

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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ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

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.¹ 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

¹ 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.²

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.³ 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.⁴ The teaching of the Greek language in Icelandic schools probably began at the beginning of the 17th century.⁵ 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

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

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

⁴ Árnason 1991a: 14–17. See also Árnason 1991b.

⁵ 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.”⁶

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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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

⁶ 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.).

⁷ See ÍB. 50, fol.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.

¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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.¹²

¹¹ 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.

¹² “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 1826–1831.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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

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

¹⁴ “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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ “að hin forna almenna norðurláfu-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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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 *Crymogaa*, published in Latin in Hamburg in 1609. See Jónsson 1985: 96, 103.

¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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*,²¹ and he also contributed to the translation of biblical texts.²² 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.²³ Egilsson had translated the *Odyssey*

²⁰ 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 íslenskur 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).

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

²² 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.

²³ The Latin translations *Scripta historica Islandorum de rebus gestis veterum Borealium, latine reddita et apparatu crítico instructa, opera et studio Sveinbjörnís Egilssonii* were published in 1828–1842.

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based on the hexameter but decided to publish it in prose.²⁴ 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.²⁵ The translations are usually seen as marking a turning point in Icelandic prose style.²⁶

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,

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

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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 *Egill's saga*. I did not see Snorri's *Heimskringla* while in school.²⁷

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.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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

²⁷ “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 forneskjuleg og hálfklassísk, lítið var um annað hugsað en hetjuöld Grikkja og Rómverja, og fornöld norðurlanda; lesnir: Platón, Xenófón og Hómer, Virgílius, Hóratíus, Júlíus Cæsar og Ciceró; höfundar Njálu, Grettlu, Eglu í svefnloftunum; Heimskringlu Snorra sá eg ekki í skóla.” Melsted 1912: 35 (my translation).

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ 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.³⁰

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.³¹ 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.”³²

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

³⁰ Egilsson 1999: 93–94, 103, 109.

³¹ 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.).

³² “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.³³ 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.”³⁴ 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.³⁵

Another example can be seen in the poem “Brisingamen” (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

³³ Povlsen 2007: 102–103, 144–147.

³⁴ Gröndal 1892: 149; Gröndal 1871: 19–91.

³⁵ Egilsson 1999: 182–184; Egilsson 2008.

hemisphere.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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

³⁶ Egilsson 1999: 189–192, 194, 197.

³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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. Einarson 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.³⁹ Einarson launched the periodical *Ármann á Alþingi*, and by using the name “Ármann,” 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, Einarson expressed concerns with the dangers facing a small nation

³⁸ Beller & Leerssen 2007: 336, 342–344.

³⁹ Karlson 2000a: 195, 198–203; Sigurdsson 2003: 81.

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and the importance of kindling feelings of nationality among its people.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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.⁴²

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

⁴⁰ Ólafsdóttir 1961: 14.

⁴¹ "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 eftir það fóru þau í gleymsku hjá öllum, um tíma, þar eftir vöknudu þau á ný, og eru þau nú hvarvetna í miklum metum. Á Íslandi blómstruðu mörg vísindi framar enn annarstaðar, á miðöldunum, en þar eftir gleymdust þau að mestu, nú eru þau farin að lifna aftur, og fer álit þeirra meir og meir í útlöndum." Einarsson 1830: 51–52 (my translation).

⁴² "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, þýdsku 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.⁴³ 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!”⁴⁴

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 *Árman á Alþingi* bravely to fight adverse circumstances. Interestingly, the Greek war of independence—with which Baldvin Einarson sympathized⁴⁵—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.”⁴⁶ Although *Fjölnir* hardly raised any new political demands,⁴⁷ it played a role in Iceland’s

⁴³ Gomard 2007: 195–217.

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

⁴⁵ Einarsson 1830: 164–166.

⁴⁶ Karlsson, 2000: 204; Gíslason 1980: 93–95.

⁴⁷ Kristjánsdóttir 1996: 153–61.

nationalist movement by its emphasis on the national spirit, which was possibly influenced by Herder's idea of *Volksgeist*.⁴⁸

Like Baldvin Einarson,⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰

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:

⁴⁸ Karlsson 2000a: 204; Matthíasdóttir 2004: 47.

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

⁵⁰ “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 bággt 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!⁵¹

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.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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

⁵¹ “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 meigi 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).

⁵² 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).

⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.”⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

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.”⁵⁷ The themes of freedom vs.

⁵⁴ Hálfðanarson 2003: 60.

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

⁵⁶ “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.

⁵⁷ “Maraðons 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.”⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰ Finally, dystopian descriptions of modern Greeks compared to the ancient Greeks are common.⁶¹ 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

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

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

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

⁶¹ 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.”⁶²

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 Melsteð, 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”⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ Heathenism, on the other hand, did not acknowledge the right of nations.⁶⁵

Sigurður Melsteð’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

⁶² Dolan 2000: 126, 179.

⁶³ “Kristin trú hefði fyrst vakið sanna skoðun á þjóðerninu.” Melsteð 1845: 16 (my translation).

⁶⁴ Melsteð 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.”

⁶⁵ Melsteð 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.⁶⁶

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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ 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.

⁶⁷ Gíslason 1980: 254.

⁶⁸ See Eiriksson 1994: 327–30.

⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰

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:

⁷⁰ 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 Matíasdóttir 1995: 36–64). On the difference between von Humboldt and Fichte, see Sorokin 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.⁷¹

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*.⁷² 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.⁷³

⁷¹ Wheaton 1831: 54–55.

⁷² See Ísleifsson 2007: 111–128.

⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ 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*.⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶ 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

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

⁷⁵ “Útlendar fréttir” [Foreign News] 1894: 126.

⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸

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

⁷⁷ Andersen 1901: 152–154.

⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹

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 1918.⁸⁰

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.⁸¹ 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.

⁷⁹ “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 nánum sífjum, í tvo andstæða hluta.” Ussing 1898: 181 (my translation).

⁸⁰ Mattíasdóttir 2004: 50–53.

⁸¹ 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,⁸² the term is now well established as is the imported slogan of Iceland as Hellas of the North.⁸³ 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

⁸² 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).

⁸³ 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."

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spirit.”⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵

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.”⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷ Although the idea of a Hellas of the North is not found here, the ideological framework is the same. In a German

⁸⁴ 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.

⁸⁵ “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.

⁸⁶ Neckel 1922: 35–44; Wachter 1835: cxlvii.

⁸⁷ Neckel 1922: 35.

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

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.”⁸⁹ The new University of Iceland established in 1911 “will again lift the torch of culture and learning which burnt so brightly in republican Iceland.”⁹⁰ 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.”⁹¹ These reflections are then used by Stefánsson to express a hope for “a united, free, and federated Scandinavia.”⁹² 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

⁸⁸ 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.”

⁸⁹ Stefánsson 1916: xxviii–xxix.

⁹⁰ Stefánsson 1916: xxix.

⁹¹ 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.

⁹² 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.⁹³

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.⁹⁴ 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

⁹³ Stefansson 1916: x–xi.

⁹⁴ 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.”⁹⁵

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.⁹⁶ 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!”⁹⁷ 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

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

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

⁹⁷ Borza 1973: 5–25.

facilitate a scientific way of thinking than the declensions and conjugations of Latin and Greek nouns and verbs.⁹⁸ 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 1914.⁹⁹ Members of the Althing discussed the proposal for the establishment of the chair in detail.¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹

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

⁹⁸ Bain 1899: 131.

⁹⁹ *Alþingistíðindi 1914*, vol. A: 193–94; *Alþingistíðindi 1914*, vol. A: 311–313.

¹⁰⁰ See *Alþingistíðindi 1914*, vol. B: 274–311, 523–551.

¹⁰¹ Glad 2003: 42–64.

Rome,” as principal Ólafur Lárusson remarked in a speech welcoming the Norwegian crown prince in his visit to the University of Iceland in 1947.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵ 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.

¹⁰² “eitt hinna þriggja skæru ljósa í andlegu lífi mannkynsins. Þeim hefur verið skipað við hlið Biblíunnar og hinna klassísku bókmennta Grikkja og Rómverja.” Lárusson 1947: 92 (my translation).

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

¹⁰⁴ 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.

¹⁰⁵ 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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