

THE LOCALISATION AND DATING OF MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC MANUSCRIPTS

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AS IS APPARENT FROM THE TITLE, the subject of this paper is the localisation and dating of medieval Icelandic manuscripts.¹ In this context I intend to touch on the identification of scribal hands in more than one manuscript, that is to say, the establishment of groups of manuscripts on the basis of common hands, and to consider attempts to identify individual scribes or at least to place them in a particular environment.

In my view, investigations of this sort can serve many purposes well beyond just satisfying pure curiosity, necessary though curiosity certainly is in a scholar. In many cases our work resembles that of the detective, although we seldom succeed in making our expositions as exciting as a detective-thriller.

Identification of scribes is not only of interest for the study of Icelandic biography and genealogy. Along with the dating and localisation of a group of manuscripts on the basis of common hands, it can contribute to our knowledge of where in Iceland manuscripts were produced and in what sort of environment. We can also get information about what literary genres were of interest in the communities in question.

A fairly secure dating for Icelandic manuscripts is more or less essential for students of literary history who are concerned with chronology and literary development. This is because the age of the oldest manuscript of a given text constitutes, of course, a *terminus ante quem* for that text. There are some interesting cases where this simple principle was ignored. In Stefán Einarsson's typological dating of the later *riddarasögur* (1957, 164; 1961, 204–05), for example, *Dínus saga drambláta* and two other sagas were put around 1500 or even after that date. In fact there are good reasons for dating the oldest manuscript of *Dínus saga* (AM 575 a 4to) to about or even before 1400, and the oldest manuscripts of the other sagas to the 15th century (*ONPInd* 1989, 172, 383, 268).

¹ This article is based on a paper given to the Viking Society in November 1996; parts of the contents have been incorporated in other papers of which one has been published, cf. Stefán Karlsson 1998.

Moreover the dating of manuscripts is, of course, of enormous importance for students of linguistic history. In grammars of Old Norse, sound-changes and morphological innovations are often dated in a rather unsubtle manner which can be deceptive. When, for example, it is stated that short /q/ and short /ø/ fall together in about 1200 and long /æ/ and /œ/ fall together in about 1250 then this is an assertion which needs explanation. It is true that we find the first signs of these sound-changes at about these dates. But the concise way they are often formulated in modern grammars might give the uninitiated the idea that they took place either by the waving of some magic wand or even by a legislative act of the Icelandic parliament. In the large Icelandic speech-area we can, I think, reckon that it took something like fifty to a hundred years for a linguistic innovation to be carried through over the whole country. In some cases it may have taken considerably longer. Besides, we still have areas where older forms linger on, and where changes have not been carried through which took place centuries earlier elsewhere in the country.

Although we believe we know the main features of Icelandic linguistic history, much remains obscure, not least about where particular linguistic innovations have arisen and in which directions and how quickly they have spread. As is well known, the most radical changes which have taken place in Icelandic since the Middle Ages are in pronunciation, and certain shifts in the sound-system find no expression in orthography because no syncretism of sounds resulted. Other changes are, of course, manifested in the written language, but up till now it has been impossible to say with certainty exactly where in the country any innovation had its origin. The sparse and scattered population of Iceland and the lack of any significant urbanisation until the present century have meant that there have been no influential centres for linguistic innovations, and this, in turn, has been one of the reasons for the relatively conservative character of the Icelandic language.

It has also proved difficult to follow the spread of linguistic change. One reason is the very uneven distribution of the preserved documentary sources. There is no specifically dated and localised original charter preserved from before 1300. And up into the fifteenth century the overwhelming preponderance of charters is from northern Iceland. This means that it is almost impossible to get from the charters of this period any overall picture of the linguistic situation outside the northern part of the country.

In an article on the external circumstances affecting the development

of Icelandic, Helgi Guðmundsson (1977, 319) drew attention to the fact that the Icelandic speech-area was circular in form. This meant that linguistic innovations could gain ground on both sides, until, by a sort of pincer movement, they conquered the whole country. But the converse could also happen: a linguistic innovation might well succumb in a campaign on two fronts against the forces of linguistic conservatism. There is evidence in the written sources for quite a number of linguistic innovations which seemed to establish themselves and flourish for a few centuries, only to disappear entirely at a later date. The problem is that we have been unable to define with any certainty the dialect-areas in which they manifested themselves at a given time, and therefore they are rarely of value in localising a particular manuscript in which they appear.

One factor that makes it difficult to establish well-defined dialect areas and boundaries in Iceland is, of course, the mobility of its population (Jón Helgason 1931, 36–37; Helgi Guðmundsson 1977, 318–21). It may perhaps appear paradoxical that such mobility existed at the same time as Icelandic society remained extraordinarily static down the centuries from an economic point of view, but that is in fact the case. This mobility took various forms, of which two are most relevant to the present discussion. First, from the late Middle Ages down to the present century labourers moved from one part of the country to another because of the seasonal nature of employment. Second, the clergy often changed residence, as did members of the wealthiest families who commonly entered into marriages, inherited farms and settled down in places far from where they were born. One result of this mobility was doubtless what might be termed linguistic infiltration, which in turn contributed to a somewhat complex dialectal situation. Another factor undoubtedly was that many scribes had a role somewhat similar to that of itinerant journeymen. I shall return to them later.

What I should like to consider, then, are the methods that have been used for dating and localising medieval Icelandic manuscripts. I shall also touch on various conclusions which earlier scholars have come to in this field, and others I have come to myself, not all of which I have so far published.

Just as the great majority of Icelandic sagas are anonymous, so it is only in exceptional cases that the scribes of preserved manuscripts are named. The best known exception to this generalisation is the original part of the largest extant Icelandic medieval manuscript, *Flateyjarbók* (Gl. kgl. sml. 1005 fol., now in SÁM). This contains primarily sagas

about four Norwegian kings, but with lengthy interpolations from Sagas of Icelanders and other sagas that are connected in their subject-matter with the missionary kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr helgi. In a prefatory note in the hand of one of the scribes of *Flateyjarbók*, we are told that the book's owner was Jón Hákonarson, a prominent land-owner of Víðidalstunga in Húnavatnssýsla, in the western part of the northern Quarter. We are also given the names of the book's two scribes, Jón Þórðarson and Magnús Þórhallsson, both of them priests, and are told which part of the codex each of them wrote and that Magnús illuminated the whole book. Elsewhere in the codex, 1387 is given as the year in which the book was written, but its youngest parts are a little later nonetheless, inasmuch as the annals which the manuscript contains continue as far as 1394 (Stefán Karlsson 1970b, 298–99). A single leaf from a manuscript containing an otherwise unknown *riddarasaga* called *Grega saga*, AM 567 4to, XXVI (now in SÁM), has also turned out to have been written by Magnús Þórhallsson. Finally, on the basis of orthographically accurate copies by later scribes, I think I have convincingly shown that a largish codex called *Vatnshyrna* which contained a number of Sagas of Icelanders but which perished in the Copenhagen fire of 1728 was at least partly written in Magnús's hand (Stefán Karlsson 1970b). Long before this, however, the production of *Vatnshyrna* had been thought to be due to Jón Hákonarson's initiative because genealogies at the end of two of the sagas it contained are traced down either to Jón himself or to the woman we think was his wife (Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860a, xiv–xvi; 1860b, ix–xi).

The manuscript Perg. fol. nr 2 in The Royal Library in Stockholm has saints' lives as its contents and the heading to one of these is: *Hér byrjar Benedictus sögu er Ormur Loftsson skrifaði*, 'Here begins Benedictus saga, which Ormur Loftsson copied'. The majority of the twenty-five other sagas in the manuscript are written entirely or partly in the same hand as *Benedikts saga*, and Peter Foote, in the introduction to the facsimile edition of the codex, detected the same hand in two leaves from another codex containing saints' lives (AM 238 fol., VIII). The scribe Ormur Loftsson must be identical with the person of the same name who was the Norwegian king's *hirðstjóri* (governor) in Iceland for a shortish period. He lived partly in western Iceland and partly in the western part of northern Iceland, dying probably at an early age before 1450 (Foote 1962, 10–12 and 17–18).

Then there is a single leaf, probably the final one, from a liturgical manuscript designated AM 80 b 8vo (now in SÁM), in which the scribe

provides specific information about the book's genesis in a colophon. He gives his own name as Jón Þorláksson and the name of the person who commissioned the book as Bjarni Ívarsson and says that Bjarni was also its illuminator. Bjarni lived at Meðalfell in Kjós in south-western Iceland but presented the book 'to the Virgin Mary at Munkaþverá', that is, to the Benedictine monastery at Munkaþverá in Eyjafjörður in northern Iceland. The year is given as 1473 (Kålund 1884–91). The reason why Bjarni gave this fine gift to a monastery in a far-off part of the country could well be that his wife (who was, by the way, a sister of the Ormur Loftsson I have just mentioned) came from the wealthy farm of Möðruvellir in Eyjafjörður which lies only twelve kilometres or so south of Munkaþverá. There is also circumstantial evidence that Bjarni, who himself came from south-western Iceland, may have grown up in the household of his aunt Margrét Vigfúsdóttir at Möðruvellir (I will be coming back to her later on). It is quite possible that Bjarni was sent to school at Munkaþverá, even though he never took orders. The scribe of the manuscript, Jón Þorláksson, who was also a layman, has been identified as the scribe of the preserved fragments of various other liturgical codices and also of a little prayer-book which Sir Joseph Banks presented to the British Museum in 1773 (BL Add. 4895). The legend about Jón Þorláksson is that the three fingers he used for writing did not grow stiff when rigor mortis set in at his death (Magnús Már Lárusson 1958; Jón Helgason 1968; Ólafur Halldórsson 1971; Andersen 1979; Stefán Karlsson 1979b).

Then there are examples of a scribe being mentioned in a manuscript without our having any further information about him. AM 152 fol. (now in SÁM) is a large saga-codex containing *Grettis saga* and also various *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*. It was written by two scribes, one of whom wrote the first quarter of the codex, including *Grettis saga*. In the margin of the part of the codex containing *Grettis saga*, on f. 46v, we find written: *Þessa sögu hefur skrifað bróðir Bjarnar Þorleifssonar*, 'The brother of Björn Þorleifsson wrote this saga'. Earlier scholars, most recently Jón Helgason (1958, 74), took it for granted that the Björn Þorleifsson mentioned here was the king's governor of that name who was killed by Englishmen in 1467. But it was later discovered that the scribal hand in question appeared in various charters, amongst them three from the years 1511–12 (DIVIII, nos 299, 327 and 334²) which concern the farm of Svignaskarð in Borgarfjörður in

western Iceland. On this farm there lived a man by the name of Þorsteinn Þorleifsson, who was half-brother to another Björn Þorleifsson, a grandson of the king's governor of the same name (Louis-Jensen 1969, 241–43). This younger Björn Þorleifsson is best known as the scribe, and perhaps also part-compiler, of the last great work of Icelandic hagiography, which goes under the name of *Reykjahólabók*. In addition to charters, his hand is also found in fragments of a couple of other codices which contain religious works (Overgaard 1968, ciii–cxi; Loth 1969, xxi–xxxv). In contrast with this, his half-brother Þorsteinn Þorleifsson's hand appears in fragments of a legal manuscript (Stefán Karlsson 1970a, 138).

The incorrect identification of the scribe of AM 152 fol. made by earlier scholars is closely related to the stagnation in the development of Icelandic script and orthography in the period between the great plague of 1402–04 and the Reformation. That stagnation was such that a number of codices which we now know to have been written in the first half of the sixteenth century, or about the middle of it, were formerly dated to the fifteenth.

To conclude this part of my paper, I will mention a group of codices in which the names of the scribes in marginalia have been the cause of trouble and divided opinion. Four manuscripts were seen to belong to this group as much as a hundred years ago. Three of them are among the largest codices from the end of the Middle Ages: the saga-manuscript AM 510 4to, the *rímur*-manuscript AM 604 4to, and AM 713 4to, which contains a large collection of Catholic poems. In addition, there is a small manuscript, AM 431 12mo, which contains a life of St Margaret of Antioch and prayers for women in labour. All four of these manuscripts are now in SÁM.

Now because the scribe of this last manuscript, 431, is referred to as Jón Arason, and because the manuscript contains some prayers in Latin, it was assumed by most scholars that this group of manuscripts was written by Jón Arason, the last Catholic bishop of Iceland. But in a long article, Jón Helgason (1932) produced strong arguments to show that, in fact, the bishop had no part in the production of these manuscripts. He pointed out that the two names Jón Arason and Tómas Arason appeared in marginalia in the saga-manuscript 510 and a 'séra Ari' in marginalia in the *rímur*-manuscript 604. After Agnete Loth had noticed that at the end of one of the sagas in 510 the book was said to have been written by *þrír feðgar*, that is either a father and his two sons, or a grandfather and his son and grandson; and after I had found one of

² Bps. A I Fasc. XVIII 42, XVIII 43 and XII 6 in Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands.

the hands of this manuscript-group in a charter written at Staður in Súgandafjörður in the Western Fjords in 1549 in which the priest Ari Jónsson was one of the witnesses (*DIXI*, no. 629³), Ólafur Halldórsson (1966, 25–26) clinched the conclusion put forward by Jón Helgason just as a possibility in his article that the scribes of this group of manuscripts were the priest Ari Jónsson from the Western Fjords and his two lay sons, Jón and Tómas. This Ari Jónsson was the grandson of a Jón Þorláksson who was either identical with, or a brother of, the well-known scribe of liturgical manuscripts whom I mentioned earlier (p. 142). Since 1966, more manuscripts have been added to the group, a little encyclopaedic manuscript and various law-books, so that we see that this college of scribes, up there in the Western Fjords, concerned themselves with most of the genres of Iceland's medieval literature (Stefán Karlsson 1970a, 139). Up to now, nobody has tried to ascribe individual parts of the manuscripts in this impressive group to particular members of the trio, but this should not be impossible despite the fact that, at first glance, the hands in these manuscripts resemble each other to the point of confusion.

There have always, of course, been groups of scribes who wrote individual characters and expressed individual phonemes in the same way. But in writing in general the graphic and orthographic possibilities were so numerous that it is highly improbable that any two scribes would adopt exactly the same combinations. It is true, on the other hand, that the probability is undeniably greatest in precisely the sort of situation we seem to have here, where two sons were presumably taught to write by their father.

In what I have said so far, I have given a few examples of how dated and localised charters can help us to identify the writers of manuscripts. Now the writers of Icelandic charters were, like the majority of scribes of the codices, anonymous. But we can sometimes identify the scribe of a charter with a reasonable degree of certainty, because his name will often appear in the charter itself, either as one of the parties in the particular piece of business or as one of the arbitrators or witnesses who execute the charter. If one has just one solitary charter, of course, it is usually useless to attempt to single out one of the persons named as the scribe. But if one has two or more charters in the same hand, then things become easier (and then normally in direct

relationship to the number of charters one has). This is because a greater number of charters reduces the number of persons who can be seen to have been present on all the occasions when the charters were executed or to have had an interest in them all. And it is also an advantage if the relevant charters are chronologically spread over a longish period, since this reduces the possibility that likely candidates had the same secretary the whole time; and one can in certain cases observe small changes in writing which can contribute to a closer dating of any manuscript which might be in the charter-writer's hand.

When one has succeeded in identifying the hand in a charter with one in a manuscript, then identification of the scribe is obviously made easier if the manuscript's content gives some hint as to who the scribe was. This was the case with the earliest identifications of manuscript writers on the basis of charters. The first was Peter Andreas Munch's identification (Munch 1847) of lawman Haukur Erlendsson, who lived chiefly in Norway, as the main scribe of the manuscript *Hauksbók* (AM 371 4to (now in SÁM), AM 544 4to and AM 675 4to), a manuscript which was already connected with him by the genealogies in the version of *Landnámabók* it contains and because the writer of 371, on a now lost leaf, had given his name as Haukur Erlendsson. The second was Gustav Storm's identification (Storm 1888, xxi; cf. also Stefán Karlsson 1963, xxxix) of the priest Einar Hafliðason, *officialis* and administrator at Hólar, as the scribe of the so-called *Lögmannsannáll* down to 1361, a set of annals whose contents suggested him as their compiler and also partly their author. As far as *Hauksbók* is concerned, I have tried to establish a closer dating of those parts of the manuscript which are written in the same hand as two charters written by Haukur in 1302 and 1310 (*IO* nos 4 and 5, both in Riksarkivet in Oslo), and on the basis of minor palaeographical differences between the two charters, I have attempted to demonstrate that the major part of what Haukur wrote in *Hauksbók* (371 and parts of 544) was written between the dates of the two charters (Stefán Karlsson 1964).

In the course of the last few decades, scholars have recognised hands found in charters in manuscripts whose contents did not already point in a particular direction. But this is relatively rare in the period before 1400. There are two reasons for this. First, the corpus of Icelandic charters for the period prior to 1400 is rather limited—not many more than a hundred original charters. Second, there is the difficulty that scribes in the fourteenth century used two different types of writing: on the one hand, a style they used for writing codices, which may be called

³ AM Dipl. Isl. Fasc. LI 23 (now in SÁM).

a Gothic book-script, on the other a semicursive which they primarily used in writing charters. It seems that the most productive scribes mastered both styles and there are actually a few examples of a scribe using both styles in a single codex. But otherwise it is often almost impossible to recognise the style a scribe uses in writing codices from the one he uses in writing charters, and vice versa.

One reason why it is of such value to recognise the hand of a charter in a codex or to establish a close relation between the hands of charters and those of codices is, of course, that charters are dated and localised. Particularly where several charters exist in the same hand as a codex, it may be possible to arrive at a very accurate dating of the codex on the basis of a development in the writing which can be observed from one charter to the next. On the other hand, a dating based solely on a codex's script and spelling cannot reasonably be more accurate than to a period of a least fifty years.

The place where a charter was executed does not necessarily give any information about the place where the scribe lived nor, if we find manuscripts in the same hand, the place where he wrote these. Scribes were mobile, and the more competent amongst them were presumably in certain cases called upon to carry out their work in several different places. When we have a number of charters in the same hand, they will normally have been written in different places, not necessarily just within the same area, but sometimes in places quite far apart. Any concentration we find at or around a given place will, of course, give a hint as to the place where the scribe lived. And when one is able to put a definite name to the scribe of a charter, then other sources can make localisation of the scribe in question considerably easier.

I will give a single example of this which will also serve to show how careful we must be if we are to make use of localised charters as sources for dialect geography. A short contribution by Pierre Naert (1956) included in its title the words 'Med þessu minu optnu brefi'. This phrase, *með þessu mínu opnu bréfi*, literally, 'by this my open letter', is found at the beginning of numerous charters, and Naert had collected from *Diplomatarium Islandicum* cases where an intrusive *t* was found between the *p* and the *n* in the word *opnu*, the dative singular neuter of the adjective *opinn*, 'open'. In all, he found the spelling in thirty-eight charters from the period 1449–1567. They were spread over northern Iceland, western Iceland and the most westerly parts of southern Iceland. But the greatest concentration was in the southern part of Strandasýsla on the eastern side of the north-western peninsula,

and it was therefore reasonable to conclude that it was somewhere in that region of Iceland that the sound-change represented by the spelling in question had its origin. On the other hand, it is a little difficult to think of the rather isolated Strandasýsla as the dynamic centre of a linguistic innovation which subsequently spread elsewhere. And when one takes a closer look at the charters which figure in Naert's list, then one sees that at least a quarter of them, including all those from Strandasýsla, are written in the same hand in the years between 1488 and 1514. This hand is also found in certain other documents which were not in Naert's list, either because they did not contain the spelling in question or because they were not accurately reproduced in *Diplomatarium Islandicum*. In all, there are some thirteen charters in this one hand. The majority of them concern one and the same person, so it is reasonable to conclude that we have here the actual scribe. This person was called Þorbjörn Jónsson and he was a farmer at Kálfanes in Steingrímsfjörður in Strandasýsla. He seems to have travelled quite a lot and to have written documents, partly for other people, at various places in the north-western peninsula, and also at some distance off to the south in the monastery on Viðey and at the bishop's seat at Skálholt. Þorbjörn was an unusual character. The first time he appears in historical sources is in a document executed in 1487 by Raymundus Peraudi, the Pope's commissioner for indulgences in Germany, which grants an indulgence to Þorbjörn and his wife; the document is in Icelandic and was written by Þorbjörn himself, with the addition of a couple of Latin prayers in the same hand (*DI VI*, no. 524)! In addition we are told in two further documents that he received absolution for some unspecified transgressions from his bishop on Viðey in 1494 (*DIVII*, no. 269) and from his archdeacon at Kálfanes probably in 1499 (*DIVII*, no. 447). In 1514 he also received absolution from his archdeacon in Vatnsfjörður *ab adulterio* (*DI VIII*, no. 401). The last time we come across him is at Skálholt in 1515 in a charter where the bishop licenses a building erected by Þorbjörn in Steingrímsfjörður as a chapel and grants nine days' indulgence to people each time they go there to hear mass (*DI VIII*, no. 439). All five of these documents are in the same hand.⁴ I will be coming back to Þorbjörn later on.

In the identification of Haukur Erlendsson and Einar Hafliðason as writers of codices, a combination of two factors was involved. First,

⁴ AM Dipl. Isl. Fasc. XXVIII 13, XXXII 21, XXXIV 16, XLII 15 and XLII 25 (all now in SÁM).

certain things in their codices pointed to them as scribes or patrons; and second, the appearance of the same scribal hands in charters which concerned them and which were written many years apart made it highly likely that they had contributed to the writing of the codices in question with their own hands.

In certain cases it is possible to localise manuscripts, without necessarily pointing to a named scribe, on the basis of some local connection of the texts. This method was used in the last century to localise AM 279 a 4to, which became known as *Pingeyrabók* (DII, nos 80 and 112), because its oldest parts, written in the second half of the thirteenth century, contain among other things information about foreshore rights belonging to the Benedictine monastery at Pingeyrar.⁵ In the 1960s, it became apparent that the latest parts of the codex are written in the same hand as certain documents which concern Jón Þorvaldsson who was abbot of Pingeyrar at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and he probably wrote these documents himself (Stefán Karlsson 1963, xxix–xxxiii). The same hand is found as one of those in AM 624 4to, which contains exempla and many other texts, including *Visio Pauli* (Tveitane 1965, 6–7). Two of the oldest hands are also found in other manuscripts, one of them in fragments of a manuscript of *Gregorius saga* and Gregory's *Dialogues* (NRA nos 71, 72, 72b, 76 and 77, and AM 921 4to, IV), and another in the oldest extant fragment of *Karlamagnús saga*, NRA 61 (Stefán Karlsson 1992). Both the manuscripts of which these fragments are the remains were probably in Norway in the medieval period and are therefore one of several indications that the scriptorium at Pingeyrar to some extent produced manuscripts with an eye to exporting them to Norway (Stefán Karlsson 1979a, 8–9).

Information about who owned a manuscript or the place it was kept can also provide evidence about its place of origin. The value of such evidence is, however, naturally qualified by the length of time between a manuscript's date of origin and the date of such information. Thus it has become clear over the years that several of the manuscripts which Árni Magnússon in his time acquired from Skálholt, and which on that

⁵ One of the oldest parts of this manuscript, 'Skipti á spákonuafri', was dated to about 1200 (DII, no. 80) or a little later (Hreinn Benediktsson 1965, xviii), probably since it contains a reference to a statement by abbot Karl (d. 1212 or 1213). But it is not certain that Karl's statement would have been written down in his lifetime, and in any case one cannot assume that AM 279 a 4to is the original of this document.

basis were in some cases formerly regarded as products of Skálholt, were in fact written in other parts of the country. This is very understandable. Ecclesiastical establishments not only produced manuscripts; they also received them as gifts and bequests. And as far as Skálholt is concerned this was particularly necessary because its stock of books was greatly reduced by various fires (Stefán Karlsson 1967a, 57–58⁶).

An example of a generally accepted localisation of a group of manuscripts on this basis is to be found in Ólafur Halldórsson's exhaustive monograph, *Helgafellsbækur fornar* (1966). Here Ólafur presented various indications that a large group of manuscripts from the second half of the fourteenth century, established as a group on the basis of common hands, had been written in the Augustinian monastery at Helgafell. One of these manuscripts is AM 226 fol., containing among other things material from or connected with the historical books of the Old Testament, known as *Stjórn*. Also belonging to the group are several manuscripts of saints' lives, including Codex Scardensis with its lives of the apostles, the manuscript of the Óláfr sagas AM 61 fol., and some law-books, including the beautifully illuminated *Skarðsbók*.

In his 'Tesen om de två kulturerna', Lars Lönnroth put together a very useful list of most of the groups of manuscripts known at the time to have had one or more scribal hands in common, with brief comments (1965, 65–73). Now in my view the production of manuscript books in the Middle Ages in Iceland was not limited to the ecclesiastical foundations and clerics to quite the degree that Lönnroth argued. He is, of course, right in arguing that wealthy farmers often commissioned ecclesiastical establishments or local priests to carry out literary work for them, perhaps primarily copying and compiling, the sort of work that *Flateyjarbók* exemplifies. We can, of course, as Lönnroth suggests, talk about two cultures in medieval Iceland, one clerical, the other secular. But we must never forget that the bearers of the secular culture belonged to a Christian community, and more people than we have specific information about would have received at least some education, sometimes in monastic schools, without going on to be ordained as priests (Stefán Karlsson 1970a, 133 and 136).

In a critique I wrote of Lönnroth's arguments (1970a, 131–40), I argued that the ability to read and write was more common amongst the

⁶ There are more manuscripts than are mentioned here that Árni got from Skálholt and have been shown to have been written elsewhere.

secular population of medieval Iceland than he was inclined to admit.⁷ I have, of course, never argued that all or even the majority of Icelandic farmers in the Middle Ages were able to read and write. On the other hand, I suggested that it was probable most of the landowning farmers, and with them, of course, the chieftains, and certain other people, were able to do so. This literate group, however, was only a minority of the total number of farmers. Among the farmers who leased the farms they worked there was undoubtedly a significant disparity depending on the value (and with that the scale of the farming) of the farms they leased.

In this connection I will mention that in a study still to be published I have tried to use a source from the middle of the seventeenth century to get an idea of what proportion of the farmers of that time could read and write. The documents are from assemblies which were held throughout the country in 1649 in connection with the swearing of oaths of allegiance to Frederik III as absolute monarch (*Skjöl* 1914).⁸ In a number of these documents we are told that all those who were able to write signed them themselves. The material proved to be rather variable, but my conclusion is that it is probable that about 20–25 per cent of all farmers could write. The document from one such assembly in Barðastrandarsýsla in the Western Fjords is the clearest because it tells us from which farm each person came. This particular assembly covered forty farms, which can be divided into three categories according to the valuation they are given in an inventory from 1710 (*Jarðabók* 1938). Sixteen farms were valued at twelve hundreds or less; of the farmers on these farms there was only one who signed. Eight farms in the second class were valued at sixteen hundreds; from them two farmers signed. Finally, sixteen farms were valued at eighteen hundreds or more, and from these seven of the farmers signed—that is nearly half of them. This shows, I think, that there was a close correlation between economic prosperity and social status on the one hand and the ability to write on the other.

Before I move on from this old dispute of mine with Lars Lönnroth, I will just mention one further point. I myself, and others before me, have quoted statements from the sixteenth century, by Peder Palladius, bishop of Sjælland, in 1546, and by two slightly later Norwegian writers, about the remarkable, in fact almost universal, literacy of the

Icelanders. I disagree with Lönnroth that the statements in question are so similar in wording that they have no independent source value. The bishop writes in general terms that he observes 'that there are not many to be found in the country who cannot themselves both read and write their mother tongue.' Absolon Beyer of Bergen writes in 1567 that it is customary among the Icelanders to teach their children to read and write, 'females just as much as males, and young lads are put to studying their law-book until they know it off by heart.' And the archdeacon Peder Claussøn Friis, writing in 1580, begins with an echo from Saxo Grammaticus to the effect that the Icelanders had writing and composing as a substitute for warfare and goes on to say that every farmer could read and write and that they taught their children to do the same, and concludes with the statement that every member of the *lögrétta* (public court of law) had his own copy of the law-book with him at the Alþingi (Stefán Karlsson 1970a, 133–35).

In this article of 1970 I accepted that these three statements exaggerate, but even so they presumably contain an element of truth in representing literacy in sixteenth-century Iceland as a good deal more widespread than in the neighbouring countries. There is no evidence that literacy was given any special impetus by the Reformation; in any case the Reformation had not been carried through in the whole of Iceland when Palladius was writing. On the other hand, it is possible that Icelandic clergy of the time might have stressed the country's vigorous literary tradition to Palladius, who functioned more or less as their archbishop after the Reformation, and might have exaggerated literacy there as an argument for Iceland having its native language as the language of the Church. As we know, this was not what happened in Norway and the Faroes, which were also under Danish rule.

We can, of course, be entirely certain that the two bishop's seats in Iceland were centres for the production of books, although there are very few preserved medieval manuscripts that can be connected with them as having been written there. On the other hand, as I have said, there are various groups of manuscripts which with varying degrees of probability appear to be the products of monastic houses. I have mentioned the large group dated to the fourteenth century connected with the Augustinian monastery at Helgafell and a smaller one from the thirteenth century connected with the Benedictine monastery at Þingeyrar; there is also a larger group of fourteenth-century manuscripts that has been linked with the monastery at Þingeyrar (Johansson 1997, 9–18).

⁷ Later modifications of some of his views appear in Lönnroth 1990, 9.

⁸ These documents are preserved in the Rigsarkiv, Copenhagen, in the section 'Island, Færø, Grønland' as nos 42–44.

and 66–80). Other groups have with varying degrees of probability been identified as monastic products: one from the second half of the fourteenth century (Louis-Jensen 1968, 10–13) and another from the middle of the fifteenth century (Stefán Karlsson 1963, lx–lxi) have been associated with Benedictine Munkaþverá in Eyjafjörður; one from the middle of the fourteenth century (Stefán Karlsson 1967a, 26–29)⁹ and another from a century later (see below) with Augustinian Möðruvellir in Hörgárdalur; and one from the late fourteenth century (Lönnroth 1965, 71–72) with the Benedictine nunnery at Reynistaður in Skagafjörður.¹⁰

I will elaborate a little on the later of the two groups of manuscripts that have been linked to the monastery at Möðruvellir. It consists of two large manuscripts written around the middle of the fifteenth century, one of which has been divided into two, AM 81 a fol., which contains *Sverris saga*, *Böglunga sögur* and *Hákonar saga*, and AM 243 a fol., which contains *Konungs skuggsjá*. The other manuscript, Perg. fol. nr 7 in The Royal Library in Stockholm, contains various *riddarasögur*. The two manuscripts are connected by the fact that two identical, or at least closely related, hands appear in both (Holm-Olsen 1961, 15; Jónas Kristjánsson 1964, xiii–xiv), and in addition a number of other scribes were involved, some of whom have written just a few lines.

Now when Ludvig Holm-Olsen wrote his introduction to the facsimile edition of 81 a, he established that one of the main hands of these manuscripts was to be found in a charter (*DI V*, no. 77¹¹) written in 1451 at the farm of Myrká in Hörgárdalur, that is, not far from the monastery at Möðruvellir. Because of the large number of hands in the group, Holm-Olsen concluded that these manuscripts were in all probability written at some ecclesiastical establishment, possibly at the bishop's seat at Hólar or at one of the monasteries, either Möðruvellir

in Hörgárdalur or Munkaþverá in Eyjafjörður (Holm-Olsen 1961, 14–16).¹² Jónas Kristjánsson (1964, xiv–xvi) and especially Lönnroth (1965, 72) favoured Möðruvellir, and so did Holm-Olsen in his later works (1986, xix–xxiii; 1987, 11–12), though with greater reservation. In the introduction to his edition of 81 a, he said (1986, xxiii): ‘a codex with as many scribal hands as 81 a and 243 a have can hardly have been written in any other place than one of the monasteries’, and here Holm-Olsen is thinking of either Möðruvellir or Munkaþverá.

Now I must confess that I am very sceptical of such arguments. I think it is faulty logic to argue (as others have done besides Holm-Olsen) that because a manuscript is written in a number of different hands it was necessarily written at an ecclesiastical establishment. We must not forget the large farms to be found in Iceland at the time. In them the country's wealthiest families resided and probably at least the male members of these would have been able to read and write. In addition, most of these larger farms were at the same time great church-places where one could find up to four clerics, two priests and one or two deacons. There might, then, have been almost a dozen literate people at such places, and they would in my opinion have had all that was needed to allow them to function as cultural centres producing books (Stefán Karlsson 1967b, 81). Also, as Jonna Louis-Jensen has pointed out in another connection (1969, 249–50), it is possible to explain the many minor hands that have written just a few lines of a manuscript as those of literate guests who perhaps put in an appearance at the place while a manuscript was actually being written.

Furthermore, a strong argument that the two manuscripts under discussion were not written in the monastery at Möðruvellir, nor indeed at Munkaþverá nor Hólar, is that not a single one of the many hands contained in them is also found in any of the considerable number of documents from the same period which concern these three ecclesiastical establishments.

I have a different suggestion to make. At the farm of Möðruvellir in Eyjafjörður, which is about forty kilometres south of the monastery of the same name, a document (*DIV*, no. 331¹³) was written in 1463 in a hand very similar to one of the hands common to the two manuscripts

⁹ The localisation in this case is based on very weak foundations.

¹⁰ The handwriting of these manuscripts is very like that in documents mostly relating to Brynjólfur ríki Bjarnarson of Akur in Skagafjörður, who was for a time steward of the monastery at Reynistaður, and his son (Stefán Karlsson 1963, xxxvii–xxxix), and their origin (or at least that of some of them) has been linked with this family (Ólafur Halldórsson 1963; Stefán Karlsson 1970a). Peter Foote (1990, 38–60) has given a comprehensive account of this group of Skagafjörður manuscripts and considered the likelihood of whether they originated in a monastery or in the household of a great secular landowner. Cf. also Ólafur Halldórsson 1993, 17–22.

¹¹ AM Dipl. Isl. Fasc. XIII 1 (now in SÁM).

¹² ‘The manuscript [AM 81 a fol.] evidently served as an exercise-book in the teaching of penmanship at one of Iceland's educational centres, an episcopal residence or a monastery’ (Holm-Olsen 1961, 9).

¹³ AM Dipl. Isl. Fasc. XV 21 (now in SÁM).

in question (Jónas Kristjánsson 1964, xiii), and a related hand is found in two transcripts of documents written at the same place in 1461 (*DIV*, nos 221 and 222¹⁴). Möðruvellir was one of the largest farms in the country and there was a church there served by two priests and a deacon (*DIV*, p. 307). At the time it was owned by Margrét Vigfúsdóttir, whom I mentioned earlier (p. 142 above), a lady of a distinguished, partly Norwegian, family (Einar Bjarnason 1964). She was an aunt of the Bjarni Ívarsson whom I mentioned before (p. 142) as a donor and illuminator of a book. In 1436 Margrét married Þorvarður Loftsson of Möðruvellir, son of Loftur Guttormsson, one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Iceland in the early decades of the fifteenth century. But only ten years afterwards Þorvarður died and she lived on at Möðruvellir as a widow for some forty years. That she had an interest in art is apparent from the inventories of churches in the district, which list works of art she had given them, and to her own church she presented a fine English altar-piece of alabaster (*DIV*, p. 308) which can still be seen in the little wooden church from the last century now standing at Möðruvellir.

From a marginal note in 243 a it is clear that the lawman Þorvarður Erlendsson, a grandson of Margrét Vigfúsdóttir, owned 81 a and 243 a for a time (Holm-Olsen 1961, 14–15; 1987, 10), and the oldest name to be found in the marginalia of Perg. fol. nr 7 is the rare name Ívar Narfason (Jónas Kristjánsson 1964, xxxvi); but this was the name of a grandson of Bjarni Ívarsson, Margrét's nephew (Einar Bjarnason 1964, 83–86), possibly her foster-son,¹⁵ who married Soffía Loftsdóttir, a sister of Margrét's husband Þorvarður. I conclude, then, that in all likelihood these manuscripts come from the farm Möðruvellir in Eyjafjörður; a cultural centre such as this was undoubtedly capable of producing books. The circumstances surrounding the above-mentioned manuscripts and others belonging to the same group will be discussed further by Christopher Sanders in his introduction to a forthcoming facsimile edition of Perg. fol. nr 7.

Before finishing, I will mention a single manuscript which also has been linked to an ecclesiastical establishment.

¹⁴ AM Dipl. Isl. Fasc. I 1 (now in Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands) and VI 23 (now in SÁM).

¹⁵ Bjarni Ívarsson's brother Guðmundur seems to have been brought up in Margrét's household at Möðruvellir; their father Ívar hólmur Vigfússon was killed in 1433 (Einar Bjarnason 1964, 82–89).

AM 551 a 4to contains the end of *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* and also *Víglundar saga* and *Grettis saga*. Of the four scribes of this manuscript, the one who wrote the major part of it also wrote various marginal notes, including this sentence in the margin of *Grettis saga*: *Standi þar fyrst, því að mál er að krjúpa krossi*, that is, 'Let it remain so for the time being; it is time to kneel before the Cross.' In his facsimile edition of the manuscript, Jón Helgason (1954, viii) took this as evidence that this scribe was a cleric or a monk. This view was accepted by Lars Lönnroth (1965, 64), who also thought that the *faðir minn góður*, 'my good father', to whom in other marginalia the scribe makes apologies for the shortcomings of his work, was his abbot. Certainly the word *faðir* can have the sense 'abbot' and can also mean 'confessor'. But in this case it is really more natural to interpret these marginal notes in 551 a as addressed to the scribe's natural father, identical with the *frændi*, 'kinsman', of whom he takes his leave in another note elsewhere in the manuscript.

The fact is that it is apparent from a comparison of the hands that the person who wrote this saga-manuscript is identical with that same amanuensis of charters I mentioned earlier, the one who wrote the dative neuter singular of *opinn* with an intrusive *t*, Þorbjörn Jónsson of Steingrímsfjörður in the north-western peninsula. And I have also found Þorbjörn's hand in two incomplete erotic poems in AM 155 b 8vo¹⁶ and in a medical miscellany, AM 434 a 12mo,¹⁷ which contains, amongst other things, a prayer to the Holy Cross.

Þorbjörn was not a member of society's highest class, but he was a travelled and landowning farmer. And layman though he was, he was also a member of the Universal Church. It was therefore natural for him to interrupt his scribal work for a while and kneel before the Cross.

¹⁶ Printed in Ólafur Davíðsson 1894, 308–09.

¹⁷ Printed in Kålund 1907; facsimiles of two pages pp. 42–43.

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