</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

<sup>46</sup> The notion of the 1980s as an era of national confidence is discussed in Bernharðsson 1998 and Valsson 2009: 355.

World and the World's Strongest Man can be seen as central figures onto which the national imagination latched in the construction of a confident national identity. Jón Páll Sigmarsson had as an athlete developed a strong and popular media persona and was famous for his self-congratulating comments in moments of victory in the various weightlifting and strongman competitions in which he partook. One of his slogans was: "I am not an Eskimo—I am a Viking."<sup>47</sup> This concise declaration, performed for the media, reflects Icelanders' attempt to influence and "correct" an extremely unpopular hetero-image of Iceland as an Arctic Inuit culture, thus moving from the image of the "far North" to the more centralized and powerful "Hellenic North." A summit-related article in the *New York Times* addressed Icelanders' dilemma of "overcoming the Igloo Image" in relation to an interview with Steingrímur Hermannsson in which he recalls the frustrating misconceptions that he was faced with as a engineering student in the United States, where he was frequently asked whether Icelanders lived in igloos.<sup>48</sup> This symbolic expression of Icelanders' aspirations towards a more "favourable" national identity in terms of the "igloo dilemma" can perhaps be seen to map out the parameters of that process.

## Conclusion: Remembering Reykjavík

While the 1986 Reykjavík Summit has marked its place in political history as an important, if somewhat debated, moment in the development and eventual end of the Cold War, it lives in the Icelandic national consciousness as a moment of opportunity and success. The narrative of how Icelanders managed against all odds to provide the facilities and services necessary to successfully host both a political and media event on such a large scale has been incorporated into a national narrative of Iceland's process of becoming a visible and credible participant in the globalized international community.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See for example Þórðarson 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Lohr 1986: 14.

<sup>49</sup> Interesting in this context is an account of the summit in a special supplement of *Iceland Review*, referred to by the editors as "a commemorative album." The publication date of the album is not specified, but it was issued in relation to the twenty-fifth publication year of the magazine, which was in 1988. The narrative of the edition tells the story of an unknown and peaceful country receiving the attention and opportunity



Institutional commemorations of the summit manifest themselves in the heritage site that Höfði now houses, while a more fluid and oral “writing” of the historical narrative of the “success” of the summit event in a national context can be discerned from commemorative efforts, such as television programmes about the summit, produced by the Icelandic State Television on the occasions of the ten- and twenty-year anniversaries of the Reykjavík Summit.<sup>50</sup>

However, national narratives and constructions of communal identities need to be kept under constant critical scrutiny, and as an unique event in the history of a small nation, the Reykjavík Summit provides us with an opportunity to examine the configurations of national images that came to light when the international spotlight was momentarily fixed on Iceland and to explore their meanings and connotations. Constructivist approaches to the concepts of nation and nationalism, established in recent writings of scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha, usefully remind us of the active processes required to maintain a nationalist discourse, in which we become both *subjects* and *objects* of various social narratives.<sup>51</sup> Rather than simply existing as a natural and causal lineage, the preferred link between a national past and its perceived present and future is drawn and cultivated and brought to bear upon the projected national image. Thus, although national identities may exist as a state of mind, those figments of imagination are frequently sustained with reference to essentialist nationalistic discourses.<sup>52</sup>

The opportunistic mode and commercial imperative of the “media event” furthermore reveals, perhaps more clearly than in other contexts, the instability and constructiveness of the national images that were performed and represented in relation to the Reykjavík Summit. Within the narrativization of Iceland as the summit host country, conflicting representations coexisted that related to the mental mappings of the political worldview at the time and to more complex parameters of the development of Icelandic national identity. The notion of Iceland as a remote, isolated, and exotic island

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of a lifetime and excelling in its role as summit host. *Iceland Review* 1988. See also Magnússon 1986: 21–22.

<sup>50</sup> Másson et al. (Writers) 1996; Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Bhabha 1990: 292.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson 1991: 19.

community appealed to the media as a useful conceptual framework to present an uneventful diplomatic meeting as exiting news material. Similarly, the parties behind the summit interpreted the smallness and military impartiality of Iceland as an ideal backdrop for an event intended to signal a new will for peace negotiations. Here the remoteness of Iceland was construed as centrality in the sense that Iceland was geographically positioned “midway” between the warring empires. The external perspective, however, interacted with a local discourse in which various national stereotypes of the strong and purebred nation, the inherent link between nature and cultural heritage, and the exotic beliefs in supernatural beings were trotted onto the stage as constitutive elements of national identity. As most of the narratives which were performed and constructed have become familiar tropes in the representation of Iceland today, the summit is an interesting focal point to trace the way in which dominant national images have, at the conjunction of external and internal discourses, been formed, shaped, and imagined.

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# The New Viking Wave: Cultural Heritage and Capitalism

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**Abstract** – This article focuses on the ambivalent theme of Viking heritage, myth, and image deriving from the Old North within modern Icelandic society and its effect on Icelandic national image and identity. It sheds light on its development and use in social, cultural, and historical context and questions why this particular element has constantly been used as a recurrent theme in the identity and image construction of the Icelandic nation. It concludes that capitalism, tourism, and globalization can be seen as major factors as shown in the variety of ways in which the cultural heritage of the Vikings has been used, whether it is within museums and heritage sites or in presidential speeches. For decades capitalism and neoliberalism have been the main driving forces in Icelandic society that undoubtedly have affected its cultural policy and social discourse, a social discourse that for instance connected risky investments abroad with highly obscure theories of Viking lineage. This can be seen as an example of how a small nation-state uses its cultural heritage to strengthen its national cohesion: the link between the state and the nation, past and present, politics and culture.

**Keywords** – National image/identity, tourism, collective memory, cultural heritage, globalization/capitalism, Vikings

## Introduction

A few years ago a new wave seemed to hit Icelandic shores. Or perhaps one should rather call it a renewal of an old wave. It was what might be called the new Viking wave. The discourse concerning so-called Viking heritage, myth, and image has for long been rather ambivalent in Icelandic society, and at times it has even been coloured with slight awkwardness or even embarrassment. In this article I will take a closer look at this dynamic theme and focus on its development in a social, cultural, and historical context. In particular, I will focus on how a variety of “Viking elements” have been used as a recurrent theme in the so-called identity and image construction of the Icelandic nation. As pointed out by Anthony Smith and many

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others, the creation of national images and identities is never a once-and-for-all affair, but rather a recurrent activity that each generation needs to contribute to periodically.<sup>1</sup> Hence in order to shape and sustain national cohesion, one must constantly evoke or recreate the various meanings of any national image/identity and regularly revisit the variety of symbols, myths, and rituals. In that context national museums and heritage sites are essential social spaces or sites where such negotiations take place—and/or where meaning of such identity can be contested. In the field of nationalism studies the formation of national images has long been seen mainly as some sort of a top-down delivery that could be handed down by the elite, the state, and various other social institutions, such as heritage tourism, and then received by rather passive receivers often referred to as the people or the unnamed masses.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, theories of this sort have been under attack and formations of national images (and identities) have increasingly been depicted as diverse, fluid, and ongoing processes. They have even been portrayed as interactive dialogues or dynamic negotiations that take place between, and within, the various spheres and spaces of society—private as well as public. That is to say, the focus has to some degree been shifting from the state, its institutions, and the elite towards the various micro-levels of society as well as towards the so-called masses that increasingly have been seen as a decisive factor in the continuing process of national image and identity negotiations.<sup>3</sup> In perhaps a similar vein, reflexivity has also been seen as key to understanding these terms and their formation. According to Anthony Giddens, identity becomes a project that is constantly being remade and in which individuals constantly construct or organize self-narratives in an attempt to establish and control their pasts and secure their futures.<sup>4</sup> Homi Bhabha has also been on a similar track when describing cultural identity not as given in some essential way but rather as developed over the course of history as terms of this identity are worked out, both internally and in relation to external others. Their meanings are

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<sup>1</sup> Smith 1986: 206; Connor 1990: 92.

<sup>2</sup> Hutchinson 1994; Kohn 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Löfgren 1989; Connor 1990; de Certeau 1989; Bhabha 1990. But this somewhat new approach has perhaps been influenced by theories within visual studies that for long have described visual experience as an interactive process or a dialogue between the producer, the visual text, and the receiver; see for instance Crouch & Lübbren 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Giddens 1991, 1994.



thus continuously being renegotiated and as a result, as Bhabha explains, our relationship to such an identity has to be fundamentally ambivalent:

Identification is a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification—the subject—is itself always ambivalent, because of the intervention of that otherness.<sup>5</sup>

As an ethnologist with a special interest in ambivalence, private space as well as public space, and “micro” no less than “macro,” I have embraced theories of this kind. Therefore, in my research on the Viking theme as a major part of Icelandic national image construction, I intend to focus on a broad mixture of social and cultural elements that can be found on both micro and macro levels of Icelandic society. That is to say, my intention is to examine this particular Viking theme and shed light on the various ways in which it has been woven into the Icelandic cultural fabric and national image/identity through the years, whether through media, objects, visual culture, presidential speeches, tourism, cultural heritage or, last but not least, certain discourses connected with contemporary investments abroad by Icelandic businessmen—the so-called Venture Vikings.

### The Icelandic Viking Image Construction

My investigation starts around the period that sometimes has been called the dawn of the Icelandic nation building, a process that began to develop quite extensively in the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>6</sup> Many Icelandic scholars who have been focusing on this process agree that during this period, when the national image began to take its form, the notion of a so-called Golden Age became of immense importance in the Icelandic national discourse. When Icelandic intellectuals, poets, and politicians started to create a collective sense of national unity and cultural continuity, the notion of the Golden Age was created as historian Sigríður Matthíasdóttir has described:

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<sup>5</sup> Bhabha & Rutherford 1990: 211.

<sup>6</sup> Sigurðsson 1996; Hálfðánarson 2001.

In the period of 1900–1930 nationalism in Iceland was redefined and reshaped. Two important aspects of the 20th century nationalist myth were firmly established in this era. First, the cultural understanding that the nation, based on the national language, resembles a living organism, a national person with one identity, one will and the same interests applying to each and every Icelander. Second, there is an historical understanding where a national Golden-Age is constructed as the primary model for the modern nation-state.<sup>7</sup>

In short this was seen as the age of strong and proud heroes who, according to the Icelandic sagas, fought to defend their land, family, and honour. This was the age of the commonwealth, the age before foreign rule, and thus “the age before everything went wrong”—or so the Icelandic nationalist discourse went for a long time. But as stated, this particular period, the Golden Age, from the settlement until the loss of political autonomy in the 13th century, was seen as a highly prolific source—a source that was brought into play in the midst of the nation-building process and that even today is constantly dived into when it comes to giving the collective sense of national cohesion and cultural continuity a boost.<sup>8</sup> But as elsewhere in Europe it was the Icelandic elite, the intellectuals, the poets, and the politicians who were in the forefront of the nation-building process. It was, in other words, mostly in their hands to make use of, or create, the various images, themes, myths, and symbols that later could be used as tools in the political struggle for independence.

Another cultural factor of similar importance was the Icelandic sagas that throughout the nation-building process gained their status as one of the major national symbols and, as representative of the Golden Age, they became one of the major aspects in the making of Icelandic national image and identity.<sup>9</sup> Although the younger generations in contemporary Icelandic society do not relate as well to the stories as perhaps their ancestors did, one can still today see many traces of their former importance for the Icelandic national image and

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<sup>7</sup> Matthíasdóttir 2004: 372.

<sup>8</sup> As can be seen in a recent presidential speech referred to later in this article.

<sup>9</sup> Sigurðsson 1996; Hálfðánarson 1996, 1997, 2001.

collective identity.<sup>10</sup> Within heritage tourism one can, for instance, clearly see many examples of their use and even recreation. As an example, in most parts of Iceland one can find some sort of heritage centre related to the sagas or even guided tours of the so-called saga trails, which often also play a major part in creating a collective sense of not just national, but also local, image and identity. The importance of national exhibitions of this sort for the shaping of collective identity has been stressed by a number of theorists within various disciplines, and the term “musealization” has been used to describe one of six possible strategies in the quest for such an identity.<sup>11</sup> According to Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, who is a key figure in the fields of museology and visual culture, such collections have “through the years played an important role in creating national identity as well as promoting national agendas,” and furthermore, “their role is to unite a populace, to reduce conflict and to ensure political stability and continuity.”<sup>12</sup>

If we agree with theorists such as Hooper-Greenhill and Tony Bennett, who have described national museums and heritage sites as “social spaces” where indications of certain power relations, knowledge, and ideology are being transmitted, the question inevitably arises about what kind of knowledge is being conveyed within such spaces and who provides the meaning of that knowledge. As I see it, the interpretation of all visual experiences mainly lies in the dynamic relationship between the producer, the visual text, and the viewer, while Hooper-Greenhill and Bennett mainly focus on the institutional apparatus as the key provider of meaning, power, and knowledge in accordance with the ideas of Michel Foucault, presented in works such as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.<sup>13</sup> Bennett has, for instance, pointed out how indications of “reality” and “scientific truth” are often used within museums, which could be seen as an example of how the institutional apparatus imposes and practises its knowledge and power.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Icelandic youngsters are, for instance, still obliged to read at least two to four Icelandic sagas during their primary and secondary education.

<sup>11</sup> Grabmann 2001: 219.

<sup>12</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 2.

<sup>13</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 1994; Bennett 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Bennett 1995: 21.

Regarding this relationship between the institutional apparatus and the viewer, Bennett tends to depict the viewer as far too passive in the meaning-making process. The viewer's role in the production (or contesting) of knowledge is of a more essential kind and the value of objects, images, symbols, myths, and rituals largely depends on the receiver.

## Icelandic Heritage Tourism

The saga heroes and perhaps especially the Viking theme seem to be up and coming within Icelandic heritage tourism. One of the Icelandic sagas, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, is supposed to have taken place in Dýrafjörður in the Westfjords. In that area many place names from the story have been marked especially and many tourist websites state that one can easily take a riding trail around certain areas there with this particular saga as the main guide.<sup>15</sup> A Viking ship replica that can take tourists on short trips was recently built there, and a town festival where people dress up in Viking costumes and have fun “the Viking way” is regularly held. This is a part of a recent tourist project in the area called “Vikings in the Westfjords.”<sup>16</sup>

A similar example is the opening of a new heritage centre that was built in 2006 in the small village of Borgarnes in western Iceland. The centre primarily offers a historical exhibition that relates to the settlement period of that area, and one can also attend a play called *Mr. Skallagrímsson*, which mainly focuses on one of the heroes from the sagas, Egill Skallagrímsson. A few years later the play *Brák*, which tells the story of one of the female slaves who were brought from the British Isles to Iceland during the settlement period, was also put on stage.<sup>17</sup> Other examples where the cultural heritage of the Old North (sometimes with obscure connections to the Vikings)<sup>18</sup> is put

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<sup>15</sup> Vesturferðir [West Tours],  
<<http://www.vesturferdir.is/index.php?k=2&f=94&lang=en>>.

<sup>16</sup> “Ferðapjónusta í Dýrafirði eflist” [Increase in Tourist Services in Dýrafjörður] 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Landsnámssetur Íslands [The Settlement Centre],  
<[http://www.landnam.is/default.asp?Sid\\_Id=26364&tId=99&Tre\\_Rod=001|&qsr](http://www.landnam.is/default.asp?Sid_Id=26364&tId=99&Tre_Rod=001|&qsr)>.

<sup>18</sup> Here it is important to note that the term “Settlement” is more frequently used in the Icelandic context than “the Viking Age,” and the term *landnámsmaður* (settler) is also

on display are Njálusetrið in Hvalsöllum (southern Iceland), Saga Museum in Perlan (Reykjavík) and the Manuscript Exhibition in the Culture House (Reykjavík).

But as Andrew Wawn points out, Hlíðarendi had long been a place of pilgrimage for Victorian lovers of *Njals Saga*, and according to him many Victorians did seek what they believed to be their Viking Age heritage. He states:

It was those old northern values, after all, that in the eyes of many Victorians, underpinned the best of Britain at home and abroad—imperial power, mercantile prosperity, technological progress, social stability and justice. What was more natural than to have books that help trace the roots of that prowess back to its Norwegian homelands, or to the north Atlantic island where the legacy could still be heard in its linguistically purest form”<sup>19</sup>

I have only mentioned a few examples here of how the cultural heritage of the Viking Age has been utilized within the Icelandic tourist and heritage industry as a theme aimed at both foreign as well as domestic travellers. As stated, however, the cultural influence of the Vikings is extensive, and for Icelanders in particular the Vikings certainly have been, and still are, used as a major link to connect the past with the present as well as man with landscape. But as we know, such connections are fundamental when creating the collective memory that is the foundation of any national image and identity construction.<sup>20</sup> People both make and are made by landscape. It is, in other words, mainly through people’s experiences, practices, and performances that landscape starts to gain its meaning. Or rather it is through such interaction that their meaning is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. And in that respect one can emphasize that spaces, and perhaps in particular contested spaces such as landscape/nature or heritage sites, can be of particular importance in the process of creating and sustaining national identities and images.

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rather used for the saga heroes that often have been called Vikings, at least since Victorian times in Britain; see Wawn 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Wawn 2000: 38–40.

<sup>20</sup> Halbwach 1992.

Regarding the negotiation of Icelandic national identity, this relation has been seen to be of particular importance. As stated earlier, the special relationship and almost biological link between man and nature have long been emphasized in Icelandic national discourse. According to a number of Icelandic theorists who have examined the creation of Icelandic image and identity, this relationship played indeed a fundamental role, especially during the struggles for independence, from the late 19th century to around the mid-20th century.<sup>21</sup> This can be seen reflected, for instance, in the writings of various poets and politicians of the time who emphasized especially this strong connection between the nation, nature, and cultural heritage. It has also been pointed out that the Icelandic intelligentsia around this period was much influenced by Romantic ideologies and German national theorists such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), who both emphasized similar themes in their writings on nation formation and the nature of national identities. According to their ideas, nature and nation were linked in almost biological ways and thus the heart of every nation, the *Volkegeist*, was to be discovered among those who were working and living in a constant relationship with nature, such as fishermen and peasants. Thus it was also within their culture, their customs, and their stories that the true soul of every nation was to be found. And perhaps therefore it has, even to this day, been mainly various bits and pieces from that particular culture that have become known as national culture in Iceland.<sup>22</sup>

As stated above, along with the Golden Age and the sagas, the image of the Vikings and so-called Viking heritage are also a major part of the Icelandic image construction. Up to a point one could perhaps state that the sagas, the Golden Age, and the Viking image all relate to one another, although according to many Icelandic historians and archaeologists the heroes of the sagas, the Icelandic settlers, and heroes of the Golden Age were not Vikings at all. A debate has been ongoing for some time between Icelandic academia and heritage tourism as to whether, and how, this complex term “Viking” should be applied. Scholars have emphasized that the Icelandic settlers can hardly be described as typical Vikings simply because they were the

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<sup>21</sup> Sigurðsson 1996; Hálfðánarson 1996, 1997, 2001; Karlsson 1985; Matthíasdóttir 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Sigurðsson 1996; Hálfðánarson 1996, 1997, 2001; Karlsson 1985; Matthíasdóttir 2004.

first inhabitants. As we know, typical Viking invasions normally included someone to invade. One of the main attributes that are normally used when describing Vikings and their culture is that they were barbaric intruders. According to the sagas and archaeological findings, however, there seems to have been very few, mostly young, men who travelled abroad occasionally and perhaps killed a man or two. But whether the rest of the population, mostly farmers living peacefully, should also be called Vikings has not yet been fully agreed upon.<sup>23</sup>

A discourse of this kind has, however, been regularly revisited through the years and the question still remains whether and how this ambivalent Viking heritage, image, and myth should be presented and how much emphasis should be put on this particular theme as part of the national image. When the Icelandic National Museum was reopened in September 2004 after a long restoration process, it was for instance debated whether a giant replica of a Viking sword should be erected in a nearby square.<sup>24</sup> After a thorough discussion as to whether this would be appropriate, the idea seemed to vanish and the sword has yet not been erected.<sup>25</sup> A so-called Viking village has however long been operated (notably without any state support) in Hafnarfjörður, a small town on the outskirts of the Reykjavík area, where people can experience “Viking” festivals and various other “Viking” events, or as the advertisement goes: “Experience traditional Icelandic food in a unique Viking atmosphere! Enjoy a three course “Viking dinner” including one beer and one schnapps of ‘Black death’ for ISK 6,200.”<sup>26</sup> And just to emphasize even more how life-changing this experience can be, I will quote another advertisement from the same “village”:

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<sup>23</sup> Vísindavefurinn [The Icelandic Web of Science], <<http://visindavefur.hi.is/svar.php?id=6617>>; see also Andrew Wawn, who states in his book *The Vikings and Victorians* (2000) that the Victorians invented the Vikings (or at least the term) in early 19th-century Britain. In this article, however, I will not use the Victorian understanding of the term but rather the wide, obscure, and sometimes misunderstood interpretation of it that remains ambivalent (partly because that’s the nature of kitsch). And of course its meaning also depends on the cultural context.

<sup>24</sup> Guðlaugsson 2004.

<sup>25</sup> See also Elísson 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Fjörukráin, <<http://www.fjorukrain.is/en/viking%5Frestaurant/>>.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

In June 2005 we opened a cave behind the Hotel Viking. In and around it we'll have our Viking kidnapping as we have had for many years, the difference is that now we are going to do it for everybody, not only groups, who wants to have an adventure and welcome drink the Viking way. Before these caves this was only done for people coming for our famous Viking dinner. These hijackings are well organized and managed by our artists and the Viking warriors in a magical surrounding fit for Vikings and guests. At the same time you will be able to see some nice handwork from Iceland, Faroe Islands and Greenland. The cave will be around 220 square meters and fit for all sizes of groups from one and up. As before there will be some singing and buses will be stormed by our Viking warriors offering "Mead" to drink—Viking Beer.<sup>27</sup>

Although much of this is probably presented with a tongue-in-cheek or a somewhat ironic undertone, one can clearly see how an often highly simplified and skewed Viking image is still being promoted despite all scholarly attempts to correct it. In many ways it even seems that this particular theme has been given a new boost that can be traced back to the year 2000, when Icelanders celebrated the millennium of the Nordic discovery of America. According to some Icelandic sagas Erik the Red, who travelled from Iceland and founded the Nordic settlement in Greenland, had a son, Leif the Lucky, who became the first European to visit the New World. As part of these celebrations a huge replica of a Viking ship, called the *Icelander*, was built, which then sailed the same route as Leif the Lucky did 1000 years earlier. On the same occasion a reconstruction of *Eiríksstaðir*, the place where Erik the Red lived and where Leif the Lucky was born, was built just beside the spot where the original farm was, according to recent archaeological findings. Today the place is presented as an exact replica of a Viking farm, where guides are dressed in Viking costumes and guests are offered "traditional Viking" food along with "traditional Viking" drinks.<sup>28</sup>

A few years after the celebrations, however, the replica Viking ship *Íslendingur* became a problem because nobody knew what to do

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<sup>27</sup> Fjörúkráin, <<http://www.fjorukrain.is/en/the%5Fcave/>>.

<sup>28</sup> "The Vikings" (n.d.).



with it. After several years of debating whether the ship should be sold abroad or whether the Icelandic state should buy it, the Icelandic minister of education finally decided that a new Viking village should be established, now with state support, and there the ship should at last gain its proper place.<sup>29</sup> Whether this alone ought to be seen as a token of a new Viking wave is of course too much of a claim, but when phrases such as “the Venture Vikings”<sup>30</sup> found their way into both Icelandic as well as foreign media in reference to a few Icelandic businessmen, and their investments abroad were described as Viking invasions—as it was put in an article in *BBC News Magazine*<sup>31</sup> with the headline, “The Vikings Are Coming!” along with a picture of a man with a “traditional” Viking helmet—there could hardly be any doubt. It became obvious that the Viking myth was still thriving within a variety of contemporary Icelandic, as well as foreign, social and cultural contexts—and it even found its way into presidential speeches.

### Venture Vikings or Barbarians from the Old North?

In a public meeting held by the Icelandic Society of Historians on 10 January 2006, the Icelandic president, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, emphasized quite strongly the importance of the Viking heritage for contemporary Icelandic society and especially in relation to Icelandic investments abroad. According to the president, this particular heritage could be seen as a contributing factor to the business success that a few Icelandic businessmen, to whom he referred as the Venture Vikings, had managed to gain through their various international investments. In his speech the president named ten characteristics and qualities as the main reasons for the businessmen’s success that, in his view, could all be traced back to their Icelandic cultural heritage, the foundations of Icelandic society or the “true” nature of Icelandic national identity. These were factors such as trust, daring, and courage—characteristics that, as he presented it, could all be traced back to “our forefathers” the Vikings along with various other so-called uniquely Icelandic elements. Or in his own words:

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<sup>29</sup> Nordic Adventure Travel,  
 <[http://www.nat.is/Sofn/vikingaskipid\\_islendingur.htm](http://www.nat.is/Sofn/vikingaskipid_islendingur.htm)>.

<sup>30</sup> In Icelandic, “Útrásarvíkingur.”

<sup>31</sup> Winterman 2006.

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It is interesting to consider the question of how elements in our culture and history have played a part in our overseas ventures, how qualities we have inherited from our ancestors give us, perhaps, an advantage in the international arena and how perceptions and habits that for centuries set their stamp on our society have proved valuable assets for today's achievers on the international stage.<sup>32</sup>

He also states,

Iceland's pioneer settlers were an offshoot of the culture of the Vikings, the people who in the period between about 800 and 1000 AD were the world's greatest travellers, who did not hesitate to undertake long journeys in search of fame and fortune.<sup>33</sup>

And on a similar note he emphasizes that

the key to the successes that we have won in our ventures abroad has been our culture itself, the heritage that each new generation has received from the old; our society, tempered by the struggle for survival in ages past; the attitudes and habits that lie at the core of Icelandic civilisation. Our thrust into overseas markets in recent years is deeply rooted in our history. It is a reflection of our common national consciousness, though admittedly changes in the world as a whole have also played a crucial role.<sup>34</sup>

When reading through this recent presidential speech it is very interesting to look at the various themes and elements that the president has chosen to focus on and which he has chosen to describe as especially Icelandic. First and foremost it is interesting to note how he, throughout the speech, constantly connects the past with the present and unavoidably the notion of a collective memory comes to mind. As we know, such a memory has been seen as one of the fundamental elements when forming a collective sense or shared

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<sup>32</sup> Grímsson 2006: 2.

<sup>33</sup> Grímsson 2006: 3.

<sup>34</sup> Grímsson 2006: 3.

understanding of any national image and identity. Whether unconsciously or not, the president seems to be well aware of the importance of a collective memory as he goes on to say that

the eighth element is the heritage I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, the Settlement and the Viking Age, which give us our models, the deep-rooted view that those who venture out into unknown territory deserve our honour, that crossing the sea and settling in a new country brings one admiration and respect. The achievers of our own day are frequently judged by these standards, and we look upon them as the heirs to a tradition that goes all the way back to the time of the first pioneer settlers in Iceland.<sup>35</sup>

Evidently it is being emphasized, in a Herderian sense, that the reasons for the success of a few Icelandic businessmen abroad is to be found in the Icelandic past and in the lifestyle of our forefathers the Vikings.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the Icelandic businessmen themselves seem to have been aware of these notions and to an extent tried to make some sort of use of them. In November 2006 my colleague and I conducted fieldwork at a so-called *þorrablót*, the Icelandic midwinter feast, held in London by the Icelandic bank Glitnir. There the bank manager (and Venture Viking) Bjarni Ármannsson stated that for several years the bank had been inviting their staff and business partners in Britain to feasts where “traditional” Icelandic food and drink is served and where “Viking helmets” and sheep horns are given to the guests. When interviewed, the bank manager stated that the whole charade was part of a calculated “image-making” of the bank. Along with the traditional name Glitnir of Old Norse origins, they wanted their business parties to be different and memorable in order to make the branding of the bank more efficient. In a similar vein, Ármannsson described how the bank made use of the strong smell of Icelandic shark meat to force their way into people’s senses by sending their guests some shark meat in an invitation box, banking on the idea that

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<sup>35</sup> Grímsson 2006: 7.

<sup>36</sup> See also Magnússon 2006.

after that experience they would remember the bank for the rest of their lives.<sup>37</sup>

When interviewing the bank manager and some of his staff as well, it appeared that the whole show was a very effective marketing strategy where irony, humour, and national imagery played a major part. Within the international business arena, standing out from the crowd is of immense importance, and according to the Icelandic bank manager, horrible-smelling food certainly can be helpful in that respect. The so-called Viking heritage, or what could be called bits and pieces of Icelandic national imagery, seemed to have found its way into the international business arena and was used there as a marketing tool. So although working within the international business arena, Icelandic Venture Vikings used their cultural heritage, such as the name Glitnir, sheep horns, shark meat, Black Death, and Viking helmets, to gain status and power within the international culture of capitalism and business.

In this context, a number of cultural theorists have pointed out how the maintenance of borders and boundaries (along with national images and identities) remain crucial under the conditions of globalization, even though they may be in constant flux. This corresponds with a growing resistance to those perceived to be outsiders, who it is feared might appropriate the cultural knowledge, identities, and economies of indigenous (often a minority) people. The right to an identity has now become the basis for making claims to both intellectual as well as cultural property.<sup>38</sup>

In his book *The Representation of the Past—Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World*, Kevin Walsh is on a similar track when stating that

Western capitalist nations developed into economies that were no longer truly “national” economies. The globalization of capital, the situation of branches of multinationals in many different countries, the outflow of foreign portfolio investments from the UK to other countries, and foreign

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<sup>37</sup> Notes based on joint fieldwork with my fellow folklorist Kristinn Schram on the Glitnir þorablót in London, Nov. 2006. See also his article in this volume.

<sup>38</sup> Rowlands 1995; Lowenthal 1998; Appadurai 1996, 2001.

portfolio investments into that country, are examples of how national economies have been replaced by international economies. This view, that the national economy and society are subordinate to global forces is known as the world system theory. In this light, it may be possible to consider yet another reason for the development of heritage. It has been, and still is, a desire to maintain the only thing that nations can still call their own. In the case of Britain, the loss of power has been more difficult for some to accept than others. Britain is clearly no longer an imperial power and the economy does not even belong to the nation. Striving for something left that was truly “British”, the heritage was recognized as a powerful and hegemonic resource.<sup>39</sup>

In recent decades a similar development has been the case in Iceland and there are parallels between Iceland and Britain over a long period. Here I have mentioned how the Victorians used the past and the obscure link to the Old North heritage of the Vikings, and then also in subsequent years how they have been striving for their heritage in the age of globalization, capitalism, and neoliberalism. In relation to Iceland I have also shown in this article how the so-called Viking heritage of the Old North has been and is being revisited and used in a variety of social, cultural, and historical contexts as the nation’s constant reminder of its idyllic past in order to achieve national cohesion, affirm collective memory and cultural continuity, and to give the national identity a boost.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, the Viking theme seems to be thriving rather well within Icelandic society. Whether with an ironic undertone or not, it is clearly still being practiced and performed by Icelanders both at home and abroad. It is perhaps no surprise that a quite strong Viking emphasis is apparent within Icelandic heritage tourism, and in almost every souvenir shop in Iceland there is at least one plastic helmet with the traditional Viking horns attached. However, when the Icelandic

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<sup>39</sup> Walsh 1992: 52.

<sup>40</sup> I am here referring to the economic boom that now has ended in a major economic crash.

president as well as the media and businessmen themselves start to use phrases such as “the Icelandic Venture Vikings” and connect their various investments abroad to some rather skewed Viking myths, one unavoidably starts to wonder why these socially exclusive (in relation to race and gender) symbols, myths, and rituals are still embraced, presented, and performed as part of the Icelandic national image at the beginning of the 21st century. When answering such a question one must keep in mind the various ways in which national images are negotiated and also their social and cultural context. Within the context of heritage and tourism it is a well-known fact that aspects of truth quite often become obscured and perhaps even completely irrelevant. Ever since tourism became a rising industry people have been concerned with the link between heritage, tourism, and national images, and many have been worried about the negative influences of mass tourism and the so-called heritage industry on some obscure cultural authenticity. Terms such as “Disneyfication” and “McDonaldization” have even been used to describe that particular industry as machinery with the capability of changing “real” national identities into mere fabrications by using recently invented or even false national traditions, myths, and symbols. But then one is reminded of Benedict Anderson, who stated that nations should not be defined by their falsity or authenticity but rather by the style in which they are imagined.<sup>41</sup> The only trouble is who gets to decide what is true and what is false in that regard.

If we take as an example a tourist who enters a Viking village, she is, in most cases, very well aware of how the so-called historical facts are perhaps not all very accurate—and she simply accepts it. She just plays along and at times she may get a chance to do so with appropriate objects or even costumes. However, despite the somewhat ironic undertones that almost unavoidably become a part of such a cultural context, the role of the shared symbols, myths, and images are of a similar kind as in the case of a serious presidential speech. Their recurrent use, in whatever context, can be seen as a part of the constant negotiation and renegotiation of a collective national memory, image, and identity and its various fluid meanings. So perhaps, when asked about my Viking heritage, I might answer without hesitation, “Yes, yes, yes, of course—we all have Viking

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<sup>41</sup> Anderson 1991: 6.

blood in our veins,” or roar like Jón Páll Sigmarsson when taking part in the World’s Strongest Man contest: “I’m a Viking, not an Eskimo!”—or perhaps not. In relation to the recent crisis of the Icelandic financial system, the Venture Vikings are not as popular as they used to be. How this will affect the Icelandic national image is not yet quite clear, but it certainly will be interesting to see if the Viking theme will maintain its position as an important element in the continuing image-weaving of the nation.

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# Foreign Fictions of Iceland

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**Abstract** – This article will examine ways in which Iceland has been fictionally recreated by the foreign imagination and assess to what extent stereotypical images of Iceland are perpetuated, challenged, and/or reconstructed in contemporary foreign fiction. The role of Iceland in fiction from different countries will be discussed and compared, as well as the way Iceland is “contained” in the language of the novel/story. Perspective, form, and national literary context will be also be explored, as well as the “Iceland novel’s” relationship to other writing on Iceland.

**Keywords** – Literature, fiction, cultural representation, cultural difference, image, the Other

## Introduction

Medieval Iceland has spoken to the European literary imagination for centuries. Not only were the Icelandic sagas translated into many languages, they inspired foreign writers to create their own tales about Iceland’s medieval past.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary Iceland has never really been able to compete with the romantic allure of its history. During the last few decades, however, there has been a noticeable change from an almost exclusive interest in the Iceland of the past to the “cool” and trend-setting Iceland of the present, which has raised the profile of modern-day Iceland in European culture and even, to a modest extent, in literature. This article will examine a selection of foreign fictions of Iceland that have appeared in the wake of this shift in focus in order to analyze the image of post-medieval Iceland that emerges in these works and its relation to the general discourse, images, and stereotypes of Iceland as part of the North.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Wawn 2000; Helgason 1999.

## Representations of Iceland and the Iceland Novel

As Sumarliði Ísleifsson points out in his article “Islands on the Edge” in this volume, foreign descriptions of Iceland go back as far as the 11th century, and there is a sizeable corpus of European writing on Iceland. From the Enlightenment onwards, Iceland became an increasingly popular subject of travel accounts and scientific literature, and scholars have turned their attention to the ways in which Iceland has been represented in these works.<sup>2</sup> Foreign fiction inspired by post-medieval Iceland, on the other hand, is still quite rare and, with some notable exceptions, quite recent. This raises the question whether there are any significant differences in the way Iceland is portrayed in these two genres. Do the requirements of fictional conventions produce a different textual representation? There is no doubt that travel literature and fiction are closely related, and often the lines between the two genres are blurred.<sup>3</sup> But to what extent and to what purpose do fiction writers rely on this existing corpus of travelogues for their representations of Iceland? And, given the fact that *belles lettres* are inevitably part of, and in dialogue with, a larger literary context, do national literary traditions influence the image of Iceland in fiction—are there, in other words, noticeable differences between countries?

For the purpose of this article, I have selected five works of fiction, each from a different country, in order to analyze and compare the image of Iceland that emerges and the role Iceland is made to play in each work. In addition, I will discuss the relationship of these Iceland novels to travel literature on Iceland. The works to be discussed are the following: the novel *Skimmer* (*Shimmer*, 1996) by the Swedish author Göran Tunström; the Dutch novel *De Knoop van IJsland* (*Iceland's Knot*, 1996) by Gerrit Jan Zwier; “Kaltblau” (“Cold Blue,” 2003), a German short story by Judith Hermann; *Smukke biler efter krigen* (*Smart Cars after the War*, 2004), a Danish novel by Lars Frost; and *The Killer's Guide to Iceland* (2005), a novel by the Northern Irish writer Zane Radcliffe. The fact that I wanted to do a cross-national comparison, and examine the representation of Iceland in the language in which it was originally cast, determined the countries I looked to for my selection of texts. Within these countries it soon

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<sup>2</sup> Notably Ísleifsson 1996; also Aho 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Adams 1983.

appeared there were not many works to choose from, sometimes only a single instance.<sup>4</sup> Where there was a choice, I selected the most recent work, in order to limit the comparison to a specific time period, 1996 until the present.

The corpus of the Iceland novel is thus, it seems, an exceptionally modest one. In France, Iceland has been little explored in fiction since the heyday of Jules Verne and Pierre Loti during the 19th century, while Norwegian literature appears to focus exclusively on medieval Iceland. While more extensive research may yet uncover more, it certainly looks as if Iceland novels are the exception rather than the rule, and they appear to be primarily the result of a particular interest on the part of an individual writer. This might explain why most Iceland novels were published recently: Iceland's increased prominence as a tourist destination and cultural hot spot means that it has come to the attention of a much wider foreign public, which, in turn, would also mean that there is an increased readership for Iceland novels.

A significant part of my analysis will be informed by close reading and existing studies on the image of Iceland and the North, but I also rely on approaches used in the study of travel literature and the representation of the Other, particularly the ideas of Joep Leerssen and Ernst van Alphen, and on post-colonial theory, principally in respect to the representation of peripheral regions by cultural centres and the asymmetrical power relations involved in those descriptions, not least the marginalization and exoticization of colonized and (apparently) peripheral peoples, as demonstrated by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*.<sup>5</sup> The stereotypes and ideas generated by such discourses of power tend to dictate the way in which particular places and cultures are perceived. In his discussion of the glacier Snæfellsjökull, famously recreated in what is probably the oldest and most well-known novel featuring post-medieval Iceland, Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), Ástráður Eysteinnsson coins the term "Thuleism" to indicate a specifically Icelandic variant of orientalism, where travel-writers recreate an Iceland they have been

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<sup>4</sup> My research has so far yielded only single examples in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Italy, and three to four instances in Denmark, Germany, and the UK.

<sup>5</sup> Said 1978.

“programmed” to see, or its antithesis.<sup>6</sup> What informs the re-creation of Iceland in foreign fiction?

## Nature, North, and Wilderness

Something that is shared by all the works under discussion is the prominent role of the Icelandic landscape, particularly the interior wilderness and its volcanic nature. The first thing Lasse, the main protagonist in *Smukke biler efter krigen*, wants to do when he arrives is visit the Blue Lagoon, and then see some “real Icelandic nature.”<sup>7</sup> Reykjavík has nice cafés, but it is too small, and holds little attraction for him. The Icelandic landscape, on the other hand, is frequently described as “imposing” (*imponerende*)<sup>8</sup> and is clearly what one is expected to see when visiting Iceland.

It is not long before the reader realizes, however, that the Iceland Lasse sees is coloured by his memories of an earlier visit with a girlfriend who has broken up with him since and the loss of whom he still mourns. The narrative provides a telling image of this at the very start, when Lasse first glimpses Iceland from the air: the weather is bright, but he remembers it looking grey and covered in mist when he arrived with Sigrid, and he concludes that “it should be misty when one arrives at Keflavík airport.”<sup>9</sup> Lasse’s view of Iceland is clearly pre-conditioned, shrouded in the mist of his own memories and the desire for a lost love. Indeed, in the course of the novel it becomes difficult to tell Lasse’s experiences in the present apart from his memories of his previous visit.

During his excursion into the Icelandic countryside with a group of other foreigners, Lasse, aside from reminiscing, continually compares what he sees with sightseeing experiences in other countries, comparing for instance the waterfall Gullfoss with his experience of the Grand Canyon. The landscape does not remain a passive receptacle for Lasse’s clouded vision of it, however, as the

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<sup>6</sup> Eysteinsson 2006: 66.

<sup>7</sup> “rigtigt islandsk natur.” Frost 2004: 24 (my translation).

<sup>8</sup> Frost 2004: 125-126 (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> “[d]et bør være tåget, når man lander i Keflavik lufthavn.” Frost 2004: 12 (my translation).

Geysir pool seems to stare back at him from its hidden depths, a gigantic eye returning his gaze

like an iris, and it's possible to glimpse something, a darkness, a hole down into the earth's interior, inside the centre of the eye, like a pupil. It's not at all difficult to imagine the geyser's pool like an eye that stares up into the sky and out into space. [...] but what does this eye see? That's an entirely different matter. That's hard to know, and one should be careful [...]<sup>10</sup>

When the group decides it is time for some adventure, the landscape has its revenge. They play around crossing a glacial river in their hired jeep, filming each other and “enhancing the dramatic effects.”<sup>11</sup> Being unfamiliar with the landscape, however, and unable to interpret its language, they soon get into trouble. Not realizing that the river is quickly filling up with water after a warm, sunny day, they cross it at exactly the wrong point on their way back, and they get stuck. Suddenly, the Icelandic wilderness has turned into a real and immediate danger: “There are no people, there is nothing to see, and no reason to hope for any help.”<sup>12</sup>

In *Skimmer*, the other Nordic novel, there is a very strong and direct connection between the physical and the human world, which is inhabited by a myriad of eccentric characters. The narrator, Pétur, has retreated to his summerhouse in order to deal with the death of his father, and to write a memorial to him, which eventually becomes the novel we are reading. He introduces the landscape around him to the reader as a place away from “the contemporary” (*samtiden*),<sup>13</sup> where he can escape from “civilised bad habits.”<sup>14</sup> It is consistently capitalized in the text as *Obygden* (“the Wilderness”) and is described as a place of creative inspiration, still and remote, where emptiness

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<sup>10</sup> “som en iris, og man kan skimte noget, et mørke, et hul ned til jordens indre, inde midt i øjet, som en pupil. Det er slet ikke svært at forestille sig geysersøen som et øje, der stirrer op i himmelen og ud i verdensrummet. Det giver sig selv med de farver og formen, den runde form, men hvad ser det øje? Det er en helt anden sag. Det er ikke til ad vide, og man skal passe på [...]” Frost 2004: 126 (my translation).

<sup>11</sup> “optimere dramaet.” Frost 2004: 139 (my translation).

<sup>12</sup> “Der er ingen mennesker, ingenting at se og ingen grund til at håbe på nogen hjælp.” Frost 2004: 143 (my translation).

<sup>13</sup> Tunström 1996: 9, 111.

<sup>14</sup> “civilisatoriska ovanor.” Tunström 1996: 65 (my translation).

reigns, nothing happens, and the limits of realism don't apply. The Icelandic wilderness is thus established as being not only a place beyond the urban and the everyday, beyond reality, but also as a place of origins for the narrator, as well as, on a metalevel, for the text and its characters.

If it is a place of origins, however, it is also a place of destruction and death. Pétur's mother Lára, a geologist who lived on a glacier on the slopes of a volcano called Fretla, measuring the movements of the earth, disappears shortly after giving birth to Pétur, when Fretla erupts. She is never found. Lára is an elusive character who has a mystical, almost symbiotic relationship with the landscape. Halldór, Pétur's father, calls her "the Seeress on Fretla":

she was the seeress, our connection to the earth: all the netherworld's quakes went through her. "Fretla breathes calmly. Fretla is restless. Fretla is asleep. Soon Fretla will blossom." As if she were talking about a child.<sup>15</sup>

Lára's mysterious, elusive nature can be explained at least in part by the fact that she exists only as an idealized memory in the book, an object of longing, but at the same time she also appears at times as the incarnation of the volcano she inhabits and, by extension, the Icelandic wilderness. Post-colonial studies have revealed how the inhabitants of colonies and peripheral regions tend to be represented in literature as childlike, innocent, and "natural" (i.e., living in an instinctive co-existence with nature), vis-à-vis the rational, cultured, and civilized European,<sup>16</sup> and several scholars have pointed to the tendency in foreign discourses on Iceland to view Icelanders as personifications of their country and its wild nature.<sup>17</sup> The novel's playful, ironic re-creation of common stereotypes about Iceland, however, suggests an intention to expose this tendency rather than uncritically perpetuate it.

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<sup>15</sup> "Hon var sierskan, den jordade kontakten till oss: alla skälvnningar underifrån gick genom henne. 'Fretla andas lugnt. Fretla är orolig. Fretla vilar. Fretla kommer snart at blomma.' Som talade hon om ett barn." Tunström 1996: 178 (my translation).

<sup>16</sup> On this, see for instance the essays in *Beyond Pug's Tour* 1997, and Thisted 2002: 319–323.

<sup>17</sup> Jóhannsson 2001: 53–54, 59; Ísleifsson 1996: 213; Jóhannsdóttir 2006: 117.



Unlike what we see in *Smukke biler*, where Reykjavík is very much overshadowed by the Icelandic landscape, the Iceland constructed in *Skimmer* encompasses both a contemporary, colourful city full of life and culture connected to the modern world, and a timeless wilderness where life and art originate. The two are intimately connected: as the modern, global world threatens the wilderness, it also lives precariously in its shadow. In Peter Davidson's words: "the thin crust of rock over volcano, the thin layer of human settlement over the wilderness."<sup>18</sup> This perceived fragility of an otherwise overpowering landscape becomes symbolic not only in *Skimmer*, where it is threatened by civilization and exploitation, the latter personified, interestingly, by a foreign Icelandophile,<sup>19</sup> but also in *Smukke biler*, where Lasse extends it to Icelanders and Icelandic culture generally:

[He] talks about how fragile Iceland is: even though its nature looks so brutal, there are fragile landscapes, new, soft, changing mountains, living lava, and rivers that continually find new ways of running into the ocean. And the language is fragile, Lasse says.<sup>20</sup>

In *The Killer's Guide to Iceland*, Sigríður, the clairvoyant mother of the protagonist's Icelandic partner, defends the Icelandic countryside and its "sacred places" from exploitation. Both here and in *Skimmer*, ordinary Icelanders are the defenders of Iceland's unspoiled nature, while the Icelandic authorities are portrayed as condoning foreign exploitation for economic gain.

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<sup>18</sup> Davidson 2005: 121.

<sup>19</sup> That it should be an Icelandophile, of all people, who personifies threat and exploitation could, on the surface, be explained by the fact that the privileged perspective in this novel is a post-colonial Icelandic one which regards the onslaught of foreign Icelandophiles escaping "civilization" in search of "wilderness" and trying to "capture" a part of it as a threat; however, it is the Icelandic authorities who consciously turn a blind eye to the exploitation in return for economic profit. The intimation may thus be that even Iceland and its wilderness are now an integral part of a larger world, where the nationalist dichotomy of innocent children of nature overrun and exploited by corrupt foreigners no longer holds—if it ever did.

<sup>20</sup> "Lasse taler om, hvor skrøbelig Island er, selvom naturen ser så brutal ud, så er det skrøbelige landskaber, nye, bløde, foranderlige bjerge, levende lava, og floder der hele tiden finder nye veje at løbe ud i havet. Og sproget er skrøbeligt, siger Lasse." Frost 2004: 98 (my translation).

In both *The Killer's Guide to Iceland* and *De Knoop van IJsland*, the Icelandic interior plays a central role as the dramatic and symbolic stage for the main protagonists' inner journeys and emotional reckoning. The emphasis in both novels is on those characteristics of the Icelandic landscape that are viewed as alien: its overwhelming silence and isolation, the lack of life and growth, the formations of the rocks and mountains that speak to the imagination. To Cal, the main character in *The Killer's Guide to Iceland*, it looks both prehistoric and futuristic, like an alien planet,<sup>21</sup> while to Hans, in *De Knoop van IJsland*, its "spooky" (*spookachtige*) qualities suggest an other, older reality, preceding civilization.<sup>22</sup> As they look at the Icelandic landscape, however, they are actually looking at themselves, a part of themselves from which they have become estranged. As Ernst van Alphen has argued with reference to Freud's essay "The Uncanny," the Other is always the Other within: something which is known and familiar becomes repressed, and thereby strange and unsettling, and is then displaced onto an alien Other.<sup>23</sup> The physical landscape becomes an emotional landscape, a mirror of an alien self, reflecting the desolation the characters feel. As the reference to Iceland's interior as "the dark heart of Iceland" in *The Killer's Guide*<sup>24</sup> seems to indicate, the Icelandic wilderness becomes a symbolic "heart of darkness," located in both novels near the crater of the volcano Askja conveniently called Víti ("hell"), and the Askja lake, which Ina in *De Knoop van IJsland* calls "the lake of death." It is here that the protagonists have to confront their past and repressed emotions, undergoing a symbolic death and rebirth—a stage to confront their inner demons and vanquish them. The Icelandic world of nature here becomes what Birna Bjarnadóttir has called "a nature of feelings."<sup>25</sup> The nature and location of this landscape are crucial to its symbolic role: the lifeless heart of the country, both burnt out and frozen over, where the guts of the earth spill out.

Víti also plays a small part in *Skimmer*, where the main protagonists are all Icelanders. Halldór takes his son Pétur along on a trip to Víti, where they watch the Americans practising for their moon

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<sup>21</sup> Radcliffe 2005: 358.

<sup>22</sup> Zwier 1996: 9–10.

<sup>23</sup> van Alphen 1991: 11.

<sup>24</sup> Radcliffe 2005: 325.

<sup>25</sup> Bjarnadóttir 1999: 937.

landing. From wondering about the nature of Iceland's independence, the conversation turns to Iceland itself:

- [...] Iceland is the most moonlike place on the entire earth.  
 —It is so horrible. It is like outer space.  
 —We *are* in outer space, Pétur. Far, far out. But there are many places that look like this. This is your country and you must learn to love it.  
 —That won't be easy.  
 —To love that which is beautiful is a cheap art. To demand a single drop of milk from a stone is much harder.  
 —I think in any case that we should move to another country, why do we have to live here? *Why?*  
 —Because the grey moss glows and the moss campion smiles, amid all the grey. So that once a year one can go into the Wilderness and be reminded that we are particles in a cosmic dream.<sup>26</sup>

Here, it is Icelanders themselves who see the landscape as alien, but not as a symbol of their estranged selves. Rather, it becomes symbolic of man's place in the universe. Iceland emerges here in all its northern austerity, its difficult beauty, its ultimate strangeness, a place for humbled meditation, removed from the ordinary world.<sup>27</sup> What seems particularly interesting is that, in this novel, it is not a place one grows to love as a matter of course, not even, or perhaps especially not, for Icelanders. Or perhaps it simply exposes a foreign perspective wondering how Icelanders come to terms with living in this country.

These foreign novels, it would seem, endow the Icelandic wilderness with a heart of sorts: whether it is a symbolic "dark" heart that reflects the inner selves of the protagonists, or the heart whose

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<sup>26</sup> "—[...] Island är den mest månlika platsen på hela jorden.—Det är så hemskt. det är som ute i rymden.—Vi är ute i rymden, Pétur. Långt långt ute. Men så här ser det ut på många ställen. det är ditt land och du måste lära dig att älska det.—Det blir inte lätt.—Att älska det redan sköna är en billig konst. Att avkräva stenen en enda droppe mjölk är betydligt svårare.—Jag tycker i alla fall att vi borde flytta till ett annat land, varför skall vi bo här? Varför?—Därför att backtimjan glöder och lambagräset ler, mitt i det grå. För att man en gång om året skall bege sig ut i Obygden och komma ihåg att vi är partiklar i en kosmisk dröm." Tunström 1996: 29 (my translation).

<sup>27</sup> Davidson 2005: 8, 46, 159, 165.

beatings the geologist Lára in *Skimmer* measures. In *Smukke biler*, *De Knoop van IJsland*, *The Killer's Guide*, and *Skimmer*, the Icelandic wilderness also has an eye, with an uncanny stare. In *Smukke biler* it is located in Geysir's pool, as we saw earlier. In *The Killer's Guide* and *De Knoop van IJsland*, Askja lake is described as a gigantic green eye, a metaphor that could be interpreted as a reflection of the self, the "I," as well as the eye, or gaze, of the land, returning that of the outsider and redirecting it to the self. And whereas most works depict the wilderness as silent, in *De Knoop van IJsland*, the Icelandic interior also has a voice, as Hans, the protagonist, listens to it howling, bubbling, sputtering, hissing, whistling, and screaming. The landscape thus becomes a living being in these works, albeit an alien one, Other to the novels' narrative selves.

In the German short story "Kaltblau," the Icelandic landscape dominates, too, but not so much in the form of the wilderness as in the form of a winterscape, which is, however, also used to symbolize and reflect the emotional landscape of the main characters. Like *Skimmer*, "Kaltblau" features an Icelandic perspective. Jonina<sup>28</sup> likes the whiteness, the quiet, the winter light, which allow her to empty her mind and think of nothing, something she experiences as purifying: "it calms her nerves and her entire body, and also her heart."<sup>29</sup> When a German couple comes to visit her and her partner Magnus, she realizes that, like many tourists, they endow the Icelandic world of nature with healing powers and a therapeutic effect. Gradually, it becomes clear that both couples struggle with relationship problems. The frozen landscape mirrors the estrangement that has crept into their relationships, which have, like the landscape, become frozen and suspended in time. Jonina, who is a tourist guide, has never liked tourist conversations about her country, but she starts listening to her guests in a way she never does to other tourists when she becomes aware of the fact that "they experience Iceland as a kind of miracle that mends their broken hearts": "For the first time she herself has the feeling that she lives in a country where the smoking volcanoes and hissing water lead to the answer to all

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<sup>28</sup> All names as spelled in the original text.

<sup>29</sup> "[...] es beruhigt ihre Nerven und ihren ganzen Körper und auch ihr Herz." Hermann 2003: 70 (my translation).

questions.”<sup>30</sup> This theme of cold estrangement is nicely captured in the story’s title, “cold blue,” and the whites and blues that dominate the descriptions of the landscape. The cold, the white snow and ice of the winterscape are everywhere in the story, watched and traversed by the four characters. It is contrasted with the bright blue of the sky, as light replaces the darkness of the long winter nights.

The Icelandic landscape as portrayed in all five works is very much a northern nature, in accordance with traditional ideas and narrative functions of the North: the gateway to hell and the land of the dead, the strangeness, the contrast of fragility and awe-inspiring power, the cold and difficult beauty.<sup>31</sup> All re-create, in one way or another, the pattern of what Davidson calls “archetypic northern journeys” in Western thinking about the North:

the journey from civilisation to wild and untamed nature [...],  
and the journey into one’s interiority, the self-understanding,  
clarification and focusing of the spirit that may be looked for  
as a result of a journey into the far north<sup>32</sup>

coupled with “the idea that in the process of an arduous journey some kind of understanding of oneself in the world can be achieved.”<sup>33</sup>

The idea of *Ultima Thule* has long been connected to Iceland, along with its associations of the periphery, on the edge of, or even removed from, the ordinary, knowable world. This idea finds its way into foreign fiction in direct and indirect ways. In “Kaltblau,” Irene, the German guest, makes specific reference to *Ultima Thule* as she tries to express her impressions of Iceland:

“far away from everything, as remote as possible.” “And therefore as close as possible,” Jonas shouts. The expression is

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<sup>30</sup> “Sie hat zum ersten Mal selber das Gefühl, in einem Land zu leben, in dem qualmende Vulkane und fauchendes Wasser alle Fragen zu einer Antwort führen.” Hermann 2003: 102 (my translation).

<sup>31</sup> Davidson 2005: 26, 45, 121, 165, 184.

<sup>32</sup> Davidson 2005: 65.

<sup>33</sup> Davidson 2005: 174.

completely new to Jonina, and she doesn't quite know what to do with it all.<sup>34</sup>

*Ultima Thule* is thus presented as belonging to an outsider's perspective: Jonina has no idea what is meant by it. It causes her to think, though, about the location of such a place, and in particular the location of the horizon: "By which standard should one measure the end of the world? And how far away is the horizon, and is it always and everywhere equally far away?"<sup>35</sup> Jonina starts to consider the classical description of Iceland in a larger context, in response to Irene's comment. Towards the end of the story, she is looking out over the same landscape, this time without the snow, and is still contemplating whether the horizon is everywhere equally far away, echoing Davidson's discussion of the North as the most distant place on earth, and at the same time a place where distance is hard, even impossible, to measure.<sup>36</sup>

Even without direct reference to *Ultima Thule*, the Icelandic wilderness is frequently described as a place representing another reality, where time is condensed or frozen. In his discussion of the mystic Celtic Fringe as a similar place of stasis at the very edge of the real world, E. W. Lynam suggests that, as in the Bakhtinian notion of a "chronotope," "a particular representational sphere is created where time is seen to pass at a different rate than elsewhere."<sup>37</sup> This description seems to fit perfectly the image of the Icelandic landscape in the foreign fiction discussed here: a place where the limits of realism don't apply and nothing happens (*Skimmer*), where the winterscape challenges the normal definitions of place and time ("Kaltblau"), a place "beyond this world" where an other, older reality challenges science and modernity (*De Knoop van IJsland*). In the two works which feature an Icelandic perspective, even Icelanders themselves come to view their landscape as above and beyond reality.

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<sup>34</sup> "[...] entfernt von allem, am entferntesten'. 'Und also am nahesten', schreit Jonas. Jonina ist dieser Ausdruck völlig neu, und sie weiß nicht, wie sie mit alledem umgehen soll." Hermann 2003: 102 (my translation).

<sup>35</sup> "Nach welchem Maß soll man das messen, das Ende der Welt? Und wie weit ist der Horizont entfernt, und ist das immer und überall gleich weit?" Hermann 2003: 105 (my translation).

<sup>36</sup> Davidson 2005: 22.

<sup>37</sup> Lynam 1990: 287.

## Intertextual Landscapes

In his *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, Percy Adams demonstrates the close relationship between these two genres: just like the travelogue is never simply a photograph of reality, the novel is never “just” fiction, but traditionally sets out to evoke a recognizable reality. Writers of fiction who wish to re-create a foreign country for their readers almost inevitably rely on the available literature, even if, in these days of global travel, their writings may be expected also to build on their own experiences and observations. The extent to which travel literature informs the Iceland novel, however, both intertextually and as a motif, is striking.

Maps, tourist guides, and Iceland travelogues abound in Iceland novels. Most obviously, they constitute convenient narrative tools to provide the reader with the information necessary to conjure up the country, as well as being obvious props for the protagonist, who is in many instances a visitor. However, in several instances they also serve to emphasize the constructed nature of the Iceland we find in these works, as well as the fact that the protagonists, and, by extension, the reader, view the country, its landscape, culture, and inhabitants primarily through the prism of other texts.

Lasse in *Smukke biler* has been invited to a wedding in Iceland and decides to add a few extra days to see something more of the country. It quickly becomes clear that tourist literature dictates what he will see while there. He decides to visit the Blue Lagoon before going on to Reykjavík, because “it is a place one should not miss.”<sup>38</sup> The entire route into the Icelandic countryside is determined on the basis of map and guidebook alone: “We *must* see this waterfall...”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, the landscape is not viewed and interpreted directly and on its own terms, but through a textual construction. While Lasse ridicules tourist guidebooks on Iceland at several points in the novel, he himself also chooses to experience the landscape indirectly, through the music of Sigur Rós: “In a banal but good way, it all fits together, the long

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<sup>38</sup> “Det er et sted, man ikke må gå glip af.” Frost 2004: 13 (my translation).

<sup>39</sup> “Det vandfald skal man se.” Frost 2004: 76 (my translation).

grating guitar chords, the plaintive falsetto, the rough mountain slopes and the soaked, pale green meadows.”<sup>40</sup>

He and his fellow travellers all want to see the Iceland they have come to expect from other texts. The image of Iceland in *Smukke biler* is thus very much that of a country perceived through the lens of commercial tourism, as well as through personal history and emotions. Iceland is either a misty isle, surrounded by the clouds of troubled memories and sorrow, or a tourist destination that sometimes fails and sometimes succeeds in living up to its marketed image by providing the expected diversion and adventure.

*The Killer's Guide to Iceland* also emphasizes its reliance on, and contribution to, a discursive tradition on Iceland created in a foreign language. Cal owns a company in Glasgow called Strawdonkey, which publishes online travel accounts, and which he sells when he moves to Iceland. Here, he sets up his own business finding locations for foreign film companies. Both businesses provide a metafictional comment by the novel on itself as a text which constructs an image of another country and foregrounds its own foreignness to its subject matter. With his firm, called Fire and Ice Locations, Callum tries to market Iceland through its “exotic” appeal, but the opposition he encounters from local people shows the potentially damaging consequences this can have environmentally. The constructed nature of the stereotyped images underlying this appeal of “exotic” Iceland is shown very effectively when Cal has to have three artificial geysers made to erupt on command for a shoot; they create an explosion which puts one man in the hospital. “The Killer’s Guide to Iceland”, a document sent to Cal anonymously by email, provides a rather eerie example of a tourist guide to Iceland, the kind Strawdonkey used to publish, but written to describe a murder. Here, in the words of Cal’s former partner Neil, “travel book meets thriller,”<sup>41</sup> an apt description of the novel itself.

If intertextuality is a feature of *Smukke biler* and *The Killer's Guide*, it is at the very heart of *De Knoop van IJsland*, which bases itself on an

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<sup>40</sup> “På en banal, men god måde, passer det hele sammen, de lange skurende guitarakkorder, den klagende falset, de skurvede bjergsider og de gennemblødte, matgrønne enge.” Frost 2004: 110 (my translation).

<sup>41</sup> Radcliffe 2005: 197.



## FOREIGN FICTIONS OF ICELAND

actual travelogue. The novel imagines the journey of Ina von Grumbkow, who published a travel book on Iceland in 1909 entitled *Isafold. Reisebilder aus Island*. The main narrative point of view is, however, not that of Ina, but of Hans Otten, an aspiring geologist. Hans and Ina's trip from Reykjavik to Askja is as much a journey through a physical as through a textual landscape, as they try to make sense of and come to grips with their impressions and experiences of Iceland by reading about it. They consequently see the landscape as much through other people's eyes as through their own, reading it as written by others, just as the reader sees the Iceland of the novel through their eyes. This Iceland is thus very much presented as a textual construction based on, and in turn contributing to, a narrative tradition of foreign discourses on Iceland.

For Hans, Iceland is primarily a topic of research, a geological paradise, and he uses geological terms to describe and comprehend the landscape around him. Ina on the other hand reads Icelandic literature and mythology, which suits her need to find comfort in a cultural presence on the one hand, and her interest in the supernatural on the other. These Iceland discourses help give shape to their impressions and provide the illusion of order in the chaos of the natural wilderness surrounding them.

A notable example of the textual self-consciousness that characterizes this novel is the conversation Hans has with an Icelandic guide called Sigurdur. Here, the novel becomes a metatext, admitting to its own nature as travel fiction, an Iceland narrative, and as such, unreliable. Hans suggests that Sigurdur's last customer, who Sigurdur said did nothing but write down what he said, must have been writing a travel book: "That genre is very popular again. Those books are usually made up of nothing but twaddle and humbug."<sup>42</sup> Sigurdur admits that he sometimes allows himself a joke at the expense of the gullible foreigner, and told this customer, who wanted to know all about Iceland's poverty, that in times of famine, Icelanders drink horse blood. Hans recognizes this as a tale about the Huns, and Sigurdur confesses to having read it somewhere. Hans teases him about the sort of book that will now be published: "An Adventurous Journey With An Icelandic Guide Through A Hell Of

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<sup>42</sup> "Dat genre is momenteel weer heel populair. Die boeken hangen meestal van beuzelarijen en kletspraatjes aan elkaar." Zwier 1996: 43 (my translation).

Fire And Ice, in which it will say how he saw you drink litres of horseblood.’”<sup>43</sup> Apart from emphasizing the intertextual nature of the novel and affirming its place in a literary tradition of narratives about “other” peoples, this passage also undermines any claim to the novel as an authentic account about Iceland.

The native guide is a classic character in literature about foreign countries, and four out of the five works of fiction discussed here feature variations on it. *De Knoop van IJsland* provides the most traditional examples, which is perhaps only to be expected, considering its subject matter. Apart from Sigurdur, who plays only a very minor role, there is Bjarni Magnússon, who is the one actually travelling with Hans and Ina. Unlike Sigurdur, Bjarni generally conforms to the conventions of the native guide as possessing a knowledge of the area that is beyond that of the foreigner, but who is otherwise poor, dirty, culturally deprived, and superstitious: a child of nature who forms an antithesis to the educated representative of civilization.

In *Smukke biler* and *The Killer's Guide*, both of which are of course set in contemporary Iceland, the role of the native guide is played by an Icelandic woman with whom the male protagonist has a sexual relationship. Lasse meets Sigrún in the Blue Lagoon at the start of his visit and asks her out. She then regularly re-appears, providing Lasse with information and explanations, as well as providing sexual interest. Birna in *The Killer's Guide*, on the other hand, constitutes an intriguing subversion of this stock character. Her knowledge of her native country, although based in an intimate relationship with the landscape, is not instinctual but scientific: she is a volcanologist. She is also the one in charge for most of the novel, and her voice drowns out most of the other voices in the text, including that of the male protagonist, Cal. Interestingly, the native guide's instinctual, mystical knowledge of his environment has not disappeared altogether: it resides in the character of Birna's mother, Sigríður. It is also noteworthy that Birna and Sigríður, who could be viewed as two sides of the same coin, aren't the only native guides, even if they are the main ones. The presence of a group of different Icelandic characters

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<sup>43</sup> “‘Avontuurlijke Reis Met Een IJslandse Gids Door Een Hel Van Vuur En IJs, en daarin staat dan hoe hij gezien heeft hoe jij liters paardenbloed hebt opgedronken.’” Zwier 1996: 43–44 (my translation).

surrounding Cal, who hold conflicting opinions about their country, allows the novel to emphasize the fact that there is no one authentic Iceland that can be represented by one native guide. The native voice in this novel is a polyphonic one.

“Kaltblau” also shows an interesting reversal of the classic pattern. Here, the native guide is the story’s main character. Jonina is a tourist guide who is tired of hearing foreigners talk about her country and prefers to keep her distance when they seek her opinion. She cannot see the island the way the tourists do. This changes, however, with Irene and Jonas’s visit, when a shared but unspoken sorrow over lost love induces her to start listening and view her country with new eyes. Thus, the foreign author adopts a native perspective that is changed by a foreign perspective, a ploy that serves to remind the reader continually of the tourist view of Iceland, its limitations and advantages, and the tension between insider and outsider views.

Ultimately, all travel literature is about cultural encounter, more specifically, about the encounter between the Self and a perceived Other. Ernst van Alphen is one among several scholars who have pointed to the fact that encounters with an Other primarily serve the purpose of shedding light not on the Other, but on the Self.<sup>44</sup> The dynamic between outsider and insider, which shapes travelogues, also importantly informs the Iceland novel. Three of the works under discussion feature an outsider’s perspective, while the other two have Icelanders as protagonists. In *Smukke biler*, as we saw earlier, Iceland is mostly the object of the tourist gaze. The reader sees Iceland almost exclusively through Lasse’s eyes. It quickly becomes clear, however, that Lasse is by no means a reliable narrator. Having lost the woman he loves, and living a rootless and aimless life that provides no fulfilment, he lacks self-esteem, and is clearly in search of a more desirable identity. His superficial and facile opinions about Iceland serve primarily as a platform to reflect on himself and his home country.

In *De Knoop van IJsland* we again have an outsider’s perspective, but this time, it is a very self-conscious one. Just as the text shows a keen awareness of itself as part of a narrative tradition, the novel’s main perspective also demonstrates a clear sensitivity to its position as

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<sup>44</sup> van Alphen 1991: 3.

outsider to its subject matter. Hans hails from one of the small East Frisian islands off the German coast. He is also of very modest background. This makes him a very marginal German character: he finds it difficult to speak standard High German, and his mental landscape of sea, dunes, and mudflats is as far removed from that of continental Germany as his home is far removed from Berlin and the German heartland. His modest, provincial background also creates a distance between him and his fellow geologists and Iceland-travellers, who are all from the upper classes.

Hans's background is important for the novel because it gives him a very different perspective from that of the other characters. He finds it much easier to understand and sympathize with the Icelanders, who are, after all, also islanders, far removed from any of the main European cultural centres and prey to the caprices of powerful and omnipresent natural forces. As he puts it: "The islands are situated on the edge of Germany, Iceland is situated on the edge of Europe. They are outlying areas, inhabited by barbarians."<sup>45</sup>

When Hans meets Horstmann, another German geologist, who personally renamed Askja lake, he thinks to himself: "Horstmann. Who thinks he can just change the names on maps of other countries into German names. As if Iceland were a German colony."<sup>46</sup> And he wonders, not for the first time:

What is it about the Germans and Iceland? [...] Denmark would indeed do her powerful southern neighbour a great favour if she would hand over her burned bride. New Germany.<sup>47</sup>

When he catches Horstmann rowing on the lake where his colleagues drowned, he seems to Hans the very epitome of Germany's attitude to other countries, "a real German" (*een echte Duitser*): "Horstmann

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<sup>45</sup> "De eilanden liggen aan de rand van Duitsland, IJsland ligt aan de rand van Europa. Het zijn buitengewesten, bevolkt door barbaren." Zwier 1996: 132 (my translation).

<sup>46</sup> "Horstmann. Die meent dat hij de namen op de kaarten van andere landen zomaar door Duitse namen kan vervangen. Alsof IJsland een Duitse kolonie zou zijn." Zwier 1996: 83 (my translation).

<sup>47</sup> "What hebben de Duitsers toch met IJsland? [...] Denemarken zou haar machtige zuiderbuur inderdaad een grote dienst bewijzen als zij haar verbrande bruid zou willen afstaan. Nieuw Duitsland." Zwier 1996: 150–51 (my translation).

seems to him a worthy representative of the modern imperial Germany, acting just as tactlessly and arrogantly on the world stage.”<sup>48</sup> This passage tells the reader two things: that Hans apparently does not regard himself as “a real German,” and that his marginal perspective provides him with the distance to criticize contemporary imperialist and colonialist attitudes. He is thus not fully at home in either the category of insider or of outsider. Instead, like a trickster, he crosses the boundaries of each: he can identify with, yet keep a critical distance from, his own country as well as the country where he is a visitor.

Like Hans Otten, Cal in *The Killer's Guide* comes with an understanding of what it is like to be from a small country often viewed as both exotic and barbaric, acting as Other to a powerful neighbouring centre. Much is made of the fact that Cal is *not* English but Scottish, and his “northernness” is emphasized, for instance by making it easier for him to deal with Icelandic weather. Furthermore, Cal, too, is neither insider nor quite an outsider: when he arrives in Iceland at the beginning of the book, it is not as an average tourist or traveller, but to start a new life there with Birna, the Icelandic woman he loves. He does not speak the language, however, and he feels he is not accepted by Birna’s mother or her eleven-year-old daughter. On one level, the novel can be read as Cal’s personal journey to become an accepted part of their family, and while it remains unclear whether he really succeeds, the fact that Birna carries his child at the end of the book means he does manage to weave his way into the family’s, and Iceland’s, genetic fabric. Here, the movement of the text is clearly towards “going native.”

In “Kaltblau,” as we saw earlier, the narrative point of view is Icelandic, but the text nevertheless builds on an insider–outsider dynamic. The central event in the story occurs when the main Icelandic character starts seeing the Icelandic landscape with the eyes of her foreign visitors and begins to consider its magical and healing qualities. In this way, the story recognizes the difference between a native and a foreign perspective, between home and the physical reality of living there on the one hand, and the romance and

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<sup>48</sup> “Horstmann lijkt hem een waardig vertegenwoordiger van het moderne keizerlijke Duitsland, dat even tactloos en arrogant op het wereldtoneel acteert.” Zwier 1996: 168 (my translation).

emotional influence of the wild elemental forces on the other, creating a tension between the two, but then resolves it by having the latter change the former. Ernst van Alphen has argued that the only way to know the Other is by letting the Other speak about the Self, by giving the Other the position of “I,” which is exactly what happens in this story.<sup>49</sup> However, in the end, the Other is not allowed to change the Self: it is still the foreign perspective that dominates, as it changes the assumed Icelandic one.

*Skimmer* also offers an Icelandic narrative point of view. It differs from all previous texts, however, in that it neither features travel as its main motif, nor does it revolve around cultural encounter in the same way that the other works do. The foreign perspective becomes clear primarily in the fact that the Iceland constructed here is a very international place, where foreigners feature prominently, and in the playful irony underlying the text’s re-creation of many common Icelandic stereotypes. Halldór, for instance, is introduced as a “child of the republic,” conceived at the suggestion of the prime minister of Iceland to be born on the day of Iceland’s independence, 17 June 1944, to form part of a new, independent nation of Icelanders. Halldór is also nationally famous as the Icelandic state radio’s fishing news reporter. Lára, the geologist, becomes a part of the landscape she is studying, while their son, Pétur, becomes a businessman who gives the Icelandic economy a new lease on life by creating a new export market for Iceland’s fishing industry. Thus, instead of uncritically perpetuating stereotypical images of Iceland, this text exposes and ridicules them.

## Language

Any text about a foreign country inevitably raises the issue of language: how to capture, in this instance, Iceland, in a foreign language; how to introduce Icelandic into the text and to the foreign reader; and how to make foreign and Icelandic characters communicate in a convincing way. This article does not provide sufficient scope to address all these questions, but language does play a prominent part in several of the works discussed here, often taking on a symbolic role as well.

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<sup>49</sup> van Alphen 1991: 15.

One thing that the foreign fiction on Iceland under discussion makes clear is that Iceland is as difficult to traverse linguistically as it is physically. Most foreign characters struggle with the Icelandic language and its pronunciation. Lasse in *Smukeke biler* cannot remember the names of most of the Icelanders he meets. As he says dismissively: “one cannot possibly remember names like that.”<sup>50</sup> This statement in turn indicates Lasse’s lack of interest in getting to know Icelanders in any depth.

In “Kaltblau,” the cold/blue, or white/blue, symbolism that dominates the story is derived from an Icelandic expression: a “cold blue” (ice cold or hard) fact.<sup>51</sup> Although the actual Icelandic is not quoted, the acknowledged role of Icelandic here demonstrates the text’s self-awareness regarding the role of language in the representation of a foreign country generally. Jonina and Magnus both speak German, and this is how they communicate with Jonas and Irene about Iceland. As a tour guide, Jonina is used to speaking about Iceland in a foreign language. Nevertheless, language has an estranging effect. Jonina remarks on the struggle for words that tourists experience in trying to speak about their Icelandic impressions.<sup>52</sup> When Magnus and Jonina speak German, they become like strangers to each other (“It is strange to be speaking German, and Magnus’s German is almost uncanny”).<sup>53</sup> When Irene calls Jonina by her name, it sounds strange to her. Thus, the role of language in this story both reminds the reader of the fact that the language of the text is not always analogous to the language of its characters and topic, and it underscores its main theme: estrangement.

One way in which Hans Otten is able to get closer to Iceland than most of his compatriots in *De Knoop van IJsland* is through language. Hans’s East Frisian dialect allows him to understand Icelanders speaking Danish much more easily than Ina or Walther, who only speak standard German. Here, too, his marginal background proves to be an advantage. It is only a limited advantage, however, for Hans does not speak any Icelandic. In fact, the only foreigner who appears

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<sup>50</sup> “det er ikke til at huske den slags navne.” Frost 2004: 87 (my translation).

<sup>51</sup> Hermann 2003: 86.

<sup>52</sup> Hermann 2003: 89.

<sup>53</sup> “Es ist merkwürdig, Deutsch zu sprechen, und Magnus’ Deutsch ist geradezu unheimlich.” Hermann 2003: 77 (my translation); also 65.

to understand and speak the language is Horstmann. Significantly, the solution to the geological riddle, or knot, Hans seeks to solve, whether there really are two craters in one big crater at Askja, is eventually found in an Icelandic poem and account. In this respect, the text pronounces its own judgement on visitors who attempt to appropriate another country, in this case through scientific discovery, without any consideration for local culture and knowledge.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the aspiring geologist in Hans, after reaching the top of Mt. Herðubreið, cannot resist the temptation to appropriate the mountain:

Hans Ottenfells, he thinks.

Hansfjall.

Hansubreid.

He tastes the words on his dry lips. Na! He looks around him in triumph. What a shame he did not bring a German flag!<sup>55</sup>

Both Hans and Ina struggle to capture the Icelandic landscape in words. Hans initially relies on geological terms, but soon finds that the scientific language is inadequate to express the emotional effect of the landscape, which induces awe, fear, sorrow, and rapture, and an older, pre-Christian, mythological language begins to take over and occasionally clashes with the former, changing the hopeful scientist into a less rational being. Terms like “ghostly landscape” (*spooklandschap*) and “witches’ sabbath” (*heksensabbat*) indicate the sense of mystery and fear induced by the wilderness and its sounds, while the story of the mythological Hella, who guards the gate to the realm of the netherworld of the dead, reverberates throughout the novel.

At the same time, or perhaps rather as a result, the two main characters try to impose a vocabulary on the landscape that is more familiar and less threatening, thus reducing the uncanny effect of an

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<sup>54</sup> Thisted 2002: 315. She has discussed how a country may be dominated and possessed by another through language and bureaucratic paperwork, as well as through the acts of mapping, measuring, and investigation, in relation to Denmark and Greenland.

<sup>55</sup> “Hans Ottenfells, denkt hij./Hansfjall./Hansubreid./Hij proeft de woorden op zijn droge lippen. Na! Hij kijkt triomfantelijk om zich heen. Wat jammer dat hij geen Duits vlaggetje heeft meegenomen!” Zwier 1996: 84 (my translation).



alien land by assuming power over it. Domestic and bodily metaphors are used repeatedly in natural descriptions: the landscape is referred to for instance as “leprous” (*melaats*) and as an “arsehole” of the earth (*een aarsgat van de aarde*), as well as “a failure from a potter’s oven” (*een wanproduct uit de oven van een pottenbakker*) and “a burned-out kettle” (*een uitgebrande ketel*) while Geysir is likened to a “green-white bowl [...] which lies entrenched [...] like the open-air display window of a china factory.”<sup>56</sup>

The Icelandic language itself plays a minimal role in the novel, although it is not entirely suppressed. *Varda* is the one Icelandic word (“varða”) that is fully adopted by the Dutch text, referring to the monuments Hans and Ina raise to their dead loved ones, and, considering the fact that the cover of the novel has a *varda* on it, we could also regard the novel itself as a literary *varda*, or monument, to previous Iceland writers and travellers on whose narratives this text is based.

Cal in *The Killer’s Guide* also resorts to describing the Icelandic environment in domestic terms, reminiscent of home, thereby familiarizing it as “broken biscuits with rocks the colour of oatmeal” and “chewed up chocolate limes,” while Esja between sea and sky is a “liquorice allsort.”<sup>57</sup> This novel never allows its readers to forget that it takes place in a different language environment, going further than any of the works discussed so far. The English prose is generously peppered with Icelandic names, words, and phrases, some italicized and some integrated as part of the English. *Já* and *nei* are for instance standard replies for Icelandic characters, instead of “yes” and “no,” and the author produces some very entertaining instances where Icelandic is integrated in a way that allows the foreign reader to guess its meaning, as in “a different kettle of *fiskur*.”<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere, Icelandic phrases remain untranslated so that the reader shares Cal’s situation, especially when he feels excluded. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator describes the Icelandic way of speaking English, so that the reader immediately gets an idea of how the Icelandic characters in the novel sound:

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<sup>56</sup> “groen-witte schaal [...] die als de openluchtetalage van een serviesfabriek [...] ligt ingegraven.” Zwier 1996: 64, 112, 93, 165, 163 (my translation).

<sup>57</sup> Radcliffe 2005: 26, 124, 45.

<sup>58</sup> Radcliffe 2005: 55.

“It iss a kortur after seffen,” she replied in that clipped singsong that the Icelanders have with the English language. It was this *delisboss* accent that had first attracted Callum to Birna Sveinsdóttir: her elongated esses, her curt kays, her softened vees.<sup>59</sup>

Language thus becomes an effective way of emphasizing the textual construction of Iceland from a foreign perspective, as well as difference and otherness.

### Genre, Form, and Context

The creation of fiction never occurs in a cultural vacuum. It inevitably responds and in turn contributes to an existing literary tradition, as well as directing itself to a particular readership. The Iceland novels discussed here are all part of a specific national literature and are the products of specific cultural and historical circumstances and relations with Iceland. The exceptionally small number of Iceland novels would seem to indicate that they are a rather singular phenomenon in themselves, but at the same time, they cannot be viewed in isolation.

A number of features have so far come to light that the foreign works of fiction under discussion share. Many texts are intertextual and metafictional in nature and enter into a self-conscious dialogue with existing foreign discourses and stereotypes about Iceland. Travel in its various forms constitutes a prominent motif, with a clear tendency to rely on travel literature in formal and structural ways as well: cultural encounter, and the dynamic between insider and outsider, Self and Other, informs many narratives. But how do these texts reflect the literary context which produced them, and what audience do they address?

*The Killer's Guide to Iceland* is a thriller, and as such, it is part of a British tradition of adventure and crime novels set in northern locations.<sup>60</sup> Iceland in literature as the site for heroic adventure is intimately connected with the image of North in Britain, as Davidson points out: “In an English-language fiction, the words ‘we leave for

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<sup>59</sup> Radcliffe 2005: 22.

<sup>60</sup> Neijmann 2009; Wawn 2000; Davidson 2005.

the north tonight' would probably be spoken in a thriller, a fiction of action, of travel, of pursuit over wild country."<sup>61</sup> The novel has in fact much in common with an earlier, popular British thriller set in Iceland, *Running Blind* (1970), by Desmond Bagley.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, the stereotypes addressed in the novel make it clear that the text also responds to the contemporary image in the UK of Iceland as a popular tourist destination and Reykjavík as a "cool" party town.

Hans in *De Knoop van IJsland* also links Iceland with adventure literature for boys: although the stories he mentions have nothing to do with Iceland per se, travelling through Iceland makes him feel like a character in one.<sup>63</sup> It is intriguing, though, that this Dutch novel bases itself on a German tradition of Iceland travelogues, and that there should not be a single Dutch person among its cast of characters. This could be seen as an indication of the fact that no such tradition exists in Dutch. The novel is very much a unique instance, the individual product of an author with an interest in northern locations, whose travels through Iceland inspired him to write his own travel account previous to this novel.<sup>64</sup> Its use of the metaphor of Iceland as a whistling kettle is, however, almost certainly an allusion to what was for a long time the only modern book about Iceland available in Dutch.<sup>65</sup>

The prominent post-colonial angle of this work is striking, considering the fact that there is no colonial history between Iceland and the Netherlands. However, its extreme self-consciousness regarding the colonialist attitudes of powerful nations towards marginal cultures and peoples, personified by a main protagonist who hails from a region that has more in common with the Netherlands than it has with central Germany, suggests that it addresses itself to an audience from another small country, itself on the fringe of the European mainland, with Germany as its large and powerful neighbour.

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<sup>61</sup> Davidson 2005: 9.

<sup>62</sup> Turned into a BBC television series in 1979.

<sup>63</sup> Zwier 1996: 54.

<sup>64</sup> *Land van Grote Eenzaamheid: Reisnotities over IJsland*, 1987.

<sup>65</sup> *IJsland. De Fluitketel van Europa* by J. H. Kruijzinga, 1975.

Colonial relations also make up an important aspect of *Smukke biler efter krigen*, but here of course for more obvious reasons. The narrative shows a self-conscious awareness of the post-colonial relationship between Iceland and Denmark and exposes Lasse's ignorance about Denmark as a colonial power. During the wedding dinner, the Icelandic guests seated with Lasse are given the opportunity to counter his crude statements and provide their own view of the colonial history between the two countries, for instance Lasse's claim that Denmark's attitude cannot possibly be compared with that of the UK or France towards their colonies: "Denmark deals with these matters in its own, *hyggeligt* way. That's what Denmark is like. Denmark has a mentality all its own"; to which his Icelandic conversation partner laconically replies: "No one takes the teaching of Danish seriously anymore."<sup>66</sup> At other points in the text, Lasse's rants are undermined by an ironic humour, as in the following instance, where he is getting money from a cash machine:

Just like earlier in Reykjavík standing by a similar machine he felt a warm, national pride flowing through him when the machine addressed itself to him, not just in Icelandic and English and French, but also in Danish, and with a finger which, just like the rest of his body, trembles with pride in his forefathers' powerful control over the island, he touches the button by the Danish sentence indicating he wishes to be served in Danish. And then the machine eats his card [...].<sup>67</sup>

Lasse's comments on Reykjavík and its "small-town charm," meanwhile, reveal a patronizing attitude. He can't stand its pretensions of being larger than it is, or its perceived shameless commercial self-promotion: "*darling*, Reykjavík is nowhere near being New York or Copenhagen."<sup>68</sup> Lasse's dismissive attitude towards the

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<sup>66</sup> "I Danmark håndterer man den slags på sin egen hyggelige måde. Sådan er Danmark. Danmark har en helt egen mentalitet. [...] Der er ingen, der tager danskundervisningen alvorligt mere, siger Dröfn." Frost 2004: 92 (my translation).

<sup>67</sup> "Ligesom tidligere i Reykjavík ved en lignende maskine fyldes han af en varm, national stolthed, da maskinen henvender sig til ham, ikke kun på islandsk og engelsk og fransk, men også dansk, og med en finger, der ligesom hele resten af hans krop dirrer af stolthed over hans forfædres magtfulde herredømme over øen, berører han knappen ud for den danske sentens og indikerer, at han ønsker at betjenes på dansk. Og så æder maskinen hans kort." Frost 2004: 105–106 (my translation).

<sup>68</sup> "men *darling*, Reykjavík er altså ikke tilnærmelsesvis New York eller bare tilnærmelsesvis København." Frost 2004: 28 (my translation).

modern Reykjavík, coupled with his fascination with the natural wilderness, and his tendency to ascribe the perceived character of Iceland's natural phenomena to its culture and inhabitants, as when he extends its natural fragility to Icelandic culture, all belong to a Danish discursive tradition on Iceland. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson has studied the reception in Denmark of Icelandic works written in Danish in the early 20th century from a post-colonial angle, and he concludes that a colonialist discourse on Iceland determined the way in which Icelanders and Icelandic literature were viewed. This discourse understands Denmark as the representative of civilization, and Iceland as untamed Nature and the past. Modernity is, consequently, viewed as alien to Iceland, and therefore dismissed.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, this view is much less prominent in the other works of fiction, with the possible exception of *De Knoop Van IJsland*, which, however, is set in 1909.

*Smukke biler* thus clearly writes itself into a tradition of Danish writing on Iceland and addresses itself to a Danish readership. While it claims to be a thriller (“knaldroman”), in fact it plays with the conventions of a variety of literary genres, most obviously those of the road novel and travel literature, where the motif of the journey is used to discover the traveller's own identity. At the same time, the author states in an interview that part of his intention was to address the criticism that contemporary Danish literature has been lacking in social engagement.<sup>70</sup>

Like *Smukke biler*, “Kaltblau” appears in its country of origin to be one among only a very few works of fiction dealing with Iceland, but, as in Denmark, there is a tradition of Iceland literature in Germany, most notably travel writing, which, like its writing on Ireland, is characterized by a romantic nostalgia for a lost world, a pre-industrial, pre-urbanized, pre-civilized, more authentic past, and a desire for myths and origins.<sup>71</sup> The story's theme of cold estrangement, frozen emotions, and lost love is reflected in the lyrical, contemplative prose and reinforced by the imagery derived from an evocative Icelandic winterscape, which acts as both a mirror and a potential cure. “Kaltblau” thus appears to continue a long-standing German

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<sup>69</sup> Jóhannsson 2001.

<sup>70</sup> Halskov 2009.

<sup>71</sup> Schaff 2003: 469. See also Ísleifsson 1996 and Julia Zernack in this volume.

narrative tradition that has viewed Europe's Celtic and northern fringe as romantic and sublime, aesthetic representations reflecting not on any Icelandic reality, but on German identity crises and losses.<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, this same tendency is attributed to the German protagonists by the Dutch author of *De Knoop van IJsland*, where Iceland represents a dreamland, a place of desire.<sup>73</sup>

*Skimmer*, like *De Knoop van IJsland*, appears to be the only Iceland novel in its country of origin. And there is no apparent reason why Iceland should constitute the novel's main setting and topic, other than a personal interest on the part of the author. The function of the Icelandic wilderness in the novel could easily have been fulfilled by a Swedish wilderness instead, except that the specific characteristics of Iceland's volcanic nature and barren highland appear to evoke more powerfully the emptiness and Otherness that turn it into a creative matrix, a place where characters still remain as suggestions, ideas, and possibilities.<sup>74</sup> Thus, it becomes a metaphorical and metafictional blank sheet, a *tabula rasa* onto which the text of the novel is inscribed. Its perceived Otherness, being both antithesis and antidote to "civilised bad habits," is at the same time alien and familiar, as the place of origins for all life and art. The eccentricity of the characters suggests that this view of the landscape is extended to its inhabitants. In this respect, *Skimmer*, like the other Nordic novel *Smukke biler*, appears to address a tendency to view Iceland as both strange and familiar, like a wilder, more mystical part of itself. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson's analysis might provide an explanation for this when he suggests that, at least in a Danish context, Icelandic nationality has been understood both as a particular contrast to Danish nationality and as a supplement to it.<sup>75</sup> *Skimmer* could suggest that this understanding extends to the other mainland Scandinavian countries.

## Conclusion

The foreign fiction about post-medieval Iceland discussed here shares a tendency to feature primarily a textual Iceland that bases itself on

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<sup>72</sup> Schaff 2003: 474.

<sup>73</sup> "Oorden van verlangen. Droomoorden [...]." Zwier 1996: 24 (my translation).

<sup>74</sup> Tunström 1996: 65.

<sup>75</sup> Jóhannsson 2001: 39.

foreign discourses about Iceland generally. Particularly striking is how little the image of Iceland that emerges appears to have changed from that found in these discourses, going back centuries. While this image of Iceland varies to some extent from one national tradition to another, in other respects, it is the same across countries, where it shares many common features with writing about islands and fringe cultures generally.<sup>76</sup> Iceland is viewed with pre-programmed eyes and serves the narrative purpose of what Barbara Schaff has called “an imaginary soulscape”<sup>77</sup>: a mirror of an estranged Self, of losses and desires, an antidote to civilization. Ultimately, the aim is not to get to know Iceland, but to address questions about the Self: Iceland provides the dramatic stage for an inner journey on the part of the narrative Self, designed to strike a chord with a readership at home. The works of fiction discussed here do, however, all display to varying degrees a self-consciousness about their indebtedness to a textual tradition, as metanovels that foreground their own foreignness towards their subject matter. They do this by emphasizing their own nature as travel fiction, undermining any possible pretension to authenticity or narrative authority towards the subject, and by providing a marginal or Icelandic perspective that brings cultural awareness and sensitivity to the text.

Fiction, it seems, does not change the image of Iceland in foreign literature, but rather incorporates it. Iceland in foreign fiction continues to serve as a mystical, natural or Northern, peripheral, wild Other to an urban, cultured, central self, “the Other within,” thereby perpetuating, albeit self-consciously, literary conventions, discursive traditions, and images of Iceland at home—creating fictional Icelands.

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<sup>76</sup> Ísleifsson 1996 and in this volume.

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# The “North” and the “Idea of Iceland”: Contemporary Cross-Cultural Construction of Representations of Iceland<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – This article studies a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary process that leads to the creation of some new artistic representations of Iceland. This process began with an academic conference about the images of the North and the production of children’s drawings about the idea of the North, which resulted in the creation of a book of fiction by a foreign author and its translation into Icelandic. This study highlights the relationship between research and artistic creation and the nature of stereotypes and clichés about the North, the Arctic, and Iceland, as well as the relationship between the national and universal content of the images produced.

**Keywords** – Iceland, Québec, children’s drawings, literature, writer, images, representations, stereotypes, research and artistic creation

## The Idea of “Place”

Iceland, like any other “place,” exists as both representation and reality. As a representation, produced by different discourses, it should be regarded as “the idea of Iceland,” which must be understood, analyzed, and interpreted as a broad and complex combination of internal discourse (from Icelanders about themselves), external discourse (from foreigners about Iceland), and a variety of elements taken from pre-existing discourses (insularity, the North, Scandinavia, and many others) to which Iceland may be linked. The relationship between how it is perceived, what others consider it to be, and what Iceland considers itself to be must be taken into

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<sup>1</sup> Translated in English by Elaine Kennedy.

account, even if the fact remains that this confronts us, as always, with discursive representations, some of which are based in reality, while others are imagined. Therefore, we consider all representations, images, and stereotypes that constitute the image of Iceland as “a hub of representations” that defines the “idea of Iceland.”

Inspired by a multidisciplinary approach to the production of representations in a context linking research and artistic creation, this study takes as an example the case of a bidirectional creative process about Iceland between researchers, children, and a writer. The question here is not to consider the production of these representations as crucial to the whole “idea of Iceland,” but rather to study, by a dialectical approach, the influences created by researchers in a context of creation (and vice versa) and to evaluate the stereotypes and *idées reçues* that emerge from it. Representations are generated by and accumulated through competing discourses. This process allows us to measure representations of the image of Iceland. In addition to imagology, this study relies on works written by Hans Robert Jauss<sup>2</sup> and Wolfgang Iser<sup>3</sup> in particular, on the hermeneutics of reception and on the ideological and sociological analysis of discourse (Mark Angenot,<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu<sup>5</sup>), on the study of stereotypes and *idées reçues* (Ruth Amossy<sup>6</sup>), as well as applications that were made in the “national” contexts by Micheline Cambron,<sup>7</sup> Dominique Perron,<sup>8</sup> and Régine Robin.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, I propose to study the cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary process that began with an academic conference and the production of children’s drawings (“Images of the North” in Reykjavík in February, 2006) and led to the creation of a book of fiction (by Lise Tremblay) and its translation, all of which involve

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<sup>2</sup> Jauss 1988, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Iser 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Angenot 1989, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Amossy 1991; Amossy & Herschberg Pierrot 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Cambron 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Perron 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Robin 2003.

different representations of the North and of Iceland. My focus is on the process but also on the drawings and story themselves, which will highlight the nature of stereotypes and clichés about the North, the Arctic, and Iceland, and the relationship between the national and universal content of the images produced.

“Stereotype,” as the essayist Ruth Amossy attempted to define it in terms of neutral textual analysis, is a useful concept in order to understand the representations or the idea of a place. According to Amossy, stereotypes, negative or positive, are necessary to understand and conceive of ideas, perceptions, and images.<sup>10</sup> In the case of the imaginary construction of the circumpolar North, stereotypes, discourses, experiences, and cultural, linguistic, and physical facts all mix together to produce a universal representation and several different circumpolar national representations (i.e., Icelandic, Inuit, Finnish, Canadian, American, etc.)—all of which contain, and use, clichés and stereotypes at different levels.<sup>11</sup>

Ruth Amossy also reminds us that, from a socio-critical perspective, stereotypes can be

seen as key links between the text and its context, with that which is unspoken but accepted within the strata of a society. These are the places where meaning is seen to crystallize.<sup>12</sup>

They act as a form of interface between the discourse and what is said of a thing or of a place. In the case of children’s drawings, this interface is of significant interest. Furthermore, intercultural and imagological perspectives induce a double interpretation of any image and add the previous meanings: internal and external (which can be seen here in the textual interpretation of the drawings made by the foreign writer). Finally, we can also state that a socio-historical perspective nurtures this conceptual framework with a diachronic

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<sup>10</sup> Amossy 1991; Amossy & Herschberg Pierrot 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Chartier 2008b.

<sup>12</sup> “apparaissent comme des relais essentiels du texte avec son en-dehors, avec la rumeur anonyme d’une société et ses représentations. Ils sont des lieux sensibles de condensation et de production du sens.” Amossy & Herschberg Pierrot 1997: 66.

dimension, and therefore the possibility of evolution, in time, of images and representations. Thus, the idea of a place can be partly understood through the analysis of stereotypes. The discourse involved is divided into internal and external points of view. Finally, how this idea evolves over time, and the variations that emerge, must also be considered.

### Representations versus Reality

One of the most frequently asked questions in relation to collective representations is how adequately they represent different points of view of what is perceived. Each of them represents a part of the reality, whether a group of individuals, a place, a country, a continent. However, these individuals or places actually exist, and the discourse that represents them in the form of images can sometimes take over from social and political perspectives, go beyond, distort, or deny them. For those who are involved in these images or representations, the question becomes even more significant: for example, can Icelanders accept a representation of themselves, be it internal or external, that is different from the reality in which they feel they live? Conversely, can we deny the existence of a representation under the pretext that it does not reflect “reality,” knowing also that the perception of the latter varies with the viewpoint of the perceiver? Furthermore, can these representations be judged on this basis when it comes to artistic creation of new images?

The issue of adequacy to reality has become more relevant since the different media have become increasingly important in discourses, and the functions of repeated messages and their echoes further increase the gap between the autonomy of discourse and its representations. Again, this fact is of importance in the case of representations made by children. The significance of reality becomes, in some cases, incidental compared to the discursive media hype, which seems to function almost independently. Denunciations of this mismatch are largely short lived: for example, in the Icelandic crisis of 2008, repetitive government statements could not affect the power of images propelled from one media to another, from one country to another. Once initiated, the media discourse explodes, changes images and representations on its way, even when it appears differently from reality. In the case of representations, we must take this effect into account, recalling that it did not apply to the same extent in previous

historical periods, which poses quite acutely the problem of the relationship between representations and reality. It also leads to further questions about the power forces behind the production of those representations.

### The Effect of the Study of Representations on Representations Themselves

The analysis of collective representations raises ethical issues: the effect of the selection of an object of study on the creation of new representations and/or stereotypes. Researchers are increasingly aware that their role in the humanities can have an impact on these stereotypes (be it positive or negative), and that research projects that study representations can lead to the creative production of new images and representations, shaped by the perspective of those research projects.<sup>13</sup>

The study of representations, images, and stereotypes is a complex and ambiguous process that is not neutral: indeed, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, this leads to a reactivation of these elements in the cultural and social discourse and, consequently, their dissemination.<sup>14</sup> Speaking about and analyzing stereotypes and representations—in order to understand or to condemn them—paradoxically leads to additional discourse about them, which further highlights these images, for better or for worse. It may happen that the selection of objects of study in cultural and social analysis leads to a reactivation of images, representations, and stereotypes otherwise forgotten or marginalized. In sum, to speak of representations and images can contribute to strengthening and sometimes even developing them.

Our own collective research project—Iceland and Images of the North—provides an ideal framework to measure both the presence of stereotypes in the discourse about the idea of Iceland as well as the influence exerted by the project itself on the image of Iceland,

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<sup>13</sup> Gosselin & LeCoguiec 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Chartier 2008.

including the creation of new representations of Iceland and the awareness of internal and external linkages that define this discourse.

### From a Research Group to a Book of Fiction

In February 2006, a conference held in Reykjavík on Images of the North dealt at length with the socio-cultural history of Scandinavia, the links between different national images of the North, the place of Iceland in the circumpolar world, tourism, multiculturalism, localities, and the concepts of “nordicity” and “cultural nordicity” proposed by Louis-Edmond Hamelin. The conference organizers defined the “North” as “an imaginary place or geographical locus, [which] constitutes a fascinating multiple mosaic shaped by myth, image, text and experience.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the inter-discursive—made from different cultural schemata—construction of representations was raised as a methodological foundation for the study of images of the North, and therefore, of Iceland.

Researchers from a dozen countries gathered for the conference, which was part of the Reykjavík Winter Festival. Even the organization of the Images of the North conference was meant to be interdisciplinary, drawing links between a tourism event, academic research, previous cultural works, and the creation of new representations of the North and of Iceland. The programme included artistic activities such as an outdoor video exhibition (“14 artists show works that refer to the North”), a Canadian northern cinemas festival, and an exhibition of children’s drawings. The conference was organized by a research group based in Iceland and led to the creation of an Icelandic Centre for Research (RANNIS)-funded international research project on images of Iceland called Iceland and Images of the North (INOR). The artistic performances, festivals, and academic conference exemplify how the relationships between these intellectual and artistic activities are closely interconnected.

For the purpose of the conference, several Reykjavík art teachers asked their pupils to produce representations of the North that would

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<sup>15</sup> Call for papers for the Images of the North international conference, 24–26 February 2006.



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be exhibited to the researchers during the conference. They asked them to illustrate what the concept of “North” (or, when they could not understand it, “towards North”) could mean for them, without giving too much additional information. This process led to various representations, stereotypes, and perspectives on the “North” that were later shown to the researchers who came for the conference.

Some of these drawings were remarkable and suggested both a particular Icelandic knowledge of the North and some universal stereotypes linked with the Arctic and the poles: icebergs, igloos, penguins, etc. As new representations of Iceland and the North, they constitute both a reinforcement of these images and a way for researchers to grasp and visualize the way Icelandic children interpret their situation as part of the North and the Arctic—or separate from it.

After the conference, the drawings were sent to Montréal to be scanned, and researchers proceeded to study them as part of another interdisciplinary research project on representations of the Arctic.<sup>16</sup> Several general characteristics of the representations of the Arctic and the North were then identified in each of the drawings, as well as those peculiar to Iceland, in order to determine the specific parameters of an “idea of North” from the point of view of Icelandic children.

The drawings were then sent back to Iceland, where an exhibition was held at the National Museum, while an album containing the drawings and an introductory analysis was published jointly in Québec and Iceland as part of a series intended to highlight and interpret the iconographic wealth of the North, winter, and the Arctic.<sup>17</sup> As a way to pursue the cycle of creation of new representations of Iceland in an intercultural context, the drawings were finally submitted to a Québec writer, Lise Tremblay, who was asked to see if she would be inspired by them to write a story for children, or a fable. Tremblay then began to carry out her own research on Icelandic culture, climate, and

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<sup>16</sup> Each drawing was analyzed and incorporated into a database of representations of the North at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

<sup>17</sup> Sigfúsdóttir & Chartier 2009.

geography to conceive such a story, which she finished writing early in 2009. As Tremblay said,

This book is the combination of my own little experience of Iceland, my documentary research on this country, my own perception of it, the inspiration that came from the children's drawings, and mostly it is a new creative act to write a book.<sup>18</sup>

The story, entitled *L'école de Johanna (Johanna's School)*, will be published in French in Québec, and then translated into Icelandic and published in Iceland, thus closing the loop of a long but fascinating intercultural process of study and creation of images of Iceland. The steps of this research and artistic creation process go as follows: a definition of the North—a scholarly conference—children's drawings—an academic exhibition of the drawings—a study of the drawings—an exhibition—an iconographic album—a book of fiction—its translation—its study as a new multicultural representation of the North.

The drawings, the story, and then the translation and the subsequent reception of the album and the books of fiction both in Iceland and abroad can be examined in a comparative manner. Moreover, the results of this research and creative process raise many methodological and ethical questions, among them the relationship between researchers and artists, the cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural influences—between Iceland and Québec, which do not share a common cultural background, other than the fact that they can both be considered “cultures from the North”—and, of course, the “creation” of an object of research by the research process itself.

Let us now examine in more detail the drawings made by the children and the story they inspired Lise Tremblay to write, paying special attention to the various discourses that run through both of them in connection with the images of the North and of Iceland.

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Lise Tremblay, Montréal, February 2009.

## Icelandic Children Imagine the North<sup>19</sup>

All the children’s drawings were made as part of a project organized by the Reykjavík School of Visual Art (Myndlistaskólinn í Reykjavík) in collaboration with the Reykjavík Academy. Nine Icelandic teachers asked groups of pupils (aged 3 to 5, 6 to 9, 10 to 12, and teens) to create a project in which they would express their idea of the “North” in a drawing according to various guidelines. The drawings were to be shown to researchers who would come to a scholarly conference the following winter.

The teachers quickly found that the concept of the “North” was not clear for some children. One teacher, Þorbjörg Þorvaldsdóttir, reported that her pupils did not really understand what the “North” could mean; it was only after some discussion that her group accepted the idea that they, themselves, live “in the North.” “I started by asking what came to mind when I said the word ‘north,’” explains the teacher,

but I didn’t get much of a response. They had no trouble pinpointing it on a map, but didn’t have a clear idea of how far it reached south. They included Greenland and, after some discussion, Iceland and the other Scandinavian countries.<sup>20</sup>

It is significant to notice that Iceland was not immediately associated with the concept of “North,” which was set at a point that seemed higher, or “further north,” from the standpoint of the children.

In the drawings, one can easily distinguish a mix of specific Icelandic content and universal northern content. The first Icelandic characteristics and clichés pertain to insularity, an island mentality shaped and formed by virtue of being islanders (see Figure 1); the importance of fishing; the presence of monsters in the sea surrounding the island—probably influenced by the old maps with monsters that the teachers already knew and, maybe, shared with their

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<sup>19</sup> This part of the article is based on the introduction (which I wrote with Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir) to the book *Norður. Icelandic Children Imagine the North. Des enfants islandais imaginent le Nord. Íslenske börn ímynda sér Norðrið.*

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with the teachers conducted by Sigfúsdóttir, 2009.

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pupils; volcanoes, lava, wind, and horses on the land; and the unusual presence of fish drying, even beside igloos (see Figure 2).<sup>21</sup> Much universal polar content can also be identified in those drawings, like they would be from any child in the world: there are bears, penguins, and seals all together, despite their different geographical location in reality; many landscapes are shown at night, and dog sleds are abundant; northern lights, snow, ice, and igloos are shown in polar colours (blue, white, and black). The drawings often illustrate the isolation of individuals; other figures are also represented, such as wolves, whales, reindeer, and even the high mountain Bigfoot, along with hunting scenes. Finally, some of the drawings go beyond stereotypical representations to reveal a dreamlike, magical polar world (see Figure 3).

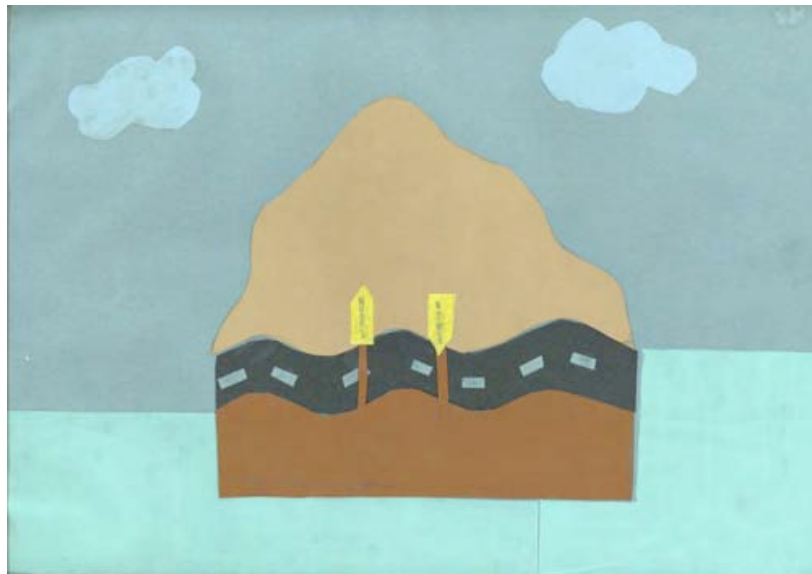


Figure 1. Drawing which illustrates Icelandic insularity by Einar Andersen.

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<sup>21</sup> Ísleifsson 1996.

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Figure 2. Drying fish beside an igloo. Drawing by Sólrún Þórólfsdóttir.



Figure 3. A dreamlike, magical polar world. Drawing by Álfrheiður Edda Sigurðardóttir.

Most of the pupils viewed the “North” as a direction rather than a specific area or a region; all of them saw it as someone else’s land—cold and exotic—and in contrast to the South. Children could hardly see the area surrounding them as the “North,” which was always a direction towards or a place further in the northern direction. Hildur

Bjarnadóttir reports that her students aged 6 to 9 understood the “North” solely in terms of direction: “I started by asking them what the ‘North’ (*norðrið*) meant, but no one understood the word or said anything. Then I asked them what ‘northward’ (*norður*) meant and everyone understood.”

Even the older pupils were inclined to portray the North as something separate from themselves; it was only after some consideration that they came to see themselves as part of it: “When they started working on their pictures,” says Sigríður Melrós Ólafsdóttir,

most of them wanted to do something exotic like ice bears, igloos, Eskimo jackets, or even penguins and other things they linked with the cold. But, one girl made a picture of her family’s summer house. When we discussed the pictures, I discovered that almost none of them wanted to do a normal “North” that is a part of their everyday life.

While the young children were unable to recognize their familiarity with the “North,” they did know what a cold world is and were more apt to associate “winter” with their own environment: Elsa D. Gísladóttir mentioned that the children aged 3 or 4 could not understand cardinal points, but said that, “when we talked about cold and temperate countries, it became clear to them that Iceland is cold—the ice, snow and icebergs reflecting that cold.” Even for the children aged 6 to 9, the elements that first came to mind to represent the “North” were the cold, snow, and colour phenomena (blue and white, pastels, the polar night, and northern lights). While the concept of “North” was an abstraction, the concept of “cold” and “winter” were ideas they already experienced and could associate with specific graphic representations.

The drawings made by these children are not simple transpositions of stereotypes and clichés about the “North” or “winter.” Actually, they illustrate extraordinary and complex worlds, both including and transcending stereotypes, and they reveal an imaginary experience of the “North.” Although they mostly conceive of the “North” as *another* world, *somewhere else*, *up there*, and *colder* than their everyday environment in Reykjavík, their drawings are permeated by local, Icelandic identity. Some details of their drawings

could have been imagined by children anywhere in the world—geography-defying penguins on a cold black sky; the odd warm light shining from houses inhabited by rare isolated characters; people hunting reindeer, wolves, and other wild animals. That is the universal North, an extension of Western discourse on the Arctic, moulded by childhood imaginings where monsters, igloos, and polar bears can mingle, the fruit of a system of representations that does not require any experience of the reality.<sup>22</sup> But beyond this first impression, upon closer examination, the drawings also reveal a “North” that is totally specific, experienced, culturally fuelled, and that would never occur in the same way to a child from Montréal, Iqaluit, or Rovaniemi—an Icelandic “North” marked by insularity, the importance of fishing, fish and boats, sea monsters around inhabitable areas, volcanoes, lava, wind, and horses galloping over the moors: all images associated both with “Iceland” and the “North,” even if some of them traditionally refer to other areas as well (volcanoes, fishing, etc.).

Despite the limitations of such a small corpus (about sixty drawings) and the interferences induced by the instructions given by the teachers, it seems from the children’s drawings that the concept of the “North” is most of the time an external one, but when applied to a particular country’s image (here, Iceland), it constructs itself as a combination of universal and specific discourses. Now let us examine how those drawings lead to an external literary representation of Iceland with Lise Tremblay’s story, another step in this cross-cultural process of constructing representations.

### *Johanna’s School*

The writing process of the book entitled *Johanna’s School* is the result of a conscious intervention to link a scholarly event (a conference) and a cultural activity with children (the drawings) to the creation of a multicultural and creative foreign literary representation of Iceland, and ultimately its analysis, in a circular manner. This circularity is actually more in line with the pattern of a spiral, in the sense that it takes elements that reposition the preliminary issues both at the centre and at the margin. This movement will also continue with the translation of the story in Iceland (a return of otherness: a self-image

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<sup>22</sup> Chartier 2008a.

seen by an “Other,” based on a reflection on the self). In all cases, we can consider this story as the product of a process in which the construction and superposition of images and stereotypes lead to the creation of a new form of representation of the “North” and of “Iceland.”

The context of the creation of this story can be defined as follows: the Québec writer Lise Tremblay, whose work shows great sensitivity to issues of identity shift, cultural and territorial eccentricity, and remoteness and small communities, was first asked to undertake a speaking tour in Iceland, a country she did not previously know. Following this visit, her collection of short stories *La Héronnière*<sup>23</sup> was translated into Icelandic and published in Reykjavík.<sup>24</sup> Thereafter, she was invited to create, from the series of children’s drawings about the “North,” an original “Icelandic story” that could accompany them. She then launched herself into personal research on Iceland, its culture, its history, and its peculiarities, and wrote a story that is a combination of her own concerns, inspiration from the drawings, the image of Iceland, and finally the desire to contribute to a scholarly research project on the image of Iceland in relation to the idea of the North. Since Tremblay’s work often deals with the concept of “nordicity” (she “nordifies” in her literary works the area where she was born, the Lac-Saint-Jean), the artistic result would certainly integrate many elements found in the children’s drawings (an Icelandic view of the “North”) with an outsider’s view of Iceland (her own perspective).

Based on a *fait divers* that occurred in 2008—the arrival of hungry polar bears around Skagafjörður—the story by Lise Tremblay unfolds like an ecological fable and also echoes the issues of the desertion of small villages, a topic that is found in the writer’s other books. Johanna, a former teacher, befriends one of her former students, now an adult. The latter supports Johanna in her last days as she seeks to stay in touch with the rest of the world using a computer and to visit the past through the drawings of children she has found in the school where she formerly taught. She is concerned about the changes that have occurred around her: the disappearance of small communities,

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<sup>23</sup> Tremblay 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Tremblay 2007.



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climate changes, etc. Before dying, she entrusts her friend with a box containing her testament: a plane ticket to America, for the narrator to visit an island where a man has reversed deforestation, and her fortune, which she has donated to an environmental organization for the protection of polar bears.

We must consider Tremblay’s narrative as a literary creation that is also a foreign view of Iceland, based on academic study, inspired by drawings of Icelandic children who represent the North and, of course, that uses—sometimes, creatively—some of the stereotypes about this country. We can extract from its first paragraph an impressive account of characteristics that can define Iceland: first, insularity, the presence of ice, women’s prominent role in society, an obsession with the sea and concern about the disappearance of fisheries, the loss of small villages, the presence of Scandinavian elements, and the importance of reading, drinking, and telling stories. Secondly come a few stereotypes, already present in the children’s drawings: polar bears, the haunting absence of trees, the lunar landscape, the desire to go abroad, the invading presence of tourists, the concentration of the population in Reykjavík, the radical change of day and night, the silence, the great wind, and the importance of technology in everyday life.

The portrait of Iceland the text conveys is not false at all, and is actually in line with many internal and foreign representations of this country. Being a cultural work, it has the advantage of concentrating many elements of these images in a single text. Again, Iceland is both shaped by a universal discourse and specific content: the North is Arctic, imaginary and stereotyped, but it is also the “place” of social, demographic, and environmental issues. Most of all, it is a “real place” where people live, struggle, and imagine the world.

### The Idea of Iceland

The study of the cross-cultural process from a conference to a new literary book about Iceland and the “North” has allowed us to consider three assumptions, two of which relate to researching contemporary culture, and the third, to the discourse on the Imaginary North, Iceland, and the Arctic.

Firstly, there is a strong link and two-sided influence between research and creative production in research on contemporary culture. Our research, that is, the selection of our objects of study, the perspectives from which we carry out research, our contacts with the creators, and the published results of our research, all influence the creative process of future works and the reception of previous works. It can also define the object of study itself.<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, since we often work on artistic creations from an aesthetic perspective, we are looking for the emergence of new forms and styles—what interests us are original works, but we are also trying to find works that combine different elements into a single reshaped form—in both cases, we need to imagine (or sometimes create) what could have been the “conventional form” (which would concentrate on the stereotypes) from which the novelty of the new productions can be evaluated and understood. Since we talk about “new,” “unconventional,” “original” artworks, we need to set a “conventional” standard, which is often very hard to define, except when based on the concepts of clichés and stereotypes. In spite of this, the contents of such clichés and stereotypes are not easy to grasp, since they evidently change over time and lead to more complex issues than originally envisioned. The best we can suggest in many cases is establishing lists of elements which rely on one aspect or another of a more general idea—here, the “North,” the “Arctic,” and “Iceland.”

Finally, it seems that the discourse on the Imaginary North, Iceland, and the Arctic oscillates between universal and particular discourses. The idea of North is made of universal elements, colours, and schemata, complemented and augmented by individual and national perspectives. Its circumpolar—or pan-Arctic—nature constitutes a remarkable example of a multicultural and intercultural construction. This makes it difficult to study the Imaginary North and the Arctic from a single national point of view, since it is a cross-cultural, shared imagination. On the other hand, the universality of

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<sup>25</sup> In some cases, this relationship has been modelled into an institutional framework: for example, some academic institutions—like the Reykjavík Academy—do not separate research from creation, which is reflected in the co-existence of researchers, writers, and artists in research laboratories, academic conferences, and published proceedings.

“the idea of North” can only be understood if we also consider the different national, generic, historic, genre-related, and geographic particularities it encompasses. This leads us to question the relationship between geography and discourse, the real and the imaginary—a relationship in which discourse is constructed like a changing whole that can be grasped only in its constant movement in the narration, images, and forms that underlie it. The way we carry out this research today and the role of the media adds to this cross-cultural perspective as we borrow and share ideas and concepts and try to apply and modify them for our own research. Contacts and collaboration between researchers from different disciplines, cultural backgrounds, and fields of study accentuate the need for a cross-cultural, shared methodological common ground. What is true for the research process can also be applied to creative processes and to the influence of research on creation, and vice-versa. Evidently, when we are researching the images of Iceland, we study a patchwork of different discourses that all apply to Iceland, but which come from different sources and perspectives: among them, the “idea of North,” the “idea of a cold place,” a “remote place,” and dozens of other discursive paradigms that shape and define “the idea of Iceland.”

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# Reflecting Images: The Front Page of Icelandic Tourism Brochures

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**Abstract** – One of the most popular tools to promote tourist destinations is the publication of travel brochures. This study explores image-making in material that promotes Icelandic tourism on a regional and national basis and its effect on the conceptualization of different regional tourist destinations. The pictorial content of the front page of the main travel brochures has been studied in order to identify images put in the foreground by both the national tourism board as well as various regional destinations' marketing bureaus. In addition, key players in tourism development and regional marketing have been interviewed about the destination image-making process and the interaction between regional and national image-making.

**Keywords** – Destination image, destination promotion, travel brochures, photographs, regional tourist destinations, Iceland

## Introduction

This country is all about majestic, muscular vistas, raw and brutal expanses of Tolkien-strength geography: unclimbed peaks, desolate, thunderous waterfalls, horizon-spanning lava fields, arctic deserts and glaciers where man has left no mark. An unfinished corner of the universe, as one Victorian traveller very deftly described it.<sup>1</sup>

Tourist destinations are created in an increasingly competitive environment, and there is hardly any place left on the globe that is still untouched by tourism development. Emerging destinations compete fiercely with older destinations for the attention of potential tourists. For many countries, tourism is an important source of foreign exchange earnings, income, and employment, and for these countries, a successful positioning in the global marketplace is of great importance. The role of destination images has received much interest

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<sup>1</sup> Moore 2009.

in tourism research in the last decade.<sup>2</sup> The path towards being a well-recognized destination presents a difficult marketing challenge. The crux of the problem is identifying a unifying image or feature that represents the whole destination, while at the same time differentiates it from other destinations.

Armed with the right strategy, it is still a considerable challenge to get the message across, not least for rural and peripheral destinations that often find it difficult to succeed in projecting the selected images to the target markets. Numerous studies have been carried out to explore the ways in which destinations' marketers can affect and manipulate potential tourists' perceptions with effective image-making.<sup>3</sup> Many of these studies point out that visual material is a significant vehicle for creating and managing a destination image.<sup>4</sup> Hence photographs in tourism promotional material are an important part of the image-making process.

This study explores image-making through visual material in Icelandic tourism marketing material, both on a regional and a national basis, and its effect on the conceptualization of different regional tourist destinations. The goal is to explore the interrelation of national and regional destination marketing and the ways in which image-making on a national level affects regional product development and the identity of the regional tourist destination. The pictorial content of the front page of the main travel brochures has been studied in order to identify images put in the foreground by both the national tourism board as well as by various regional tourism boards. In addition, key players in tourism development and regional marketing have been interviewed about the destination image-making process and the interaction of regional and national image-making. In total forty-seven people were interviewed. All are involved in regional tourism development and have participated in decision-making regarding marketing and promotional activities. A few participants work at the national level.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Buhalis 2000; Gallarza, Saura, & García 2002; Nadeau et al. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Tasci & Gartner 2007; McCartney, Butler, & Bennet 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Jenkins 2003; MacKay & Couldwell 2004.

<sup>5</sup> The interviews were part of a larger research project carried out by the Rural Tourism Department at Holar University College and the Iceland Tourism Research Centre with the aim of assessing methods of regional marketing in Iceland.

## Promoting Destinations

Marketing creates narratives, images and brands that mediate a place to the potential tourist in the traveller-generating regions.<sup>6</sup>

Destinations appear in various shapes and forms, and as Jarkko Saarinen has stated, “destination is by nature a problematic concept.”<sup>7</sup> No exact definition of the term “destination” really exists, and many studies do not clarify what exactly constitutes a destination.<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang Framke observes that the definition of the term varies according to the research approach adopted.<sup>9</sup> Thus, business and marketing studies often have different definitions of a destination than studies that employ sociological research methods. The former usually focus on geographical boundaries as well as supply and demand when defining destinations, whereas the latter generally view destination as a social product. Thus, Saarinen observes that the notion of physical or administrative units as a way to define tourist destinations may be a convenient approach, but he stresses the need to understand tourist destinations as a more fluid entity. He suggests that the identity of a tourist destination is a discursive formation of a dual nature, combining discourse of the region with discourse of development:

The discourse of the region (or “place”) refers to our knowledge and meanings related to tourist destinations (the idea), and the discourse of development (or “action”) aims to represent the practices and larger processes constructing destinations.<sup>10</sup>

Tourism literature, such as guidebooks, brochures, advertisements, maps, and blogs, are influential factors making up the discourse of the region. The discourse of development, on the other hand, reflects the actions of tourism organizations and institutions, such as destination marketing offices, travel bureaus, information centres, etc. Together

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<sup>6</sup> Framke 2002: 106.

<sup>7</sup> Saarinen 2004: 164.

<sup>8</sup> Hunter 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Framke 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Saarinen 2004: 167.

then, these discourses shape the identity of the tourist destination. It is important not to forget that the discourses are never static; thus the identity of a destination is the product of constantly evolving and changing discursive practices.<sup>11</sup> This means that destinations are constantly shaped and reshaped, developed and promoted.

In recent years, growing emphasis has been placed on organized marketing efforts on a regional basis. Regional imagery has become more and more important, and this has been especially noticeable with the promotion of quality food products and with the application of heritage and history as a place promotional tool.<sup>12</sup> Each region thus strives to recognize its key attractions and make them the focus of all promotion. It is not a simple process to translate all the various factors that give a region its special appeal into a synthesized marketing concept that creates a strong image of the destination. Susan Horner and John Swarbrooke maintain that coordination between different geographical levels is one of the major challenges of destination marketing throughout Europe.<sup>13</sup> The regional–national dynamic in destination marketing is certainly not a simple one, as Stephen W. Litvin and Nacef Mouri found out in their study of visual content of destination advertisements. They conclude that political correctness, in the sense of trying to favour lesser-known regions in destination promotion, is not an effective strategy for building up a strong destination image.<sup>14</sup> Thus, destination marketing on a national level tends to promote selective features, which may then result in the exclusion of some regions that may have little relevance to those selected features.<sup>15</sup> In general, the strongest promotional power is at the national level, and individual regions try to benefit from that while simultaneously developing their own unique and identifiable image.

Destination marketing aims at creating a positive image of a place to lure potential travellers to visit. Brochures are an important tool for systematic image-building.<sup>16</sup> According to Robert Dilley, the image

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<sup>11</sup> Saarinen 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Williams 2001; Fox 2007; Storey 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Horner & Swarbrooke 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Litvin & Mouri 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Seaton 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Hunter 2008.



presented in national travel brochures is “the closest thing to an official tourism image of each country [...] this is how the countries themselves wish to be seen.”<sup>17</sup> Annette Pritchard and Nigel Morgan agree with Dilley and point out that the design of the brochure cover is particularly critical. “The cover establishes eye contact and initial interest [...] It is also the marketers’ main opportunity to establish a brand identity for the destination.”<sup>18</sup> This was written long before the era of extensive Internet marketing of various types (websites, blogs, banners, videos, etc.) as well as all kinds of different mobile technologies (phones, videos, and such) that have opened up new ways of image-making and projection of images.<sup>19</sup> Despite these newer marketing media and despite certain controversy regarding the impact of tourism promotion, the brochure retains its status as most destination marketing bureaus, national as well as regional, still publish their yearly brochure and spend considerable money and time on this.<sup>20</sup> Most of those brochures are characterized by a profuse use of beautiful glossy pictures. The pictorial content of brochures is undeniably of great importance and influence in image-making.

## Photographic Images

Indeed without photography there would not be the contemporary global tourism industry.<sup>21</sup>

In his seminal work *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry describes how tourism is characterized by a hermeneutic cycle where photographs play the main role.<sup>22</sup> That is, tourists seek places they have seen in travel brochures or other promotional material. Once there, they take pictures in order to demonstrate to others that they have really been there. In his attempt to empirically prove Urry’s theory of this closed circle of representation, Brian Garrod demonstrates how

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<sup>17</sup> Dilley 1986: 65.

<sup>18</sup> Pritchard & Morgan 1996: 357.

<sup>19</sup> Jansson 2007; Gren & Gunnarsdóttir 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Govers, Go, & Kuldeep 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Urry 2002: 130.

<sup>22</sup> Urry 2002.

the imagery employed by the tourism industry to draw tourists to particular destinations becomes the object of the tourist gaze and thereby the subject of tourists' photographs.<sup>23</sup>

Other studies have demonstrated how pictures of certain places have repeatedly been used in brochures, even for decades, causing tourists to feel that they have not experienced the destination until they have encountered the places that have been presented in the promotional material.<sup>24</sup> Thus, photographs are crucial in constructing tourists' expectations that easily affect the way in which they experience the visited destination.

Photographs are the essence of modern tourism; hence carefully selected visual material is of great importance.<sup>25</sup> However, it is important to note that photographs do more than only present the product: they also tell a certain story. That is, the selection of visual images can communicate values and ideas.<sup>26</sup> The focus in research on image-making in brochures has primarily been to understand the ways in which the picture selection affects tourists' views of the destination and its inhabitants. Image-making always creates systems of meaning and the discourse of tourism imagery can reveal power relations that can affect the way we see ourselves and others—tourism images are not only selling a place/destination, they also reveal the power relations that underpin the image construction. Thus, the pictorial content of tourism brochures often projects the host population as stereotypes, people belonging to minority groups are only portrayed in service roles, and women are often presented as the object of the tourist gaze whereas men are more active and dominant.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, several studies indicate that image-making in tourism promotional material affects the way in which the host population sees itself and its community. Garrod, for example, found out that “residents identify more strongly with the tourism-related

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<sup>23</sup> Garrod 2009: 356.

<sup>24</sup> MacKay & Fesenmaier 1997; Nelson 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Molina & Esteban 2006.

<sup>26</sup> MacKay & Fesenmaier 1997: 538.

<sup>27</sup> Morgan & Pritchard 1998; Urry 2002.

image of the town than its contemporary economic role.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, residents as well as tourists are affected by the visual images projected by the promotional material. William Hunter actually warns that photographic representations in tourism material can be socially negative and those who promote destinations should pay more attention to the photographic material they are using, “before it is too late and local people are left vigorously struggling to retrieve their already compromised identities.”<sup>29</sup>

Tourism operators, tourism officers, and all those who are actors in regional tourism development are also residents at the tourist destination; hence they too are receivers of destination images. Little attention has been paid to the way in which image-making affects the actors in tourism, their decisions, and their understanding, both regarding product development and marketing strategies.

## Iceland’s Front Page

Tourism is an important pillar in Iceland’s economy and a major source of foreign revenue. The international promotion of Iceland as an attractive tourism destination is an important part of its tourism development. Icelandic tourism authorities, as well as a range of private companies, have invested heavily in constructing and developing Iceland’s image as a tourism destination.

The issue of marketing has been a hot topic in the discourse on Icelandic tourism in recent years. Marketing of rural areas has been of special interest, and arguments have risen concerning methods and strategies applied by the national tourism authorities.<sup>30</sup> At the beginning of this century, controversy arose regarding image-making in Icelandair’s promotional material. The suggestion of sex tourism implicit in slogans like “One Night Stand in Iceland” and “Fancy a Dirty Weekend” became a target of feminist critique.<sup>31</sup> Others have argued that Icelandic tourism promotional material has been

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<sup>28</sup> Garrod 2008: 395.

<sup>29</sup> Hunter 2008: 364.

<sup>30</sup> Gunnarsdóttir 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Dagsdóttir 2002; Elísson 2003.

influential in asserting nationalistic ideas that do not necessarily accurately reflect Icelandic reality and recent societal changes, for example, in terms of immigration.<sup>32</sup>

The so-called *Iceland brochure* is published yearly by the Iceland Tourist Board (ITB). It is published in ten languages (English, German, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, French, Italian, Spanish, and Dutch) with additional special publications for North America. The Iceland brochure is distributed worldwide in printed form, on a DVD, and as a PDF document accessible on the Iceland Tourist Board's website, [www.visiticeland.com](http://www.visiticeland.com). For the purpose of this study, the visual images on the front page of eighteen brochures were studied, thirteen of the main brochure and five of the North American brochure. Most of the brochures were published in the first decade of the 21st century. It should be noted that no systematic preservation of older copies of the Iceland brochure seems to exist. Thus, the National and University Library of Iceland does not have a collection of the brochure, nor are any copies from before 1995 available at the office of the Iceland Tourist Board. This limits the possibilities of systematic research over an extended period of public tourism promotional material.

Nature images dominate the front pages. There is only one instance among the covers where nature is not prominently on display. Without exception, it is a wild, uninhabited landscape that is presented (Figure 1).

Nature has for years been the main theme in the promotion of Iceland as a tourist destination. The early slogans of the 1960s and 1970s used the theme of drama in nature, ice, and fire, whereas in recent years the accessibility of Icelandic nature is stressed, for example, in slogans like “Reykjavík: Next Door to Nature.”<sup>33</sup> The material places a heavy emphasis on a pure and pristine landscape. Since 1999, Iceland has been promoted in the United States by a marketing consortium labelled “Iceland Naturally,” and in recent years the same strategy has been employed in the main European markets (see also Edward H. Huijbens in this volume). As the name

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<sup>32</sup> Einarsson 1997; Grétarsdóttir 2002; Þórarinsdóttir 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Stefnumót—stefnumótun í ferðaþjónustu í Reykjavík [Policy Meet—Policy Meeting in Reykjavík Tourism Activities] 1999.

## THE FRONT PAGE OF ICELANDIC TOURISM BROCHURES

indicates, nature has been emphasized as the main attraction. Surveys, carried out the whole year round among foreign tourists, also clearly confirm that nature is by far the main reason for visiting Iceland.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, a recent study also reveals that tourists' image of Iceland is that of a scenic nature destination.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the imagery employed in the promotion of Iceland seems to have successfully directed the tourists' gaze and constructed their view of Iceland.



Figure 1. The front page of the Iceland brochure: 1991, 1993, 2003, 2002, 2005, 2007.

Given this emphasis on nature as the main attraction, it is surprising how monotonous and passive the image of nature is on all the covers. The passivity indeed implies that this is a place that waits for the tourist to explore and there is no nuisance that will disturb. This pattern is indeed typical of other destinations. Thus, after

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<sup>34</sup> Óladóttir 2004; Óladóttir 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Magnusson & Gudlaugsson 2008.

analyzing brochures and travel guides published by twenty-one tourist destinations around the world, Hunter concludes that “photographic representations in tourism tend to depict vacant and pristine spaces awaiting the tourist.”<sup>36</sup> Hunter labels this type of representations as “groomed spaces”; in other words, the brochures depict space that is neat and tidy, nothing too messy to distract the eye.

A study of twenty-eight tourism brochures for Wales also revealed that the covers were remarkably similar, most of them displaying one photograph of scenic imagery, blue images in particular.<sup>37</sup> Bluish covers are also naturally predominant on the Iceland brochure, since water (sea, lakes, and waterfalls) is a recurrent theme. The abundance of water is hardly surprising for a North Atlantic island destination characterized by fjords, lakes, and waterfalls. Indeed, many other cold-water islands also focus on water as an attraction.<sup>38</sup> Blue is also the colour of northern and cold regions, and Stefan Gössling concludes that this is manifested in Icelandic tourism promotional material (on this matter see also Daisy Neijmann in this volume):

The general image represented is that of a cold, unusual, majestic country, which is also the image reflected in books on Iceland, including titles such as *“Lost in Iceland”*, *“Magic of Iceland”*, *“Wonders of Iceland”*, *“Colours of Iceland”* or *“Land of Light”*.<sup>39</sup>

This reflects what Oystein Jensen and Tor Korneliussen call perceptions of the overall North that are constituted by “an idea of wild and untouched nature with an ‘arctic’ climate and people living close to nature.”<sup>40</sup> Morgan and Pritchard have pointed out how a masculine landscape characterizes tourism imagery of the North. This is the image of an active, wild, and rough landscape that is connected to the themes of adventure, excitement, and exploration. In the South, however, feminine landscape (passive, sensual, waiting to be controlled) is more dominant in the tourism promotional material,

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<sup>36</sup> Hunter 2008: 360.

<sup>37</sup> Pritchard & Morgan 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Baum 1998.

<sup>39</sup> Gössling 2006: 122.

<sup>40</sup> Jensen & Korneliussen 2002: 325.

especially in less powerful countries that are populated with First World tourists.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, the cover of the Iceland brochure does not emphasize adventure and activity. Rather, a certain passive tone is dominant (see Figure 1). The gaze is often from a distance looking at calm water and landscape stretching, as it seems, infinitely, emphasizing scenic landscape ready for exploration. Bearing in mind that Iceland's volcanic landscape features large glaciers and numerous hot springs, it is surprising to note that glaciers, volcanoes, and geothermal places are not featured on the covers. As mentioned before, preservation of older copies of the Iceland brochure is sporadic, but it seems that both spouting volcanoes and geysers were more common features on brochure covers from the 1970s and early 1980s.

Cultural aspects are hardly visible on the Iceland brochure cover, and people perform, at best, a supporting role. At the same time, there has been an explosion in the supply of both cultural tourism products as well as opportunities for excitement and adventure. It should be noted that this study focuses only on the covers; hence, a content analysis of the brochures may present a somewhat different image than the one emphasized on the covers. Indeed, Gössling's analysis of information material (both from private companies and public authorities) on display in the tourist information centres in Reykjavík revealed "that Iceland seeks to market itself as an 'extreme' and 'different' destination."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Gössling notices that the capital area is presented in a very different way from the rest of Iceland. In the case of the city, culture and modernity is stressed, whereas

[for] the "rest of Iceland", pictures mostly depict landscape views, often aerial, ice formations, snow scooters, dogsleds, super jeeps, Northern lights, waterfalls, horses and whales. People shown usually wear sweaters or coats, often raincoats.<sup>43</sup>

This analysis of the front page of the Iceland brochure reveals a consistent emphasis on scenic nature. At first glance this image-

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<sup>41</sup> Morgan & Pritchard 1998.

<sup>42</sup> Gössling 2006: 122.

<sup>43</sup> Gössling 2006: 121.

making should be beneficial for image-making on a regional level since the whole country is characterized by scenic nature. In order to explore that national/regional relationship further in terms of destination promotion, we need to take a closer look at the covers of brochures promoting the regional destinations in Iceland as well as investigate how key players within the tourism sector in each region identify the destination image.

### Image-Making Closer to Home

The growing emphasis on regional destination marketing has certainly been the case in Iceland, resulting in the establishment of regional marketing bureaus around the country.<sup>44</sup> Their operating environment is based on that of the regional tourism associations established in the 1980s. Those regional tourism associations in turn were established according to the boundaries of electoral districts for the national elections at that time. Hence, it is fair to say that an institutional setup outside the touristscape has been dominant in defining the regional tourist destinations in Iceland. Regardless of their origins as tourist destinations, those regions all have ambitions of enhancing their tourism activities and are operating, as all other tourist destinations, in an increasingly competitive environment.

The Icelandic Tourism Association (ITA) was established 1984 and is comprised of eight regional tourism associations, which in turn have individual memberships made up of both business people, municipalities, and the interested public. The regional tourism associations vary dramatically in their activities; some have been inactive for years, and others are instrumental in developing and promoting tourism in their area. The main purpose of both the regional tourism associations and the newly established regional marketing bureaus is to enhance regional visibility and promote the regions on the national and international markets.<sup>45</sup>

The ITA supervised publication of brochures for each region in the years 2005 and 2007 (some brochures were not published until 2008). A publishing agency designed a standardized format for all the

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<sup>44</sup> Huijbens & Gunnarsdóttir 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Huijbens & Gunnarsdóttir 2008.



## THE FRONT PAGE OF ICELANDIC TOURISM BROCHURES

regions and drafted the content, which was then sent to each regional association for revision and approval. The publication of those brochures coincided with the establishment of the new marketing bureaus. In some cases, the regional tourism association had already been replaced by a marketing bureau, which was then responsible for the supervision of the brochure. The cover of the second round of the regional brochures (see Figure 2) is the subject of this study.



Figure 2. Front pages of the regional tourism brochures.

Interviews with key players in each region revealed that regional image-making has seldom been based on a systematic approach. Emphasis in the promotional material has mostly been negotiated on an informal basis and is based on what the key actors within the tourism sector in each region view as important elements of their product. Incidentally, respondents often find it difficult to describe the image of the destination they are promoting. Commonly, people stated that it was tricky to nail down the image of the region, and much work remained undone in terms of identifying key factors that could be appealing to the main target markets. Many interviewees talked about a weak image and complained about their region being more or less invisible in the Iceland Tourist Board's promotion. In recent years, a regional approach has actually become more apparent in the promotional material (brochures, websites, posters, etc.) published by the Iceland Tourist Board. However, the content of this representation has been decided upon solely at the national level. The interviews revealed that this frustrated the regional destination promoters and that they wanted to have more to say in the image-making process.

At the same time, people were conscious about the regions' weak images, and some felt that the images promoted were in essence Iceland in a miniature; hence, nothing distinctive came to mind. In general, "diversity" was the first word that people mentioned when they were asked to describe the image of their region. When asked to explain this diversity further it became clear that it was first and foremost based on various descriptions of the Icelandic landscape and that the variety is such that it is almost complete. The key headings in the brochures are also in this spirit: "*All* you can desire," "Cross-section of *all* that is Iceland," "Experience *everything*," and "*World* of enchantment," just to name a few. The diversity of nature is prominently on display on all the brochure's covers (Figure 2) as well as in the introductory text inside the brochures:

East Iceland—a magical region of natural phenomena. Glaciers, forests, bird cliffs, vast expanses, deserts, majestic mountains and narrow fjords. Waterfalls, rivers and the sea. The ocean air and highland scents!<sup>46</sup>

South Iceland is a nature traveller's daydream, a sampling of all that is Iceland including some of the most treasured natural attractions.<sup>47</sup>

Regional imagery is not prominent on the covers, although selected natural icons of the region add some sense of locality. However, it is doubtful that the location of those natural wonders is universally known, except maybe in the case of west Iceland, where the glacier Snæfellsjökull is on display. Thus, there seems to be a limited effort to establish a strong regional destination image. An attractive destination is based on the whole community; hence it is the interaction of nature, culture, and lifestyles that creates a unique experience or perception for the tourist. The covers of the regional brochures, however, display pristine, untouched nature, an "empty" landscape, so to speak. This is by no means uncommon, and Morgan et al. note that there is a strong tendency to emphasize landscape rather than cultural attributes, posing the question: "Why do destination marketers so often ignore a place's unique cultural attributes in the rush to promote

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<sup>46</sup> Hlöðversson & Nielsen 2008a: 5.

<sup>47</sup> Hlöðversson & Nielsen 2008b: 3.

sun, surf, and sand or lake, land and mountain?"<sup>48</sup> One answer is that physical aspects translate better into photographic images. The complexity of culture and society is more difficult to convey.

It is clear that promoters of many regions in Iceland feel that the characteristics of their regions have not been represented adequately in the national promotional material. This demonstrates some of the problems in representation and how complex the issue of destination marketing is. Tourism destinations are sold largely on image—the Icelandic image being one of a pure, raw environment—as well as emphasizing the promotion of Reykjavík as a modern city of high culture and with a vibrant nightlife. The covers of the regional brochures underline this clearly since only the brochure for the capital region has culture in the foreground (see Figure 2). Thus, in some ways we seem to end up with two Icelands: cultural capital and empty landscapes, neither of them representing the rural areas of Iceland as living communities and worthwhile destinations. Tourist facilities and infrastructure in rural areas are ignored or de-emphasized in order to promote a wild and pristine landscape. Not only does this image affect the way the local tourism actors present their product, it is also in stark contrast to their product development and emphasis on service delivery.

As Claudio Minca has pointed out, this is a pattern all too common in modern tourism marketing:

Tourist landscapes continue to be represented as objects, as simply a collection of endlessly reproducible images—all the while tourist mediators' expend great time and energy in order to invest those images with meaning, to render them able to elicit emotions, sentiments and, above all, a sense of belonging.<sup>49</sup>

Destinations coexist on national, regional and subregional levels. Hence, the discourses of region and development that shape the identity of the destination take place on multiple levels as well. In the case of Iceland, the discourse of region does not comply very well

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<sup>48</sup> Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggot 2003: 297.

<sup>49</sup> Minca 2007: 439.

with the discourse of development, with the result that the identity of the regional destinations is unclear and confusing.

## Conclusion

It is increasingly important to understand how tourism reinforces and encourages particular ways of seeing and thinking. Promoted images affect the way the host population perceives itself and its environment.<sup>50</sup> In the case of Iceland, actors in regional tourism development seem to suffer from an identity crisis based on limited representation of the region in the national marketing material. The regional representation reflects very much the image promoted on the national level, which does not necessary comply with the emphasis on the region's product development and service delivery.

Much in the same way tourists are affected by repeated images and motives in tourism promotional material, regional tourism officers and tourism entrepreneurs are also receivers of those same images. Carla Santos has pointed out how travel writers constantly focus on similar items in their narratives, thus "they do not constantly create new representations but rather fall on previously established organizing narratives."<sup>51</sup> The interviews revealed that people felt that they were governed by a dominant narrative constructed on the national level and that the need for a more aggressive local initiative is pressing. So far the conceptualization of the regional tourist destinations seems to be rather limited, and the design of the brochure cover is primarily based on the selection of a photograph presenting an empty and pristine landscape that often seems to have little connection with the tourism supply of the region.

There is no dispute that nature is Iceland's primary tourist attraction, and it is certainly the focus of all promotion. However, the passive nature image presented in the national as well as the regional brochures has become rather static. Promotion is dynamic and multifaceted, so regions must complement but also distinguish themselves in the promotional material. The emphasis on passive nature images offers limited opportunities for development or

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<sup>50</sup> See for example Adams 2004 and Garrod 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Santos 2004: 123.

differentiation, therefore limiting regional destination development and promotion. The Iceland brochure cover presents a gaze from the distance, rendering an image of a slightly mysterious country far away in the bluish north. Static images of nature have been dominant, and the reflection of those images has in some ways been too bright and prevented the development of distinct regional destinations, resulting in the image of an “empty” and “groomed” Iceland for the tourists to explore—a corner of the universe waiting for the finishing touch.

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# Nation-Branding: A Critical Evaluation. Assessing the Image Building of Iceland<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – Icelanders have long been image conscious. But only recently with Icelandic companies expanding abroad has a concerted effort towards image building been set in motion. With the budding expansion, the Icelandic Trade Council invested in an analysis of “the image of Iceland,” which was conducted by the Office of the Prime Minister and is now being perpetuated as “communicative defence strategies” by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This article provides an analysis of image building and claims that its underpinnings lie in the idea of “nation-branding,” with Iceland receiving a place on the *Nation Brand Index* (NBI) devised by Simon Anholt. This article seeks to critically evaluate the Icelandic image building effort with reference to geographic literature on place-making, placing, and notions of belonging, ideas integral to an image of anywhere.

**Keywords** – Iceland, image, nation-branding, place brand, geography, space, place, ethics, post-structuralism, politics, foreign affairs

## Introduction

We also have to take care that Iceland does not become a  
brand; Iceland is naturally like...life.<sup>2</sup>

Above the artist Ólafur Elíasson expresses his thoughts about Iceland when asked about his relationship to the country in terms of his art in the news programme *Kastljós* on Icelandic national television (RÚV), 23 June 2008. He emphasizes that a country and its people are not

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<sup>2</sup> “Við verðum líka að passa að Ísland verði ekki svona brand, Ísland er náttúrulega eins og...líf” (my translation).

brands or “raw material” for image building, but alive and thus unpredictable.

This article is set in the context of recent efforts of image building in Iceland.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, it is about the marketing of Iceland as a tourist destination and the ways in which branding is an integral part of such efforts. These marketing efforts are critically evaluated and I will demonstrate how they draw on recently promoted ideas of nation-branding. Thus the image building is critiqued through stating that branding can never surmount the inherent tension within the socio-cultural reality of the destination being promoted, in this particular case Iceland. The main focus of the critique is placed on this last point, Iceland itself as space and a place.

As a number of my colleagues demonstrate in other articles in this book, there is undoubtedly something about Iceland. Islands in general do have a special allure, as John R. Gillis observes: “In Western cultures, islands have always been viewed as places of sojourn [...] from the beginning they were seen as remote liminal places,” usually associated with pilgrimage or spiritual travel.<sup>4</sup> Further, Gillis claims that nowadays, islands often capitalize on their apparent remoteness in time and space to become popular destinations— islands slake the modern thirst for that authenticity which seems in short supply on the mainland.<sup>5</sup> Iceland is slightly set apart from the majority of islands in the world as it is inhabited, yet bordering the Arctic and thus remote in the sense of its Nordicity. Thus its island allure, composed of an amalgamation of its physical, cultural, and climatic features, is compounded through less tangible characteristics of “island-ness,” such as a sense of distance, isolation, separateness, tradition, “otherness,” and the North.<sup>6</sup> This amalgamation creating its allure has been well documented by scholars<sup>7</sup> as being a combination of uninhabited wilderness, volcanic activity, frontier land at the edge of the world, and a genuine physical challenge to those wanting to

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<sup>3</sup> Gunn 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Gillis 2007: 278.

<sup>5</sup> Gillis 2007: 280.

<sup>6</sup> Jóhannesson, Huijbens, & Sharpley 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ísleifsson 1996; Oslund 2000; Pálsson & Dürrenberger 1992.

travel in it. Through the centuries Iceland has thus been a well-known destination, at least in the Western world.

Before setting out, some basic premises need to be outlined. Firstly, a destination is no simple matter. Jarkko Saarinen states:

*Destination* is by nature a problematic concept. It refers to a varying range of spatial scales (i.e. levels of representation) in tourism: continents, states, provinces, municipalities and other administrative units, tourist resorts or even single tourist products. Spatial scales and definitions of destinations based on administrative or other such units are sometimes useful and practical, but theoretically they tend to approach tourism as a spatial and geographical phenomenon from a technical and static viewpoint.<sup>8</sup>

Emerging from this is a type of relational ontology where a destination is never static and scales can never be fixed, as that would fail to bring to life all the ongoing events and spatial trajectories which co-form it.<sup>9</sup> These trajectories are manifold and entail human as well as non-human actors in a particular destination. Tourism, understood from this perspective, revolves around practices, orderings, and the ways tourism is done. Tourism is thus an active ongoing endeavour, never to be arrested and fixed into explanatory categories.<sup>10</sup> This ontology will be further explored below whilst critiquing image building. But in this context a particular trajectory is made from the perspective of those visiting destinations. They seek experiences, and managing those is impossible, although B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore attempt to produce guidelines to that effect.<sup>11</sup> These experiences are lived ones and do not merely revolve around visual perception. Adding the visitors' perspective thus adds a commercial trajectory to destination formation, which Maria F. Cracolici and Peter Nijkamp explain:

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<sup>8</sup> Saarinen 2004: 164.

<sup>9</sup> Massey 2005: 110.

<sup>10</sup> Cloke & Perkins 1998; Crouch 2002; Edensor 1998; Franklin & Crang 2001.

<sup>11</sup> See Pine II & Gilmore 1999.

A tourist destination (e.g. city, region or site) is at present often no longer seen as a set of distinct natural, cultural, artistic or environmental resources, but as an overall appealing product available in a certain area: a complex and integrated portfolio of services offered by a destination that supplies a holiday experience which meets the needs of the tourist. A tourist destination thus produces a compound package of tourist services based on its indigenous supply potential.<sup>12</sup>

If we understand destinations through a relational ontology as composed of trajectories that have, as Brian Massumi would say, “an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary,” then a country, with its inhabiting nation, can be seen as a constellation of such destinations, to use tourism vocabulary.<sup>13</sup> Nation building as outlined by Benedict Anderson is very much a calculated effort to align this constellation into a coherent state, but branding is as well. However, branding is business and thus wholly different from the process Anderson describes.<sup>14</sup>

The second premise is that of understanding branding and its relation to images. In tourism a destination’s image is well known to be fundamental to destination choice.<sup>15</sup> That is, the images, perceptions, feelings, and beliefs that tourists hold of particular places are significant influences on the destinations they choose to visit; moreover, those images may be verified, enhanced, or modified (positively or negatively) by the experience of the destination, thus impacting on future travel decisions.<sup>16</sup> In this context and drawing on Graham Hankinson, an image can be defined as that which people perceive whilst a brand is that which is being communicated by someone.<sup>17</sup> Jean-Noël Kapferer outlines a relationship between brands and images in three parts.<sup>18</sup> First, there is the sender, who conveys brand identity along with other sources of inspiration as a

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<sup>12</sup> Cracolici & Nijkamp 2008: 336.

<sup>13</sup> Massumi 2002: 4.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Baloglu & McCleary 1999; Jenkins 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Chon 1992.

<sup>17</sup> Hankinson 2004: 111.

<sup>18</sup> Kapferer 2004.

signal. These signals are messages transmitted to a third party, the receiver, who develops the brand image. An image is always in the eye of the beholder, but branding or brand management aims to encompass both ends, the eye of the beholder and the producer of the image. Between both ends there needs to be congruence. Image thus appears as a promotional asset in brand management, be it for good or bad, and branding is about the management of images amongst other things, just as branding is created through image.

Thus a destination and any constellation thereof (i.e., nations and regions) is not so much about nation building and their deployment in diplomatic advocacy, but it has become a component in branding exercises of various kinds. Image and reputation have become essential equities of states,<sup>19</sup> and these are subject to brand management practices to an increasing extent.<sup>20</sup> It almost goes without saying that it takes considerable investment in neo-liberal ideology to believe that culture, spaces, and places can be subjected to brand management practices.<sup>21</sup> It simply begs for a critical analysis, but first the official efforts at creating and maintaining Iceland's image will be outlined.

## Branding Iceland

The recent image building exercise of the Icelandic authorities will be analyzed below. This concerted multi-stakeholder effort of induced image building started in the late 1990s and is aimed at marketing Iceland and products produced there. Midway through, the Icelandic authorities called upon the popularly labelled proponent of nation-branding, Simon Anholt, as they became conscious of the need to "repackage" Iceland's image and seek the source of its brand.<sup>22</sup> The image building exercise has been greatly influenced by Anholt's input, and Iceland's latest effort in marketing and image promotion bears his mark.

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<sup>19</sup> van Ham 2005: 17; see also Anholt 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Anholt 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Harvey 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Anholt is currently the chief editor of the journal *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, and has published extensively on the subject. See for example Anholt 2002, 2007.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

Most tourists travel to major destinations and a country like Iceland can hardly be considered amongst those, with only 500,000 visitors yearly compared to the millions that visit neighbouring countries or places like Paris, Amsterdam, and Copenhagen. Iceland can at best be a niche player competing on the margins. Thus, when it comes to an induced image, the country relies on effective, targeted strategies that have the potential to squeeze the maximum value from the small budget available.<sup>23</sup> The government of Iceland has wholeheartedly accepted this, at least for tourism, and a report outlining the policy and vision for Icelandic tourism until 2030 states the necessity of a concerted effort to harmonize the image of Iceland domestically and internationally, or “to attach the image better to the country’s competitive advantage.”<sup>24</sup>



Figure 1. Iceland Naturally—registered trademark and the logo of Íslandsbanki.

Iceland Naturally (IN) can be considered the start of this concerted effort in building and protecting Iceland’s image as a tourist destination, although the image was not only developed for tourism. Initiated in 1997 and 1998, by the then head of the Icelandic Tourist Board and the commercial attaché of the Foreign Secretariat in New York, the project was formally launched in the U.S. in 1999 and in 2006 in Europe, based on the U.S. experience. It was not only Iceland’s tourism industry that was involved in this exercise, but artists and advertisement agencies contributed as well, for example, through making the logo in Figure 1 above. Other logos were also produced, sharing the layout of Figure 1, such as that of Íslandsbanki, set next to it on the right.

The initial focus of the IN campaign was upon product awareness. Preceding its launch a market survey was carried out on the U.S.

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<sup>23</sup> Morgan 2005.

<sup>24</sup> “Að tengja ímyndina betur samkeppnisforskoti landsins.” *Íslensk ferðaþjónusta—framtíðarsýn* [Icelandic Tourism—Vision for the Future] 2003 (my translation).



market by Fleishman Hillard, showing that only 11% of respondents were aware of Icelandic products in the U.S. market. Later, the Michael Cohen group conducted a similar product awareness survey in Europe in 2005 preceding IN's launch there, but this was also with a focus on the island as a tourism destination. There the results were that around two-thirds of respondents in Britain, France, and Germany found Iceland to be an appealing destination. The themes that emerged from the survey were different according to the nationality of the respondent. Whilst the British associated Iceland with ice and snow, with mineral spas, fish, and volcanoes lagging as far seconds, the Germans placed primacy on the mineral spas, although they ranked on a par with ice and snow, and with natural beauty and rugged exotic landscapes coming second. The French followed the British with prominent notions of ice and snow, with fish, exotic rugged landscapes, and mineral spas coming far behind. These findings have guided the marketing efforts of IN. Generally the Iceland Naturally project can be viewed as a first step in Iceland's image campaign.<sup>25</sup> The main themes of Iceland Naturally are the natural, with reference to purity, sustainability, nature, and the unspoiled. The companies who partner with the public authorities in this project are seven food producers and selected tourism operators in the country.

The Iceland Travel Industry Association (SAF) is also involved in the management of IN. In 2003 SAF called its members to a strategic planning meeting to review the association's five-year history and create a vision for the next five years. The vision created entailed seven strategic goals, one of which revolved around the image of Iceland. The bases stated for the image are:

- Purity
- Health
- Safety
- The country's beauty

For the SAF the marketing of Iceland and its beauty revolves around notions of untouched nature, to be promoted through the marketing slogan "Iceland Naturally." Environmental consciousness

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<sup>25</sup> Pálsdóttir 2005.

also features in their vision for the image, as well as the idea of purity.<sup>26</sup> So in many ways the industry association's vision echoes that of the IN marketing strategy. Purity seems to be the focus in Iceland's marketing, responding to the Michael Cohen group survey where the respondents did not have a strong awareness of Iceland in terms of purity.

Following the strategy of IN and the vision of SAF, the Iceland Chamber of Commerce (ICC) recruited Simon Anholt as an advisor for the long-term strategic build-up of the image of Iceland in response to the adverse publicity in early 2006 regarding Icelandic banks and the resumption of whaling.<sup>27</sup> Through focus group interviews in Iceland and abroad, several work sessions, and most importantly the surveying of Iceland's position through Anholt's quarterly Nation Brand survey, Iceland emerged as a relatively unknown entity mostly associated with the Nordic countries in general. Anholt concluded that Iceland's image today is more of a country brand than a nation brand, referring to the physical entity that is Iceland and its nature rather than the people living in the country. Thus, he praised the rise in Icelandic tourism as it has done a good job of communicating the natural attributes of the island around the world, but the character of Iceland's population remains largely unknown except to its nearest neighbours.<sup>28</sup>

The ICC next recommended that a special task force should be set up in order to establish the image of Iceland. Their role was to inventory the current perception of the population, outline a policy, and suggest ways of implementation. The Office of the Prime Minister responded and set up this task force in 2007, which delivered

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<sup>26</sup> *Stefnumótun SAF 2004–2012* [SAF Policy 2004–2012], 2007.

<sup>27</sup> As an interesting comparison, Denmark has gone through much the same. First image awareness became prominent with the Muhammad cartoon controversy; see Therkelsen & Halkier 2008. Then in 2007 the government allocated 400 million DKK to branding Denmark; see for example *Markedsføring af Danmark* [Global Marketing of Denmark], <<http://www.brandingdanmark.dk>>.

<sup>28</sup> *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, staða og stefna* [The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy] 2008.

NATION-BRANDING: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

its report in February 2008 entitled *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, staða og stefna* (The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy).<sup>29</sup>

The task force’s method entailed an attempt at an inventory of the cultural resources of Iceland, along with an inventory of the population’s “mindscape.” In practical terms it can be compared to Wally Olins’s seven-step essentials in nation-branding.<sup>30</sup> These steps are outlined in Table 1:

Table 1. The seven-step essentials in nation-branding.

<b>Olins’s steps</b>	<b>The taskforce’s method and results</b>
Set up working groups	The task force set up several smaller focus groups by invitation around the country.
Perception of the nation	Large open focus group meetings were held in Reykjavík and in the countryside.
Evaluate strengths and weaknesses	The focus was mainly on outlining the strengths.
Central idea created	The image core was set up as a matrix of nature, people, the economy and culture, intersecting with power, freedom and peace.
Visualisation	The core was visualised through the “ice crystal” and a volcano and it was suggested that a brand image should be created.
Co-ordination of the message	The current state of affairs was detailed and what emerged was a tangled web of relations entitled “the spider” by the taskforce. They recommend how to clarify this.
Liaison system launched	Recommendations are put forth as to who is to work with whom.

Source: Olins 1999 (left column)

With the steps in the right-hand column a core was made, around which a sense of purpose in the country was to be built. In the core, tourism, population, export, policy, cultural relations, and investment promotion agendas could be aligned into a long-term development

<sup>29</sup> *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, staða og stefna* [The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy] 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Olins 1999.

agenda for the entire nation.<sup>31</sup> As stated in the foreword to the taskforce's report,

this has to do with the whole nation, as the build-up of a powerful and positive international reputation is necessary to further secure Iceland's position in the international community.<sup>32</sup>

With this aim the task force set about researching in order to generate the core image of Iceland. Spearheaded by the rector of Reykjavík University, a semi-private business school, huge focus groups of around 100 participants around the country were set up in collaboration with Capacent-Gallup, and from them the task force distilled the five points below as a summary of what Icelanders thought of themselves. These ideas served as a first step in outlining the truth of the "Iceland brand," guiding branding practices.

*Origin:* The first Icelanders were people who came here in search of freedom and better quality of life. The nation mostly suffered from hardships through history, but once becoming independent it vaulted from being a developing country to becoming one of the richest nations in the world in less than a century. The greatest cultural heritage of Icelanders, the Icelandic language, lives in the nation's daily communications and literature.

*Society:* Iceland is a free democratic society, human rights are well respected, and welfare dominates. The society is egalitarian characterized by strong social bonds. It is a safe and peaceful society.

*Personal characteristics:* Icelanders are hard working, brave, and resourceful. They are uninhibited children of nature and have a strong will for independence.

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<sup>31</sup> Wason 2005: 28.

<sup>32</sup> "sem varðar þjóðina alla þar sem uppbygging kraftmikils og jákvæðs alþjóðlegs orðspors er nauðsynlegt til þess að festa Ísland enn frekar í sessi á alþjóðagrundvelli. *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, stada og stefna* [The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy] 2008: 3 (my translation).

*Achievements:* The struggle for independence by a small nation and achievement to escape poverty and become one of the world's richest nations is ranked in the minds of many as the nation's key achievement.

*Attributes/Assets:* Unique nature, its resources and purity, safe and peaceful democratic society, founded on freedom and respect for human rights. A powerful economy and the aptitude of the nation's people are the driving force.<sup>33</sup>

Here the mixing of people, society, and nation is no coincidence as the above is presented in a selectively diachronic fashion. Based on the key attributes of Iceland defined above, the taskforce proposed that there should be three founding tenets to Iceland's branding:

**Power:** Efficiency, optimism, and audacity characterize the unique creative powers of the nation. The Icelandic landscape is extremely powerful and its purity is one of the most important factors in Iceland's image.

**Freedom:** The origin of settlement in Iceland is rooted in the search for freedom. The struggle for independence captured a small nation's desire for freedom, which despite its size and poverty managed to gain independence. Iceland is amongst the freest societies in the world and democracy is its founding principle.

**Peace:** Icelanders enjoy one of the safest societies in the world, a strong welfare society populated with those wanting to live at peace with their environment, Nature, and other nations and who advocate peace strongly in the international arena.<sup>34</sup>

Following this, the taskforce claims that the untamed forces of Nature are parallel to the often unruly and unpredictable behaviour of Icelanders. The report draws a stark homogenous picture of a nation invested with a "natural strength" that forms the "foundation of its

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<sup>33</sup> *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, stada og stefna* [The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy] 2008: 25 (my translation).

<sup>34</sup> *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, stada og stefna* [The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy] 2008: 25 (my translation).

dynamic business activities.”<sup>35</sup> The people, the place, and its romance all feature here, generously laced with power in all its form but in a very superficial fashion, as much more in-depth research than simple focus groups is required to get a sense of places and its people. All the tenets of former image building exercises and ideas from the Iceland Naturally concept through the industry association and the Icelandic Chamber of Commerce are present, especially nature. But here there is an explicit attempt to tie the people to the landscape in order to turn the country brand into a nation brand, as deemed necessary by Simon Anholt. The key conclusion of the taskforce is the necessity of a joint platform to communicate the key attributes and thus commit and align the stakeholders to the branding vision. The government report, compiled to serve business interests, even suggests that Icelandic artists should be put to use creating positive stories about Icelandic companies’ achievements.<sup>36</sup> The brand is to be an all-encompassing framework and shows an amazing lack of awareness of the complexities of places and its peoples and draws heavily on the branding literature. It is abundantly clear under which theme “truths” are to be introduced in branding, or as Andy Pike shows, how “space and place are written through branded objects and the social practices of branding,” simplistically and framed with the teleological lens of branding’s ultimate marketing aim.<sup>37</sup>

As is clear from the above, the work of the taskforce is the culmination of Iceland’s image building exercise and clearly echoes that of nation-branding, albeit the taskforce claims it is about image building and protecting. What is also clear is the way in which the aim is to further commit people and places to the image of Iceland for profitability.<sup>38</sup> Now the taskforce’s proposals have been adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a “communicative defence strategy,” taking marketing into the realm of public diplomacy. Branding is indeed business, but there are inherent tensions within the destinations it aims to promote.<sup>39</sup> What is perceived by a person

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<sup>35</sup> Ólafsdóttir 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Ólafsdóttir 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Pike 2009: 620.

<sup>38</sup> Pike 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Even going so far as having handbooks produced for the purposes of branding nations, cities, and destinations published in the academic press; see Moilanen & Rainisto 2008.

visiting a place is open to different interpretations, not only since we are all different and with different backgrounds, but also depending on the different ways each stakeholder packages the image and encounters *in situ*. In this way Philip Kotler's euphemism that "places are more difficult to brand than products"<sup>40</sup> holds, as the qualities of places, for example, experiences of authenticity, cannot be determined, and how a place is apprehended in its entirety is hard to make clear sense of.<sup>41</sup> All places are an outcome of history and heritage, culture, a specific political system, distinctive core values and beliefs, constitutions, institutions, and national behaviour—or as Brian Massumi would say, an infinity of trajectories ripe with non-present potential, as will be further explained below.<sup>42</sup>

## Critique and Ways Forward

Space *can* talk back<sup>43</sup>.

Ash Amin

By way of introduction to this critique I pose the question: Can a nation be branded? Do nations function as competitive entities on a world market? Here the distinction between a brand and branding becomes significant. Iceland has an identity in the minds of the international community, albeit rather vague and primarily tied to its landscape and Nordicness, as Simon Anholt showed. This identity can supposedly be augmented through branding, but the question is whether Iceland can be branded. This is a pertinent question, since the efforts of the taskforce can only be seen as an attempt at branding. Douglas B. Holt states, "Consumer culture is the ideological infrastructure that undergirds what and how people consume and sets the ground rules for marketers' branding activities."<sup>44</sup> In the same way, Andy Pike states that branding "represents the valorization of the cultural forms and meanings of

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<sup>40</sup> Kotler 2005: 12.

<sup>41</sup> Ryan 2002; Seddighi & Theocharous 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Massumi 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Amin 2004: 39, emphasis in original.

<sup>44</sup> Holt, 2002: 80.

goods and services.”<sup>45</sup> Consumer culture is to guide branding and branding valorises consumption—the agenda is clear as has been outlined above. According to the branding literature nations are competing, with much of what a nation and society is about being turned into *equities*, and the taskforce’s aim is to define basic national characteristics in order for them to become equities in a branding strategy.<sup>46</sup> This equitization of Iceland’s people and culture is taken through a three-tiered critique below.

## Packaging People

As a first level critique, the taskforce has in certain ways fallen prey to what Holt terms the modern branding paradigm, where the brand is to function as a cultural blueprint for the masses to adopt.<sup>47</sup> The critique of this type of place branding evident in the literature is neatly summed up by Joao R. Freire:

Often, people do not accept that branding or any other marketing concept should be applied to places because they immediately establish a negative link between these marketing aspects and the commercialisation of national and local culture [...] branding is a perverse tool used by greedy companies, with the objective of manipulating consumers’ minds and increasing profits [...] corrupt a place’s authenticity [...] abuse of the natives.<sup>48</sup>

In very much the same way, Sun-Young Park and James F. Petrick say that

the measures to evaluate effectiveness of destination branding are not different from those for image. Thus, the term, DB [destination branding] *might be* “old wine in a new bottle.” That is, it may be re-adorned jargon to emphasize the need for

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<sup>45</sup> Pike 2009: 630–631.

<sup>46</sup> Anholt 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007; Anholt & Hildreth 2004; Bengtsson & Fuat-Firat 2006; Clifton 2005; Freire 2005, 2006; Garbacz Rawson 2007; Gudjonsson 2005; van Ham 2005; Hankinson 2004; Nebenzahl 2005; Wason 2005; Wetzel 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Holt 2002.

<sup>48</sup> Freire 2005: 350.



unequivocal “focus” in marketing a destination to appeal to tourists.<sup>49</sup>

Graham Hankinson’s concern is that “conflicts can arise between the destination’s economic aspirations and the socio-cultural needs of residents, leading to commodification at the expense of culture.”<sup>50</sup> The four points below are matters of dispute between branding exercises and those involved.

- The way guests and tourists experience a destination they visit cannot be controlled by those marketing the destination.
- The product presented and marketed is not necessarily the one that will be actually used.
- Many actors are involved in the promotion and use of the product.
- Capital is not forthcoming for joint marketing exercises such as branding of a nation or a destination.

Clearly an awareness of conflicting views and multi-stakeholder interests can be gleaned in the branding literature. Simon Anholt speaks of an advanced notion of branding, creating a more complex picture drawing on vested interests, socio-cultural dynamics, and place specificity.<sup>51</sup>

The taskforce in some ways also took this more nuanced approach aiming to understand the image Icelanders have of themselves in order to promulgate a true image that is then to underpin the nation’s brand. In that sense the taskforce sought to create a brand that Holt explains to be “invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value.”<sup>52</sup> Through their focus-group methods they sought to place the brand in real life, looking for what Holt would call “evidence that the brand has earned its keep

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<sup>49</sup> Park & Petrick 2006: 264, I emphasize.

<sup>50</sup> Hankinson 2004: 117.

<sup>51</sup> Anholt 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Holt 2002: 83.

either at some remove from marketing's propaganda engines or in historic eras that precedes the race to create brand identities."<sup>53</sup>

The nation brand is construed as a valuable resource for identity construction, for example, for those in tourism or those in export businesses. Hlynur Gudjonsson proposes that the people of any place are the keys to successful branding, or, as he states: the people "properly utilised [are] the most powerful communication tool in the nation branding toolbox."<sup>54</sup> In a more nuanced, less utilitarian, account, Juergen Gnoth states: "The economic motivation needs to be expanded to embrace ecological accounting based on a critical socio-historical background."<sup>55</sup> Here branding is about coordination, rather than directives and control, similar to the way in which Clare A. Gunn explains the workings of a tourism destination:

Tourism, in contrast to a manufacturing plant, cannot be managed by a single director. It can be guided, stimulated, and led, but not managed, by a central authority. Especially important at the destination scale is leadership, not dictation.<sup>56</sup>

What appears is that the balance struck in the taskforce's work is one skewed towards dictation rather than guidance.

To sum up the first level of critique: Firstly, conflicting and contested interests complicate the unravelling of an image core of a nation. Uncovering a "true" brand is thus nothing more than an exercise in branding and can never patch up the commercial motivations. Secondly, the methods employed in order to unravel the core for the benefit of a brand treated the nation and Iceland as a tangible product. It is obviously not so. The taskforce thus emerges as a dictating branding instrument with clear commercial motivations. Here notions of authenticity, commodification, and "disneyfication" come to the fore.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Holt 2002: 84.

<sup>54</sup> Gudjonsson 2005: 288.

<sup>55</sup> Gnoth 2005: 25.

<sup>56</sup> Gunn 1994: 438.

<sup>57</sup> The term "disneyfication" was coined by Zukin (1996) but was popularized in Ritzer's work (especially Ritzer 1995) referring to how societies become uniform

## Authentic Iceland

With the notions of contestation a second-level critique emerges. Bella Dicks points out when referring to authenticity, “authenticity is not an objective quality but a subjective judgement, always open to dispute and dissent through conflicting interests.”<sup>58</sup> Thus what is real is a matter of conflicting voices. First to contest the representation presented by the taskforce was the Association of Icelandic Historians, who wrote an open letter to the prime minister dated 12 June 2008. They take special issue with the notion of origin as presented above and say in the letter:

The Association of Icelandic Historians finds it prudent to point out that these few sentences among other things entail a view on history not in line with historical research from the past 30–35 years. These reflect a view on history forged during the struggle for independence with a political purpose in mind. This view has been objected to by several historians with compelling arguments. Myths such the original settler’s desire for freedom and a new golden age in the wake of independence were amongst those created to justify the claim for independence. In addition modern concepts and norms such as “better quality of life” and “developing country” are used with reference to a past when they maybe had no value.<sup>59</sup>

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through globalized consumption practices. Here it means that little by little, tourism would turn out to be very similar everywhere, that experiences tourists went to get would be predictable and calculated as in Walt Disney’s theme park. There would be a guaranteed satisfaction in a perfect *Disneyland* image, but at the same time using the Disney techniques in branding, marketing, pricing, safety, and staff.

<sup>58</sup> Dicks 2003: 58.

<sup>59</sup> “Sagnfræðingafélagi Íslands finnst rétt að benda á að þessar fáu setningar fela m.a. í sér söguskoðun sem er á skjön við sagnfræðirannsóknir síðustu 30-35 ára. Hún sver sig fremur í ætt við þá söguskoðun sem mótuð var í sjálfstæðisbaráttunni í pólitískum tilgangi. Þeirri söguskoðun hafa fjölmargir sagnfræðingar andmælt síðustu áratugi og komið fram með sannfærandi rök sínu máli til stuðnings. Greina má godsagnir á borð við frelsisþrá landsnámsmanna og nýja gullöld í kjölfar sjálfstæðis sem voru meðal þeirra sem skapaðar voru til að réttlæta sjálfstæðiskröfuna. Einnig má sjá að nútímahugtök og –viðmið eins og „betri lífsskilyrði“ og „þróunarland“ eru notuð yfir fortíð þar sem óvíst er að þau hafi haft nokkuð gildi.” Ellenberger 2008 (my translation).

In a radio interview on RÚV on 28 June 2008, Professor of History Guðmundur Hálfðánarson of the University of Iceland sums up: “This picture is built like all such images...this is not something that simply exists.”

Quoting the professor further, indeed the truth content of images, if they at all can represent what they are supposed to, is highly suspect. In addition, squeezing a whole nation into a uniform whole under a “core brand” simply entails violence to all those who cannot assimilate. Hálfðánarson also picks up on the attempted commercial camouflaging, noting that developing a core brand for advertising purposes has a pre-given result: it must at all costs be positive.<sup>60</sup> The critique summed here through Professor Hálfðánarson is one half of a two-pronged critique, the other half revolving around landscape imagery and how nature and the environment are put to work. Power and purity are suffusing landscape myths, transposed onto the inhabitants. The nature portrayed or the representative landscapes of Iceland set forth by the taskforce entails an active forgetting of hardships and suffering.

In sum, the deconstructions of historical and landscape myths provide a stepping-stone in the second-level critique of branding. The neo-environmental determinism, renewing notions of how different species of man are directly shaped physically and culturally by their environment,<sup>61</sup> manifest in the taskforce’s simplistic categorical associations, is taken to task by the historians.<sup>62</sup> But places and spaces, which compose landscapes, nature, and the environment, are complex. What Pike calls the brand’s inevitable “geographical entanglement” forms the basis for a third-level critique, which is the main focus of this article.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> My notes from the radio interview: “Þessi mynd er tilbúin líkt og aðrar ímyndir...þetta er ekki eitthvað sem einfaldlega er til” (my translation).

<sup>61</sup> See Sluyter 2003.

<sup>62</sup> This has been done before; see for example a sum of literature presented by Sigurðsson 1996: 20. Also the environmental determinism notion can be traced to antiquity in Western literature; see Glacken 1967: 81.

<sup>63</sup> Pike 2009.

## Species of Spaces and Other Places<sup>64</sup>

Spaces and places are key to the core brand of nations. Understanding space is thus instrumental to understanding the inherent complexities of the core brand. Theories of spaces and places are becoming more intricate and nuanced. Spaces have become understood relationally in terms of multiplicity and flows. Spatial theory builds on a progressive sense of place, a sense that recognizes places as unbounded, open, and mobile, as movements of various intensities where space and time are unhinged. All these movements come together to form a place, such as the city Elizabeth Grosz outlines:

By “city,” I understand a complex and interactive network that links together, often in an unintegrated and ad hoc way, a number of disparate social activities, processes, relations, with a number of architectural, geographical, civic and public relations.<sup>65</sup>

This progressive sense of place has been promoted in the work of Doreen Massey, who places it in juxtaposition with

thinking of the local as uniquely embedded [that] can encourage a certain closure of identity, an understanding of identity as pre-formed before engagement with the world beyond.<sup>66</sup>

She argues that places are historically contingent. By being historically contingent a place is born out of a certain material and temporal context from which future spaces emerge. This is to say, how the dense networks of interaction for which a place provides make spatial configurations that are generative of future spaces.<sup>67</sup>

Franco Bianchini and Lia Ghilardi argue in the branding literature for an inventory of the cultural resources of a place, along with an inventory of the “mindscape,” in the manner of the Icelandic

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<sup>64</sup> See Perce 1999.

<sup>65</sup> Grosz 1995: 105.

<sup>66</sup> Massey 1999, 2005, 2007: 154.

<sup>67</sup> Massey 2005; see also May & Thrift 2001; Murdoch 1997; Pred 1983; Thrift 1996.

taskforce.<sup>68</sup> But this exercise is never complete, as Georges Perec reminds us: “I know that if I classify, if I make inventories, somewhere there are going to be events that will step in and throw the order out.”<sup>69</sup> As we continually mould our identities, there always follows another act from the preceding one, there is always an and. As Marcus A. Doel states, “the taking place of space is always already,”<sup>70</sup> which paraphrases Michel de Certeau, who says that “the fact remains that we are *foreigners* on the inside—but *there is no outside*.”<sup>71</sup> There is never a goal to be reached, yet we are always reaching.

The above understanding of spaces and places is that one can never stand outside the unfolding of space; one can never black-box it and set it up as a representation; space is always at one with its own unfolding. In capturing this one-dimensional foldedness of space (that at the same time implies its multidimensionality), the illustration of the Möbius strip is often used when discussing what Michel Serres would term “the chain of genesis.”<sup>72</sup> Premised upon this spatial understanding a new view emerges of the co-ordination of stakeholders’ interests and the efforts of those involved in branding a nation. Bruce Bough would see this coordination as “a chance concatenation of forces, of converging and diverging series of fluxes, differentials of intensity and rates of change, which together produce something new and unforeseeable.”<sup>73</sup>

It must be unforeseeable, since Brian Massumi claims everything always exceeds and is thus kept in motion:

If there were no escape, no excess or remainder, no fade-out to infinity, the universe would be without potential, pure entropy, death. Actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Bianchini & Ghilardi 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Perec 1999: 132.

<sup>70</sup> Doel 1999: 144.

<sup>71</sup> de Certeau 1984: 13–14.

<sup>72</sup> Serres 1995: 71; see also Conley 2002; Deleuze 1991, 1992, 1998, 2001; Deleuze & Guattari 1983, 1987; Doel 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001.

<sup>73</sup> Bough 1993: 23.

<sup>74</sup> Massumi 2002: 35.

With the world constantly escaping through its own excess, as Massumi argues, a politics emerges. Ben Highmore explains this politics as not being “about having certain ends in mind, but about generating beginnings.”<sup>75</sup> This is a politics, as Jacques Derrida argues:

To assert that a decision is ultimately undecidable does not mean that there can be no such thing as truth, right or good. It means rather, that if we purport to know in advance the specific contents of such notions, then the event of the decision is divested of its political content, it is simply “deduced from an existing body of knowledge [...] [as] by a calculating machine.”<sup>76</sup>

It is in the coordination and networking that these politics unfold, that we make assessments, analyze, and decide based on our aspirations, hopes, dreams, faith, longings in every moment, every encounter. This is a sensibility of attending to and through the relations that are constituted through coordination,<sup>77</sup> or what Sarah Whatmore sees as

ethical praxis [that] likewise emerges in the performance of multiple lived worlds, weaving threads of meaning and matter through the assemblage of mutually constituting subjects and patterns of association that compromise the distinction between the “human” and the “non-human.”<sup>78</sup>

Doel wants thus to “*make way for that which is coming [...] step aside as things come to pass. (In the United Kingdom, it is customary to keep to the left whilst so doing).*”<sup>79</sup> In this way, basing politics on ethics sensible to the emergent relationality of the coordination of interests in practice invokes “vitalist” notions, in the sense of being as-signifying and non-textual, sympathetic to the stance argued by Derrida in the quote above. Thus, Whatmore tells us that agency is not reduced “to the impartial and universal enactment of instrumental

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<sup>75</sup> Highmore 2002: 173.

<sup>76</sup> Derrida 1999.

<sup>77</sup> McCormack 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Whatmore 2002: 159.

<sup>79</sup> Doel 2004: 456, emphasis in original.

reason, or “enlightened self-interest,” but is difference-in-relation constituted in the context of the practical and lived.<sup>80</sup> With the grander questions of society in mind, Derrida asks:

Is it possible to think and to implement democracy, that which would keep the old name “democracy”, while uprooting from it all those figures from friendship (philosophical and religious) which prescribe fraternity: the family and the androcentric ethic group? Is it possible, in assuming a certain faithful memory of democratic reason and reason *tout court* [...] not to found, where it is no longer a matter of *founding*, but to open to a future, or rather to the “come”, of a certain democracy.<sup>81</sup>

Massey explains that what Derrida draws forth is that “space is the dimension of contemporaneous existence [...] that demands an attitude of ‘respect.’”<sup>82</sup> The politics inherent in branding management and the coordination of stakeholders’ interests in producing the nation brand is one-sided, narrow, and instrumental. It does not allow for excess or continuation and rehearses simplistic myths in order to sustain them sufficiently for them to be part of the nation’s core brand.

With space talking back, as stated in the opening quote to this section, what I argue is that being part and parcel to the excess of communication and encounters, a vitalist future-oriented spatial politics makes brand management exercises untenable in terms of destinations. Moreover, this particular critique has recently been extended to product branding.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusions

A vitalist future-oriented spatial politics means that what matters is what we do and have done through time. Marketing a nation to a

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<sup>80</sup> Whatmore 2002: 149, 153.

<sup>81</sup> Derrida 1997: 306.

<sup>82</sup> Massey 2007: 23.

<sup>83</sup> Pike 2009.



tailored brand, no matter how thoroughly researched amongst the population, cannot alter international perceptions. What counts is what we do: a genuine reputation is earned, not fabricated. In summary, the first level of the three-tiered critique demonstrated that the taskforce, as the latest manifestation of Iceland's image building campaign, was a branding instrument with clear commercial motivations, notwithstanding their various claims to the contrary. Secondly, the taskforce did not account for the inherent conflicts in the campaign regarding Iceland's identity and image. With simplistic categorical assumptions history was stereotyped, historically specific political agendas and socio-cultural realities were glossed over and, in the process, the campaign veered uncomfortably close to neo-environmental determinism. From a critique directed at the simplistic categorical assumptions, the third tier of critique involving space and its specificities was made.

To end then with the opening quote: "We also have to take care that Iceland does not become a brand; Iceland is naturally like...life." The vitalism bubbling from the spatial critique above formulations should give abundant material for more nuanced brand management practices, or a wholesale departure from them. I support the latter and follow Massey where she argues, "What is needed is a politics that is prepared not just to defend but also to *challenge* the nature of the local place."<sup>84</sup> According to her, "it is moreover about the process of *construction*, not the prior assumption, of a grounded solidarity."<sup>85</sup>

Therefore each and everyone's joint and unremitting responsibility for things as they come to pass cannot be negated. Through ongoing debates and mediations, open discussions, and open plans regarding the future, Iceland can best be prepared for its forthcoming challenges in a globalized world. Through a relational-spatial understanding of branding, the ceaseless dialogue between the nation and the rest in a globalized world becomes understood in terms of performance and practice, that is, the ways in which we act and do things, conditioned by our history, will constitute the "core brand" or image of the nation—which then obviously becomes a contradiction in terms. Thus an image or brand being promoted by anyone can at

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<sup>84</sup> Massey 2007: 171, emphasis in original.

<sup>85</sup> Massey 2007: 192, emphasis in original.

best give insights into the tensions between spatio-temporally specific socio-cultural realities and those leading the branding initiative. The question that now remains is whether publicly recruited brand managers in post-crash Iceland will learn.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hersveinn 2009.

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**Clarence E. Glad**, Ph.D. in religious studies, Brown University, 1992, and Cand. theol., University of Iceland, 1983. Scholar at the Reykjavík Academy of nascent Christianity in its Greco-Roman context and author of books and articles on St. Paul, the Pauline heritage, and the formation of the biblical canon. Translator of works by Philodemus and Clement of Alexandria. Gymnasium and university teacher in general history, philosophy, world religions, Greek, Latin, and history and literature of early Christianity.

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**Edward H. Huijbens**, Ph.D. in cultural geography, Durham University, 2006. Geographer and scholar of tourism at the Icelandic Tourism Research Centre and the University of Akureyri. Author of articles in several scholarly journals, both Icelandic and international, and co-editor of three books. He is currently focusing on landscape experiences, spaces and places, tourism innovation, and marketing strategies.

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**Sverrir Jakobsson**, Ph.D. in history, University of Iceland. Adjunct lecturer in medieval and early modern history at the University of Iceland since 2010. His main research interest is the history of medieval thought systems, identities, and spatial formations. Currently

#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

he is leading a research project with the aim of providing a total history of the region of Breiðafjörður in Iceland from an environmental, economic, social, and political perspective.

**Heiða Jóhannsdóttir**, Ph.D. candidate in film and cultural studies at University College London. Her dissertation focuses on British silent cinema and representations of gender, work, and city space. She has taught courses in language and culture at the University of Iceland; the University of Wisconsin, Madison; and UCL. Her research interests include silent and contemporary cinema, representations of the city, gender politics, and ideologies in media and popular culture. Her most recent publications include articles on early and contemporary film in *Scope: An online journal of film & television studies* and *Ritið, tímarit Hugvísindastofnunar Háskóla Íslands*.

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**Marion Lerner**, MA in cultural studies, sociology, and educational studies from Humboldt University in Berlin, 1998; MA in translation studies with a specialization in German–Icelandic translation from the University of Iceland, 2005; Ph.D. in Scandinavian studies from Humboldt University, 2009. Teaches translation theory and courses on Icelandic history and culture at the University of Iceland. Publications on Icelandic history of travelling, aesthetics of nature, cultural memory, national identity, and national myths. Translations of Icelandic historic travel writings. Now working on a book translation of Icelandic history from settlement to the present.

**Kristín Loftsdóttir**, professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Iceland. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona in 2000. Her doctoral dissertation based on fieldwork in Niger focuses on globalization, agency, and development among WoDaaBe pastoral nomads and migrant workers. Recently, she has been engaged in analysis of Icelandic identity, focusing on international development, nationalism, gender, and racialized identity, and has analyzed historical representations of Africa in Iceland.

Kristín has participated in the ATHENA (Thematic Network for Women's Studies) network focusing on issues relating to post-colonialism and gender and is co-director of the network the Nordic Colonial Mind.

**Daisy Neijmann** holds a Ph.D. from the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam (1994), and is currently a Reader in Icelandic in the Department of Scandinavian Studies at University College London. She is the author of a book and various articles on Icelandic-Canadian literature and culture. More recently, she has published on Icelandic language teaching and contemporary Icelandic literature, and edited *A History of Icelandic Literature* (2007). At present she is working on a research project on memory and representations of the Allied occupation in Icelandic fiction.

**Karen Oslund** has recently published *Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic* (University of Washington, 2011), which deals with changes in the images of Iceland and the rest of the North Atlantic from the mid-18th century to Icelandic independence during World War II. She teaches world history at Towson University in Maryland, U.S.A., and is currently at work on a project about the politics of global whale hunting and whale protection, of which this article is a part.

**Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir**, Ph.D., is a social scientist and an independent scholar at the Reykjavík Academy. She co-authored the collaborative international book *AA as a Mutual Help Movement* (1996) and published *Alcoholics Anonymous in Iceland: From Marginality to Mainstream Culture* (2000). Her works and publications are in the fields of alcohol studies and criminology. She is currently working on an evaluation of the Scandinavian Research Council for Criminology, and she is a consultant to the Ministry of Welfare on a research project on men's violence against women in intimate relationships.

**Kristinn Schram** is a postdoctoral researcher and director of the Icelandic Centre for Ethnology and Folklore (ICEF). His doctoral thesis dealt with folkloristic perspectives on transnational performances and the exoticism of the north. Combining film with fieldwork, his research is also centred on the re-appropriation of representations in both media and everyday life. His postdoctoral research position is awarded by the Icelandic Centre for Research and Edda – Centre for Excellence and hosted by ICEF and the Reykjavík Academy. He teaches folklore at the University of Iceland and ICEF.

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**Ólöf G. Sigfúsdóttir** is trained as an anthropologist with a BA from the University of Iceland and an MA from the University of Chicago in 2002. She has done fieldwork in Nigeria, Italy, and Iceland, where her main interests evolve around the souvenir, tourism, art and design, and post-colonialism. She has also curated fine art exhibitions in public museums in Iceland, where she works on the crossroads of anthropology, material culture, and fine art. During 2004–2007 she worked independently at the Reykjavík Academy, and since 2007 she has been the director of the Research Service Center at the Iceland Academy of the Arts.

**Julia Zernack** is a professor of Scandinavian studies at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt. Her research and teaching interests include Old Norse literature and culture including its post-medieval reception, history of philology, and modern Scandinavian literature. She is currently leading a research project on the reception of Old Norse mythology from the Middle Ages to the present day.

**Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir** (a.k.a. Frida Thorarins) received a Ph.D. in anthropology from the New School for Social Research in New York in 1999. She teaches both in continuing education and at the university level, is the creator of many study programs on immigration and multiculturalism, and is the author of articles on language, nationalism, and immigration. She is the founder and chair of CIR-RA – The Center for Immigration Research at Reykjavík Academy. Currently she is working on an international research project concerning Polish migration to Iceland and the other Nordic countries as well as research on language use amongst immigrants in Iceland.

**Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir**, BA in history and MA in gender studies and feminist theory from the New School of Social Research, New York, in 1998. She is a scholar at the Reykjavík Academy and a Ph.D. candidate in gender studies from the University of Iceland. The working title of her thesis is “Equality Discourses at Crossroads: Gender Equality vs. Diversity.” She has written articles on equality discourses and policies, the history of criminal law and homosexuality in Iceland, and images of femininity and female beauty within the Icelandic national discourse.



**PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE,  
INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS  
MENTIONNED IN THE ARTICLES**  
*(Scholars discussed in the articles are not included)*

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**A**

- AÐILS, JÓN JÓNSSON** – Clarence E. Glad, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Marion Lerner  
**ÆGEAN SEA** – Clarence E. Glad  
**ÆGIR** – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
**AESCHYLUS** – Clarence E. Glad  
**AFRICA** – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Kristín Loftsdóttir, Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir  
**ALBA** – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson  
**ALEXANDER THE GREAT** – Clarence E. Glad  
**ÁFENGIS-OG TÓBAKSVERSLUN RÍKISINS** (State Alcohol and Tobacco Company of Iceland) – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
**AFGHANISTAN** – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir, Daisy Neijmann  
**ÁGÚSTSSON, ÁGÚST Ó.** – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
**ALPS** – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Marion Lerner  
**ALÞINGI/ALTHING** (Parliament) – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Marion Lerner, Heidi Hansson, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
**AMALIENBORG PALACE** – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
**AMERICA** – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Heidi Hansson, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir, Daniel Chartier (article)  
**AMSTERDAM** (Netherlands) – Edward H. Huijbens  
**ANDERSEN, RASMUS B.** – Clarence E. Glad

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- ANDERSON, JOHANN – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
ANHOLT, SIMON – Edward H. Huijbens  
ANIMAL WELFARE INSTITUTE – Karen Oslund  
ANTIQUARIAN COLLECTION – *see Forngripasafnið*  
ANTONSSON, ANTON – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
APHRODITE – Clarence E. Glad  
APOLLO/PHOEBUS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Clarence E. Glad,  
Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack  
APULIA – Sverrir Jakobsson  
ARASON, STEINGRÍMUR – Kristín Loftsdóttir  
ARCADIA – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Heidi Hansson  
ARCTIC – Daniel Chartier (foreword), Daniel Chartier (article)  
ARCTIC CIRCLE – Marion Lerner, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
ARGONAUTS – Clarence E. Glad  
ARISTOTLE – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Clarence E. Glad  
ÁRMANNSSON, BJARNI – Kristinn Schram, Katla Kjartansdóttir  
ARNARHÓLL PARK – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
ARNARSON, INGÓLFUR – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Marion Lerner  
ÁRNASON, SIGURJÓN – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
ÁSBJÖRN THE GENTLE – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
ASIA – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sverrir Jakobsson, Hallfríður  
Þórarinsdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
ASKJA LAKE – Daisy Neijmann  
ASKJA VOLCANO – Daisy Neijmann  
ATHENS (Greece) – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Clarence E. Glad  
AUSTRALIA – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
AUGUSTUS CAESAR (Roman Emperor, 27 BC–14 AD) – Sverrir Jakobsson  
AUSTRIA – Julia Zernack  
AUSTRRÍKI/AUSTRVEGR (Russia and other lands to the East) – Sverrir Jakobsson  
AUSTURVÖLLUR SQUARE – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir

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**B**

- BACCHUS – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
BAGLEY, DESMOND – Daisy Neijmann  
BALDUR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack  
BALTIC SEA – Heidi Hansson  
BARBIE – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
BARSTOW, ROBBINS – Karen Oslund  
BARTH, HEINRICH – Kristín Loftsdóttir



MAIN PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS

- BARTHOLIN, THOMAS – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
BASEL (Switzerland) – Julia Zernack  
BEIJING – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
BERLIN (Germany) – Kristinn Schram, Daisy Neijmann  
BESSASTAÐIR – Clarence E. Glad  
BISKUPSSKJALASAFN ÞJÓÐSKJALASAFNS ÍSLANDS (National Archives in Iceland) –  
Clarence E. Glad  
BJARKI, BÖÐVAR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
BJARNASON, ÁGÚST H. – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
BJARNASON, JÓN – Kristinn Schram  
BJÖRGVINSSON, ÁSBJÖRN – Karen Oslund  
BJÖRK – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
BJØRNSON, BJØRNSTJERNE – Julia Zernack  
BJÖRNSSON, PÁLL – Clarence E. Glad  
BLÁA LÓNID (Blue Lagoon) – Daisy Neijmann, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
BLANCK, ANTON – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
BLEFKEN, DITHMAR – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
BLICHER, STEEN STEENSEN – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
BLOME, RICHARD – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
BLUE LAGOON – *see Bláa lónið*  
BOLTZ, AUGUST – Clarence E. Glad  
BONAPARTE, NAPOLEÓN – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
BONUS, ARTHUR – Julia Zernack  
BORDE, ANDREW – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
BORGARNES – Katla Kjartansdóttir  
BOTSWANA – Karen Oslund  
BOURDIEU, PIERRE – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Hallfríður Þ órarinsdóttir,  
Daniel Chartier (article)  
BRACE, CHARLES LORING – Heidi Hansson  
BRAGI – Julia Zernack  
BRANDES, GEORG – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
BREIÐFJÖRD, SIGURÐUR – Clarence E. Glad  
BREMEN (Germany) – Sverrir Jakobsson  
BREMEN, ADAM OF – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sverrir Jakobsson,  
Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
BREMER, FREDRIKA – Heidi Hansson  
BRITAIN, *see also England, Great Britain, and United Kingdom* – Heidi Hansson,  
Katla Kjartansdóttir, Daisy Neijmann, Edward H. Huijbens  
BRYCE, JAMES (1st Viscount Bryce) – Clarence E. Glad

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**BRYN, KÄRE** – Karen Oslund  
**BRYNHILDR/BRÜNNHILDE** – Julia Zernack  
**BUGGE, SOPHUS** – Julia Zernack  
**BUNBURY, SELINA** – Heidi Hansson  
**BURKE, EDMUND** – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
**BYRON, LORD GEORGE GORDON** – Clarence E. Glad

### C

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**CALIFORNIA** (United States of America) – Karen Oslund  
**CANADA** – Daniel Chartier (foreword), Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction),  
Daniel Chartier (article)  
**CANTH, MINNA** – Heidi Hansson  
**CARTMELL, MARGARET** – Heidi Hansson  
**CHICAGO** (United States of America) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
**CHINA** – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir,  
Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
**CHIRAC, JACQUES** – Kristinn Schram  
**CHRISTIAN III** (King of Denmark, 1534–1559; King of Norway, 1537–1559)  
– Clarence E. Glad  
**CHRISTIAN IX** (King of Denmark, 1863–1906) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
**CICERO** – Clarence E. Glad  
**COLD WAR** – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir,  
Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
**COLUMBUS, CHRISTOPHER** – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
**COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE SOVIET UNION** – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
**CONSTANTINOPLE** – Sverrir Jakobsson, Clarence E. Glad  
**COPENHAGEN** (Denmark) – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sumarliði  
R. Ísleifsson (article), Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Kristín  
Loftsdóttir, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Kristinn Schram, Þorgerður H.  
Þorvaldsdóttir, Daisy Neijmann, Edward H. Huijbens  
**CRANTZ, DAVID** – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)  
**CULTURE HOUSE** – *see Þjóðmenningarhúsið*

### D

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**DAGUR KÁRI** – Kristinn Schram  
**DAHN, FELIX** – Julia Zernack  
**DANIEL** (Biblical Figure) – Clarence E. Glad  
**DE CERTEAU, MICHEL** – Kristinn Schram, Edward H. Huijbens  
**DE FRIE BILLEDHUGGERE** (The Free Sculptors) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
**DELPHI** (Greece) – Clarence E. Glad

MAIN PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS

DEMOSTHENES – Clarence E. Glad  
DEN FRIE UDSTILLING (The Free Exhibition, 1906) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
DENIS, MICHAEL – Julia Zernack  
DENMARK – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Karen Oslund, Kristinn Schram, Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Daisy Neijmann, Edward H. Huijbens  
DERRIDA, JACQUES – Edward H. Huijbens  
DIEDERICH, EUGEN – Julia Zernack  
DIMMALIMM – Kristín Loftsdóttir  
DISNEY, WALT – Edward H. Huijbens  
DÝRAFJÖRÐUR - KATLA KJARTANSDÓTTIR

E

EAST FRISIAN ISLANDS (Germany) – Daisy Neijmann  
EDINBURGH (Scotland) – Kristinn Schram  
EGERTON, GEORGE (Mary Chavelita Dunne) – Heidi Hansson  
EGILSSON, GUNNAR – Kristín Loftsdóttir  
EGILSSON, SVEINBJÖRN – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
EHRNROOTH, ADELAÏDE – Heidi Hansson  
EINARSSON, BALDVIN (Ármann, the Guardian of Alþingi) – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
EINARSSON, GUÐMUNDUR – Marion Lerner  
EIRÍKSSON, LEIFUR (Leif the Lucky) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir  
EIRÍKSSTAÐIR – Katla Kjartansdóttir  
ELDJÁRN, ÞÓRARINN – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
ELÍASSON, ÓLAFUR – Edward H. Huijbens  
ENGLAND, *see also Britain, Great Britain, and United Kingdom* – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sverrir Jakobsson, Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Heidi Hansson  
ENGROUELAND (GREENLAND) – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
ENLIGHTENMENT – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Heidi Hansson, Daisy Neijmann  
EPICTETUS – Clarence E. Glad  
EQUAL STATUS ACT (1976) – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
EROS/AMOR/CUPID – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
ESJA MOUNTAIN – Daisy Neijmann  
ESPÓLÍN, JÓN – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
ESTOTILAND – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

- ETNA – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
EUROPE – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sverrir Jakobsson, Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Marion Lerner, Heidi Hansson, Karen Oslund, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Kristinn Schram, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir, Daisy Neijmann, Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir, Edward H. Huijbens  
EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
EUROPEAN UNION – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
EVENING SOCIETY – *see Kvöldfélag*  
EYJAFJALLAJÖKULL – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
EYJAFJÖRÐUR – Marion Lerner  
EYSTEINSSON, ÁSTRÁÐUR – Daisy Neijmann  
EYVINDUR SKÁLDASPILLIR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
EYÞÓRSSON, JÓN – Marion Lerner  
EZEKIEL (Prophet) – Clarence E. Glad

F

- FAFNIR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
FAHRENKROG, LUDWIG – Julia Zernack  
FAIRMOUNT PARK (Philadelphia, United States of America) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
FAROE ISLANDS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Karen Oslund, Katla Kjartansdóttir,  
FAUST – Julia Zernack  
FÉLAG ÍSLENSKRA BÓKAÚTGEFENDA (Icelandic Publishers Association) – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
FÉLAGS- OG TRYGGINGAMÁLARÁÐUNEYTIÐ (Icelandic Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Security) – Kristín Loftsdóttir  
FEMINIST ASSOCIATION OF ICELAND – *see Fémínistafélag Íslands*  
FÉMÍNISTAFÉLAG ÍSLANDS (Feminist Association of Iceland) – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
FERÐAFÉLAG ÍSLANDS (Tourist Association of Iceland) – Marion Lerner  
FICHTE, JOHANN GOTTLIEB – Clarence E. Glad, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir  
FINLAND – Sverrir Jakobsson, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Heidi Hansson, Kristinn Schram, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
FINMARK – Heidi Hansson

MAIN PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS

- FINNBOGADOTTIR, VIGDIS (president of Iceland, 1980–1996) – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir
- FINNBOGASON, GUÐMUNDUR – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Marion Lerner
- FINNBOGASON, KARL – Kristín Loftsdóttir
- FINNSSON, HANNES – Clarence E. Glad
- FIRST WORLD WAR – Heidi Hansson
- FISCHER, BOBBY – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir
- FJALAR – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir
- FJALLKONAN (Lady of the Mountain) – Marion Lerner, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir
- FJÖLNIR – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson
- FLEISHMAN-HILLARD INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS – Edward H. Huijbens
- FLJÓTSHLÍÐ – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson
- FORESTER, THOMAS – Heidi Hansson
- FORNGRIPASAFNIÐ (Antiquarian Collection) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir
- FORSTÉN, LENNART – Heidi Hansson
- FOUCAULT, MICHEL – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir
- FOUQUÉ, FRIEDRICH DE LA MOTTE – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson
- FRANCE – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sverrir Jakobsson, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Daisy Neijmann, Edward H. Huijbens
- FRANCK, SEBASTIAN – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)
- FREDERIK VI (King of Denmark, 1808–1839; King of Norway, 1808–1814) – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson
- FREDERIK VIII (King of Denmark, 1906–1912) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir
- FRETLA (VOLCANO) – Daisy Neijmann
- FREUD, SIGMUND – Daisy Neijmann
- FREYJA – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack
- FRIGG – Julia Zernack
- FROST, LARS – Daisy Neijmann

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G

- GENEVA (Switzerland) – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir
- GENTLE GIANTS – *see Hvalaferðir*
- GERING, HUGO – Julia Zernack
- GERMANIA – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir
- GERMANY – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sverrir Jakobsson, Clarence E. Glad, Julia Zernack, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Marion Lerner, Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, Daisy Neijmann, Edward H. Huijbens

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

- GERSTENBERG, HEINRICH WILHELM VON – Julia Zernack  
GEYSIR (The Great) – Daisy Neijmann  
GÍSLADÓTTIR, INGIBJÖRG SÓLRÚN – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
GJÚKASON, GUNNAR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
GJÚKASON, HOGNI/HÖGNE – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
GJÚKI – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
GLASGOW (Scotland) – Kristinn Schram, Daisy Neijmann  
GLITNIR BANK – Kristinn Schram, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir  
GOD – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article),  
Clarence E. Glad, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Heidi Hansson  
GOETHE, JOHANN WOLFGANG VON – Clarence E. Glad, Julia Zernack  
GOG – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)  
GOLDEN AGE – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
GOLDEN AGE (930–1262)/[Commonwealth Period] – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi  
Gunnlaugsson, Marion Lerner, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir  
GORBACHEV, MIKHAIL – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
GORBACHEVA, RAISA – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
GOTHS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi  
Gunnlaugsson  
GRACE, SHERRILL – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)  
GRAND CANYON (United States of America) – Daisy Neijmann  
GRAY, THOMAS – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack  
GREAT BRITAIN, *see also Britain, England, and United Kingdom* – Heidi  
Hansson, Karen Oslund  
GREECE – Clarence E. Glad, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
GREEN, FRANK J. – Kristín Loftsdóttir  
GREENLAND – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (Introduction), Sverrir Jakobsson,  
Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Karen Oslund,  
Katla Kjartansdóttir, Daisy Neijmann  
GREENPEACE – Karen Oslund  
GRETTIR – Clarence E. Glad  
GRIMM, JACOB – Julia Zernack  
GRIMM, WILHELM – Julia Zernack  
GRÍMSSON, ÓLAFUR RAGNAR (President of Iceland, 1996–) – Kristinn Schram,  
Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir  
GRÖNDAL, BENEDIKT JÓNSSON – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
GRÖNDAL, BENEDIKT SVEINBJARNARSON – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
GRUMBKOW, INA VON – Daisy Neijmann  
GRUNDTVIG, NIKOLAJ F. S. – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
GUÐFINNSSON, EINAR K. – Kristinn Schram

MAIN PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS

GUÐMUNDSSON, SIGURÐUR – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir

GUÐMUNDSSON, VALTÝR – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir

GULF OF FINLAND – Sverrir Jakobsson

GULLFOSS – Daisy Neijmann

GUTHRIE, WILLIAM – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)

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H

HAFNARFJÖRÐUR – Katla Kjartansdóttir

HAFRANNSÓKNASTOFNUNIN (Marine Research Institute) – Karen Oslund

HAGEN, FRIEDRICH HEINRICH VON DER – Julia Zernack

HALLFREÐR VANDRÆÐASKÁLD – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson

HALLGRÍMSSON, JÓNAS – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir

HÁKON/HAAKON I THE GOOD (King of Norway, 920–961) – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson

HÁKON/HAAKON IV THE OLD (King of Norway, 1217–1263) – Sverrir Jakobsson

HAMBURG (Germany) – Sverrir Jakobsson, Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)

HAMELIN, LOUIS-EDMOND – Daniel Chartier (article)

HAMMERFEST (Norway) – Heidi Hansson

HÁMUNDARSON, GUNNAR – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson

HANNARR – Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir

HANNESSON, PÁLMI – Marion Lerner

HANNIBALSSON, ÓLAFUR – Karen Oslund

HANSEN, WILHELM – Kristín Loftsdóttir

HANSSON, OLA – Heidi Hansson

HARALDUR HARDRÁÐI (Harald Sigurdsson) – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson

HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS (University of Iceland) – Clarence E. Glad, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Edward H. Huijbens

HÁSKÓLINN Í REYKJAVÍK (University of Reykjavík) – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Edward H. Huijbens

HEIMA DESIGN COMPANY – Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir

HEIMDALLR – Julia Zernack

HEKLA – Julia Zernack

HELGASON, HALLGRÍMUR – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir

HELGASON, JÓN – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson

HELSINKI (Finland) – Heidi Hansson, Kristinn Schram, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir

HERDER, JOHAN GOTTFRIED – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack, Marion Lerner, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir



ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

- HERÐUBREIÐ – Daisy Neijmann  
HERMANN, JUDITH – Daisy Neijmann  
HERMANNSSON, STEINGRÍMUR (Prime Minister of Iceland, 1983–1987) – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
HERODOTUS – Clarence E. Glad  
HERVÖR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
HEUSLER, ANDREAS – Julia Zernack  
HEYLIN, PETER – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
HIÐ ÍSLENSKA BÓKMENNTAFÉLAG (Icelandic Literary Society) – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
HIÐ ÍSLENSKA REÐASAFN (Icelandic Phallogical Museum) – Karen Oslund  
HIGDEN, RANULPH – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
HIGH NORTH ALLIANCE (HNA) – Karen Oslund  
HIGHLANDS (Scotland) – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
HJARTARSON, SNORRI – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
HJÖRVARÐSSON, HELGI – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
HLÍÐARENDI – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Katla Kjartansdóttir  
HÖFÐI – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
HÓLAR – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Marion Lerner, Edward H. Huijbens  
HÓLAR UNIVERSITY COLLEGE – see Hólaskóli  
HÓLASKÓLI (Hólar University College) – Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir  
HOLLAND – Kristín Loftsdóttir  
HOLSTEIN (Duchy of) – Clarence E. Glad  
HOLY LAND – Sverrir Jakobsson  
HOMER – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
HÖNNUNARMÍÐSTÖÐ ÍSLANDS (ICELAND DESIGN CENTRE) – Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir  
HORACE – Clarence E. Glad  
HUITFELDT, ANNIKEN – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
HUMBOLDT PARK (Chicago, United States of America) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
HUMBOLDT, WILHELM VON – Clarence E. Glad  
HUNS – Daisy Neijmann  
HÚSAVÍK – Karen Oslund  
HÚSAVÍK WHALE MUSEUM – Karen Oslund  
HVALAFERÐIR (Gentle Giants) – Karen Oslund  
HVALUR HF – Karen Oslund  
HVOLSVÖLLUR – Katla Kjartansdóttir  
HYNDMAN, HENRY MAYERS – Heidi Hansson



MAIN PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS

HYPERBOREAN PEOPLE – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Clarence E. Glad

I

- IBSEN, HENRIK – Julia Zernack, Heidi Hansson  
ICELAND ACADEMY OF THE ARTS – *see Listaháskóli Íslands*  
ICELAND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE – *see Viðskiptaráð Íslands*  
ICELAND DESIGN CENTRE – *see Hönnunarmiðstöð Íslands*  
ICELAND TRAVEL INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION – *see Samtök ferðaþjónustunnar*  
ICELANDAIR – Kristinn Schram, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir  
ICELANDIC CENTRE FOR RESEARCH – *see Rannís*  
ICELANDIC INVESTMENT BANK – *see Íslandsbanki*  
ICELANDIC LANGUAGE COMMITTEE – *see Íslensk Málnefnd*  
ICELANDIC LANGUAGE INSTITUTE – *see Íslensk Málstöð*  
ICELANDIC LITERARY SOCIETY – *see Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*  
ICELANDIC MINISTRY OF FISHERIES AND AGRICULTURE – *see Sjávarútvegs- og Landbúnaðarráðuneytið*  
ICELANDIC MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND SOCIAL SECURITY – *see Félags- og tryggingamálaráðuneytið*  
ICELANDIC PHALLOLOGICAL MUSEUM – *see Hið Íslenszka Reðasafn*  
ICELANDIC PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION – *see Félag íslenskra bókaútgefenda*  
ICELANDIC TOURISM ASSOCIATION – *see Samtök ferðaþjónustunnar*  
ICELANDIC TOURISM RESEARCH CENTER – *see Rannsóknamiðstöð ferðamála*  
ICELANDIC TOURIST BOARD – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir, Edward H. Huijbens  
ICESAVE – Karen Oslund  
IÐNAÐARMANNAFÉLAGIÐ Í REYKJAVÍK (REYKJAVÍK CRAFTSMEN’S ASSOCIATION) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
IÐUNN/IDUNA – Julia Zernack  
INDIA – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sverrir Jakobsson  
INGÓLFSNEFND (Ingólfur Committee) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
INGÓLFUR COMMITTEE – *see Ingólfsnefnd*  
INDEPENDENCE DAY (17 JUNE 1944) – Daisy Neijmann  
INDRÍÐASON, ARNALDUR – Kristinn Schram  
INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION – Heidi Hansson  
INNOCENT IV (Pope, 1243–1254) – Sverrir Jakobsson  
INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
INTERNATIONAL WHALING COMMISSION – Karen Oslund

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF WOMEN (1975) – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
INUIT/ESKIMOS – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir, Katla  
Kjartansdóttir, Daniel Chartier (article)  
INUIT CIRCUMPOLAR COUNCIL – Karen Oslund  
IQALUIT (Nunavut, Canada) – Daniel Chartier (article)  
IRELAND – Sverrir Jakobsson  
ISAIAH (Prophet) – Clarence E. Glad  
ÍSLANDBANKI – Kristinn Schram, Edward H. Huijbens  
ÍSLENSK MÁLNEFND (Icelandic Language Committee) – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
ÍSLENSK MÁLSTÖÐ (Icelandic Language Institute) – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
ITALY – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Daisy Neijmann

## J

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JÄMTLAND (Sweden) – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
JANUS – Marion Lerner  
JAPAN – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Karen Oslund  
JASON (Argonaut) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
JENA (Germany) – Julia Zernack  
JEREMIAH (Prophet) – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)  
JESUS CHRIST – Sverrir Jakobsson, Clarence E. Glad, Julia Zernack, Júlíana  
Gottskálksdóttir  
JOHN, PRESTER – Sverrir Jakobsson  
JOHNSEN, BJARNI – Clarence E. Glad  
JÓNSSON & LE'MACKS – Kristinn Schram  
JÓNSSON, ARNGRÍMUR – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Clarence E. Glad  
JÓNSSON, BJARNI – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
JÓNSSON, EINAR – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
JÓNSSON, EYJÓLFUR – Clarence E. Glad  
JÓNSSON, FINNUR – Clarence E. Glad, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
JÓNSSON, KRISTINN – Marion Lerner  
JÓNSSON, STURLA – Marion Lerner  
JORDANES – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)  
JULIUS CEASAR – Clarence E. Glad

## K

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KANT, IMMANUEL – Marion Lerner  
KARELEN (Finland) – Heidi Hansson  
KARLSDÓTTIR, HÓLMFRÍÐUR – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
KARLSEFNI, THORFINNUR – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir

MAIN PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS

KAUPTHING BANK – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
KEFLAVÍK – Karen Oslund, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir,  
Daisy Neijmann  
KEIKO (Killer whale) – Karen Oslund  
KENT, SUSANNA HENRIETTA – Heidi Hansson  
KIERKEGAARD, SØREN – Kristinn Schram  
KING’S COLLEGE (London, United Kingdom) – Clarence E. Glad  
KLOPSTOCK, FRIEDRICH GOTTLIEB – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack  
KORMÁKUR, BALTASAR – Kristinn Schram  
KRÁKA/ASLAUG – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
KRANTZ, ALBERT – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
KRAUM DESIGN STORE – Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir  
KVARAN, EINAR H. – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
KVÖLDFÉLAG (Evening Society) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir

L

LA PEYRÈRE, ISAAC – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
LAC-SAINT-JEAN (Québec, Canada) – Daniel Chartier (article)  
LÆKJARGATA – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
LANDSBANKI/LANDBANKINN (National Bank of Iceland) – Hallfríður  
Þórarinsdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
LANDSBÓKASAFN ÍSLANDS (National and University Library of Iceland) – Júlíana  
Gottskálksdóttir  
LANGBEHN, JULIUS – Julia Zernack  
LAPLAND – Heidi Hansson  
LÁRUSSON, ÓLAFUR – Clarence E. Glad  
LAUFÁS – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
LAXNESS, HALLDÓR – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
LEACH, HENRY G. – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
LEFT-GREEN MOVEMENT – *see Vinstrihreyfingin – grænt framboð*  
LEIFS, JÓN – Clarence E. Glad  
LEONIDAS – Clarence E. Glad  
LIBERTY ISLAND (New York, United States of America) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
LINNÉ, CARL VON – Kristín Loftsdóttir  
LIPPMAN, WALTER – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)  
LISTAHÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS (Iceland Academy of the Arts) – Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir  
LIVERPOOL (United Kingdom) – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
LIVY/TITUS LIVIUS – Clarence E. Glad  
LOÐBRÓK, RAGNAR (King of Denmark, 9th century) – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

LOFOTEN (Norway) – Karen Oslund  
LOKI – Julia Zernack  
LONDON (United Kingdom) – Kristín Loftsdóttir, Heidi Hansson, Hallfríður  
Pórarinsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
LOTI, PIERRE – Daisy Neijmann  
LUCIAN – Clarence E. Glad  
LUCIFER – Julia Zernack  
LYNGE, FINN – Karen Oslund  
LYSCHANDER, CLAUS CHRISTOFFERSEN – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)

M

MACDOUGALL, SYLVIA BORGSTRÖM – Heidi Hansson  
MACPHERSON, JAMES – Julia Zernack  
MAECENAS, GAIUS – Clarence E. Glad  
MAGNUS, OLAUS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sumarliði R.  
Ísleifsson (article)  
MAGNÚSSON, ARI – Kristinn Schram  
MAGNÚSSON, ÁRNI – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
MAGNÚSSON, FINNUR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
MAGOG – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)  
MALLET, PAUL-HENRI – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack, Heidi Hansson  
MANUEL I KOMNENOS (Byzantine Emperor, 1143–1180) – Sverrir Jakobsson  
MARATHON (Greece) – Clarence E. Glad  
MARHOLM, LAURA – Heidi Hansson  
MARINE RESEARCH INSTITUTE – *see Hafrannsóknastofnunin*  
MARKARFLJÓT – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
MATTHEW (Apostle) – Clarence E. Glad  
MAURER, KONRAD – Julia Zernack  
MCKAY, SCOTT – Karen Oslund  
MECCA – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
MEDITERRANEAN SEA – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Clarence E.  
Glad, Heidi Hansson  
MELASKÓLI – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
MELSTED, PÁLL – Clarence E. Glad  
MELSTED, SIGURÐUR – Clarence E. Glad  
MERITON, GEORGE – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
MEXICO – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
MEXICO CITY (Mexico) – Karen Oslund  
MIÐDALUR – Marion Lerner

MAIN PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS

- MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND EXTERNAL TRADE – *see Utanríkisráðuneytið*  
MISS WORLD CONTEST – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
MONGOLS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)  
MONTESQUIEU – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Gylfi Gunnlaugsson,  
Marion Lerner, Heidi Hansson  
MONTRÉAL (Québec, Canada) – Daniel Chartier (article)  
MORRIS, WILLIAM – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Clarence E. Glad  
MOSCOW (Russia) – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
MOUNT HERÐUBREIÐ – Daisy Neijmann  
MUHAMMAD CARTOON CONTROVERSY – Edward H. Huijbens  
MÜLLENHOFF, KARL – Julia Zernack  
MUNICH (Germany) – Julia Zernack  
MÜNSTER, SEBASTIAN – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
MYNDLISTASKÓLINN Í REYKJAVÍK (Reykjavík School of Visual Art) – Daniel  
Chartier (article)

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N

- NAMIBIA – Karen Oslund  
NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARY OF ICELAND – *see Landsbókasafn Íslands*  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES IN ICELAND – *see Biskupskjalasafn Þjóðskjalasafns Íslands*  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ICELAND – *see Þjóðminjasafn Íslands*  
NATIONAL SOCIALIST PARTY (Germany) – Julia Zernack  
NATIONAL SOCIALIST PARTY (United States of America) – Heidi Hansson  
NATO – *see North Atlantic Treaty Organization*  
NECKEL, GUSTAV – Julia Zernack  
NETHERLANDS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Daisy Neijmann  
NEW WORLD – Katla Kjartansdóttir  
NEW YORK CITY (United States of America) – Kristín Loftsdóttir, Júlíana  
Gottskálksdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Daisy Neijmann, Edward  
H. Huijbens  
NIBELUNG TRADITION – Julia Zernack  
NIETZSCHE, FRIEDRICH – Julia Zernack, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
NIGER – Kristín Loftsdóttir  
NIKE (Goddess of Victory) – Clarence E. Glad  
NJÁLA – Clarence E. Glad  
NORDAL, SIGURÐUR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
NORDIC COUNCIL – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
NORÐRLÖND – Sverrir Jakobsson  
NORÐURSIGLING (North Sailing) – Karen Oslund

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

- NORNA-GESTUR – Sverrir Jakobsson, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
NORTH ATLANTIC MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION (NAMMCO) – Karen Oslund  
NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION (NATO) – Karen Oslund, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
NORTH CAPE (Finland) – Heidi Hansson  
NORTH SAILING – *see Norðursigling*  
NORWAY – Sverrir Jakobsson, Clarence E. Glad, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Heidi Hansson, Karen Oslund, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir  
NUUK (Greenland) – Karen Oslund

## O

- OCEAN ALLIANCE – Karen Oslund  
ÓÐINN/ODIN/WOTAN – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
ÓÐUR – Clarence E. Glad  
OEHELENSCHLÄGER, ADAM – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
ÓLAFSSON, BJÖRN – Marion Lerner  
ÓLAFSSON, BRAGI – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
ÓLAFSSON, JÓN – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
ÓLAFSSON, JÓN (Indíafari) – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)  
Ólafsson, Magnús – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
OLAFSSON, STANLEY T. – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
OLLIN, WALLY – Edward H. Huijbens  
ÓLSEN, BJÖRN M. – Clarence E. Glad  
OLYMPIA (Greece) – Clarence E. Glad  
OLYMPIC GAMES (Summer, 2008) – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
ORÐABÓKARNEFND HÁSKÓLA ÍSLANDS (Vocabulary Committee of the University of Iceland) – Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir  
OREGON (United States of America) – Karen Oslund  
ØRSTED, HANS CHRISTIAN – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
ORTELIUS, ABRAHAM – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
OSLO (Norway) – Karen Oslund  
OSSIAN – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack  
OSTROBOTHNIA – Sverrir Jakobsson  
OSWALD, ELIZABETH JANE – Heidi Hansson  
OVID – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Clarence E. Glad

MAIN PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS

P-Q

- PÁLSSON, GUNNAR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
PARIS (France) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Heidi Hansson, Edward H. Huijbens  
PAYNE, ROGER – Karen Oslund  
PERCY, THOMAS – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
PEREC, GEORGES – Edward H. Huijbens  
PERLAN – Katla Kjartansdóttir  
PERU – Karen Oslund  
PHILADELPHIA (United States of America) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
PHILIPPINES – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
PLATO – Clarence E. Glad  
PLINY THE ELDER – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
PLUTARCH – Clarence E. Glad  
POESTION, JOSEPH CALASANZ – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
POLAND – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
POPE, ALEXANDER – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
PORTUGAL – Clarence E. Glad  
PROTESTANT REFORMATION – Clarence E. Glad  
PRUSSIA – Clarence E. Glad  
PYGMIES – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
QUÉBEC (Canada) – Daniel Chartier (foreword), Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Daniel Chartier (article)

R

- RADCLIFFE, ZANE – Daisy Neijmann  
RANNÍS (Icelandic Centre for Research) – Kristín Loftsdóttir, Daniel Chartier (article)  
RANNSÓKNAMIÐSTÖÐ FERÐAMÁLA (ICELANDIC TOURISM RESEARCH CENTER) – Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir  
RASK, RASMUS CHRISTIAN – Clarence E. Glad  
RAUÐSOKKAHREYFINGIN (Red Stocking Movement) – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
REAGAN, RONALD – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
RED STOCKING MOVEMENT – *see Rauðsokkahreyfingin*  
REPUBLICAN PARTY (United States of America) – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
RESEN, PEDER HANSEN – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Julia Zernack  
REYKJAVÍK – Clarence E. Glad, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Marion Lerner, Karen Oslund, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir, Daisy Neijmann, Daniel Chartier (article), Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

- REYKJAVÍK ACADEMY – *see ReykjavíkurAkademían*  
REYKJAVÍK CRAFTSMEN’S ASSOCIATION – *see Iðnaðarmannafélagið í Reykjavík*  
REYKJAVÍK SCHOOL OF VISUAL ART – *see Myndlistaskólinn í Reykjavík*  
REYKJAVÍK SUMMIT (1986) – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
REYKJAVÍK UNIVERSITY – *see Háskólinn í Reykjavík*  
REYKJAVÍKURAKADEMÍAN (Reykjavík Academy) – Daniel Chartier (foreword),  
Daniel Chartier (article)  
RHINE – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
RITHÖFUNDASAMBAND ÍSLANDS (Writers’ Union of Iceland) – Hallfríður  
Þórarinsdóttir  
RODIN, AUGUSTE – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
ROMAN EMPIRE – Sverrir Jakobsson, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
ROME (Italy) – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Heidi Hansson, Sverrir  
Jakobsson  
ROTH, ELI – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir  
ROUSSEAU, JEAN-JACQUES – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack, Marion Lerner  
ROVANIEMI (Finland) – Daniel Chartier (article)  
ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS (Copenhagen, Denmark) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
ROYAL DANISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND LETTERS – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
RUNEBERG, FREDRIKA – Heidi Hansson  
RUSSIA – Daniel Chartier (foreword), Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction),  
Sverrir Jakobsson, Heidi Hansson, Karen Oslund, Kristinn Schram

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S

- SÆMUNDSSON, TÓMAS – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
SAGA (Goddess) – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
SAGA MUSEUM – *see Sögusafnið*  
SAID, EDWARD – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Kristinn Schram, Daisy  
Neijmann  
SAINT PAUL – Clarence E. Glad  
SAINT PETERSBURG (Russia) – Kristinn Schram  
SAINT THOMAS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
SALAMIS (Greece) – Clarence E. Glad  
SALMON, THOMAS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)  
SAMFYLKINGIN (Social Democratic Party) – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Þorgerður  
H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
SAMI PEOPLE/SAAMI/SÁMI – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sverrir  
Jakobsson, Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
SAMUEL, ELLEN PHILIPPE – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
SAMUEL, J. BUNFORD – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir



MAIN PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS

- SAMTÖK FERÐAÞJÓNUSTUNNAR (ICELAND TRAVEL INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION) –  
Edward H. Huijbens
- SAPPHO – Clarence E. Glad
- SATAN – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)
- SAXO GRAMMATICUS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir
- SCANDINAVIA (as a whole) – Daniel Chartier (foreword), Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson  
(introduction), Sverrir Jakobsson, Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Clarence  
E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Marion Lerner, Heidi Hansson, Karen  
Oslund, Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, Daniel Chartier (article)
- SCHELLING, FRIEDRICH – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson
- SHEVING, HALLGRÍMUR – Clarence E. Glad
- SCHWARTZKOPF, APOLLONIA – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir
- SCOTT, SIR PETER – Karen Oslund
- SCYTHIA – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction)
- SCYTHIANS – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson
- SEA SHEPHERD CONSERVATION SOCIETY – Karen Oslund
- SEA WORLD – Karen Oslund
- SEPTEMBER 11TH ATTACKS (2001) – Karen Oslund
- SHELLEY, PERCY BYSSHE – Clarence E. Glad
- SHEVARDNADZE, EDUARD – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir
- SICILY (Italy) – Sverrir Jakobsson, Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)
- SIGFÚSSON, SÆMUNDR – Sverrir Jakobsson
- SIGMARSSON, JÓN PÁLL – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir
- SIGRÚN – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson
- SIGUR RÓS – Daisy Neijmann
- SIGURÐARDÓTTIR, JÓHANNA – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir
- SIGURÐR/SIEGFRIED – Julia Zernack
- SIGURÐSSON, JÓN – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Júlíana  
Gottskálksdóttir
- SIMROCK, KARL – Julia Zernack
- SINDING, STEPHAN – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir
- SJÁVARÚTVEGS- OG LANDBÚNAÐARRÁÐUNEYTIÐ (Icelandic Ministry of Fisheries  
and Agriculture) – Karen Oslund
- SKAGAFJÖRÐUR – Daniel Chartier (article)
- SKÁLHOLT – Clarence E. Glad
- SKALLAGRÍMSSON, EGILL – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Heidi  
Hansson, Katla Kjartansdóttir
- SKJÁLFAÐI BAY – Karen Oslund
- SKJÖLDUR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson
- SKÚLASON, ÞORLÁKUR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

- SKULD NATURE PROTECTION GROUP – Karen Oslund  
SLESVIG (Duchy of, Germany) – Clarence E. Glad  
SNÆFELLSJÖKULL – Daisy Neijmann, Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir  
SNEGLU-HALLI – Kristinn Schram  
SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION – Heidi Hansson  
SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY – *see Samfylkingin*  
SÖGUSAFNIÐ (SAGA MUSEUM) – Katla Kjartansdóttir  
SOUTH AFRICA – Karen Oslund  
SPAIN – Clarence E. Glad, Karen Oslund  
SPARTA – Clarence E. Glad  
SPASSKY, BORIS – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
SPRENGISANDUR (upland/highland) – Marion Lerner  
STASSEN, FRANZ – Julia Zernack  
STATE ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO COMPANY OF ICELAND – *see Áfengis-og  
tóbaksverslun ríkisins*  
STATUE OF LIBERTY (New York City, United States of America) – Júlíana  
Gottskálksdóttir  
STEFÁNSSON, JÓN – Clarence E. Glad  
STEFFENS, HENRICH – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
STEPHENSEN, MAGNÚS – Clarence E. Glad  
STEPHENSEN, ÓLAFUR Þ. – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
STEPPENWOLF – Kristinn Schram  
STOCKHOLM (Sweden) – Heidi Hansson  
STRAUMUR BANK – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir  
STRINDBERG, AUGUST – Julia Zernack, Heidi Hansson  
STURLUSON, SIGHVATUR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
STURLUSON, SNORRI – Sverrir Jakobsson, Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson,  
Julia Zernack, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
SUÐRRÍKI (Germany, Holy Roman Empire) – Sverrir Jakobsson  
SVAVA – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
SVEFNEYJAR ISLANDS – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
SVEINSSON, BRYNJÓLFUR – Clarence E. Glad  
SWEDEN – Clarence E. Glad, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Heidi Hansson, Hildigunnur  
Ólafsdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Daisy Neijmann  
SWITZERLAND – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)

T

- TACITUS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sverrir Jakobsson, Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir
- TALLINN (Estonia) – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir
- TARANTINO, QUENTIN – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir
- TAYLOR, BAYARD – Heidi Hansson
- TERRA NOVA-SÓL – Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir
- THAILAND – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir
- THEOPHRASTUS – Clarence E. Glad
- THERMOPYLAE – Clarence E. Glad
- THIERSCH, FRIEDRICH WILHELM – Clarence E. Glad
- THOMSEN, GRÍMUR – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson
- THOR/ÞÓR – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson
- THORARENSEN, BJARNI – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Marion Lerner
- THORBJARNARDÓTTIR, GUÐRÍÐUR – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir
- THORSTEINSSON, GUÐMUNDUR (Muggur) – Kristín Loftsdóttir
- THORSTEINSSON, STEINGRÍMUR – Clarence E. Glad
- THORVALDSEN, BERTEL – Clarence E. Glad, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir
- THORVALDSSON, ERIK (Erik the Red) – Katla Kjartansdóttir
- TOLKIEN, J. R. R. – Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir
- TRADE COUNCIL OF ICELAND – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir, Edward H. Huijbens
- TRAVERS, ROSALIND – Heidi Hansson
- TREMBLAY, LISE – Daniel Chartier (article)
- TROY (Anatolia/Turkey) – Sverrir Jakobsson, Clarence E. Glad
- TRUSLER, JOHN – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)
- TRYGGVASON, ÓLÁFR – Sverrir Jakobsson
- TUNSTRÖM, GÖRAN – Daisy Neijmann
- TURKS – Clarence E. Glad
- TWEEDIE, ETHEL BRILLIANA – Heidi Hansson
- THULE/ULTIMA THULE – Julia Zernack, Daisy Neijmann

U

- UNITED KINGDOM, *see also Britain, England, and Great Britain* – Heidi Hansson, Karen Oslund, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir, Daisy Neijmann
- UNITED STATES OF AMERICA – Clarence E. Glad, Kristín Loftsdóttir, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Heidi Hansson, Karen Oslund, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Kristinn Schram, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir, Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir, Edward H. Huijbens

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

- UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS (U.S.S.R.) – Karen Oslund, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
UNITED NATIONS – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND – *see Háskóli Íslands*  
UNIVERSITY OF REYKJAVÍK – *see Háskólinn í Reykjavík*  
UNIVERSITY OF STRASBURG (France) – Clarence E. Glad  
URSA MAJOR/GREAT BEAR – Sverrir Jakobsson  
UTOPIA – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Heidi Hansson  
UTANRÍKISRÁÐUNEYTIÐ (Ministry for Foreign Affairs and External Trade) – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Edward H. Huijbens

V

- VALHALLA/WALHALL – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Julia Zernack, Kristinn Schram  
VENUS – Clarence E. Glad  
VERNE, JULES – Daisy Neijmann  
VESTRLÖND (British Isles) – Sverrir Jakobsson  
VÍDALÍN, JÓN – Clarence E. Glad  
VIÐSKIPTARÁÐ ÍSLANDS (Iceland Chamber of Commerce) – Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Edward H. Huijbens  
VIENNA (Austria) – Julia Zernack  
VIETNAM – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
VIKINGS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (introduction), Julia Zernack, Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Heidi Hansson, Kristinn Schram, Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, Hallfríður Þórarinsdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Heiða Jóhannsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir  
VÍNLAND – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir  
VINSTRIHREYFINGIN – grænt framboð (Left-Green Movement) – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
VIRGIL – Clarence E. Glad  
VOCABULARY COMMITTEE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND – *see Orðabókarnefnd Háskóla Íslands*  
VÖLKISCH MOVEMENT – Julia Zernack  
VÖLUNDR/WAYLAND (the Blacksmith) – Julia Zernack  
VÖLVA – Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir

W

- WAGNER, RICHARD – Julia Zernack  
WASHINGTON D.C. (United States of America) – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir

MAIN PLACES, PERSONS, PEOPLE, INSTITUTIONS, AND EVENTS

WATSON, PAUL – Karen Oslund  
WEST INDIES – Kristín Loftsdóttir  
WESTFJORDS – Katla Kjartansdóttir  
WHITE HOUSE (United States of America) – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
WILHELM II (German Emperor, 1888–1918) – Julia Zernack  
WILHELMINIAN EMPIRE (1888-1918) – Julia Zernack  
WINCKELMANN, JOHANN JOACHIM – Julia Zernack, Heidi Hansson  
WISCONSIN (United States of America) – Clarence E. Glad  
WORLD COUNCIL OF WHALERS – Karen Oslund  
WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM – Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir  
WORLD WILDLIFE FUND – Karen Oslund  
WORLD'S STRONGEST MAN COMPETITION – Heiða Jóhannsdóttir  
WORM, OLE – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
WRITERS' UNION OF ICELAND – *see Rithöfundasamband Íslands*

X-Z

XENOPHON – Clarence E. Glad  
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ZENO BROTHERS – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
ZEUS – Clarence E. Glad  
ZIEGLER, JACOB – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article)  
ZIMBABWE – Karen Oslund  
ZORGDRAGER, CORNELIUS G. – Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (article), Kristinn Schram  
ZWIER, GERRIT JAN – Daisy Neijmann

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ÞINGVELLIR – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
ÞJAZI – Julia Zernack  
ÞJÓÐMENNINGARHÚSIÐ (Culture House) – Katla Kjartansdóttir  
ÞJÓÐMINJASAFN ÍSLANDS (National Museum of Iceland) – Júlíana Gottskálksdóttir, Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, Þorgerður H. Þorvaldsdóttir, Katla Kjartansdóttir, Daniel Chartier (article)  
ÞJÓÐÓLFR ÓR HVÍNI – Julia Zernack  
ÞORGEIRSSON, NJÁLL – Clarence E. Glad, Gylfi Gunnlaugsson, Katla Kjartansdóttir  
ÞORGILSSON, ARI – Sverrir Jakobsson  
ÞORLÁKSSON, JÓN – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson  
ÞORRABLÓT FESTIVAL – Katla Kjartansdóttir  
ÞVERÁ RIVER – Gylfi Gunnlaugsson

