

From Nature to Script

Reykholt, Environment,
Centre, and Manuscript Making

Editors

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Manuscript Design in Medieval Iceland

Már Jónsson

What do we know about the making and production of vellum manuscripts in Medieval Iceland? Close to nothing, I would say. Where were they made? Who did it and, most importantly: how? A handful of studies done in recent years, mostly for conservation purposes, throw scant light on these and other issues related to the materiality of Icelandic manuscripts. A whole range of things could be investigated and I will now present some preliminary results of my research into the design of manuscripts as revealed in the size and layout (*mise en page*) of the corpus of Icelandic vellum manuscripts (around 900 items) and in two smaller samples that have been investigated in some detail. The results so far indicate an early mastery of the relevant skills in Iceland, but also a subsequent decline that set in shortly after 1400. I will discuss Icelandic manuscripts as a whole and not go into regional differences, although that might be possible or even feasible, using scholarly research on scribal schools and other scattered information on provenance as a basis. Lamentably, not a single preserved vellum manuscript can be connected to Reykholt or its vicinity, except for the leaf containing Reykjaholtsmáldagi, discussed in another contribution.

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Some years ago I pointed out that "excellent concepts in scholarship deserve to be truly international."¹ What I had in mind was that manuscript studies in Iceland would gain by adapting methods and ideas developed since 1980 or so by scholars of codicology writing in French and Italian. In the

¹ Már Jónsson, "Recent trends (or their lack) in Icelandic manuscript studies." *Gazette du livre médiéval* 36 (2000), p. 11. Some of what I say there is repeated in what follows here.

meantime not much has happened. In 2003, however, an Icelandic translation of Ezio Ornato's *Apologia del apogeo* was published with my introduction in Icelandic.² As we all know too well, the literary production in Iceland in the period 1100-1500 was indeed impressive, with learned works on geography and history, legendary sagas, family sagas, bishops' sagas, Norwegian and Danish kings' sagas, mythological studies, poetry of all kinds, linguistic and rhetorical works and law codes, besides translations of romances and hagiographical works. A list of manuscripts published in *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* shows somewhat more than 1100 Icelandic and Norwegian items from the period 1150-1550; an item being a whole manuscript, a defective manuscript or a fragment. A few manuscripts in Latin are not included, although probably or possibly made in Norway or Iceland.³

I have gone through all extant catalogues, printed and not printed, in order to trace manuscripts from the latter half of the sixteenth century, and the distribution of Icelandic and Norwegian vellum manuscripts goes like this:

Table 1: The number of preserved Icelandic and Norwegian vellum manuscripts

Period	Icelandic	Norwegian	Total
1101-1200	16	7	23
1201-1300	113	56	169
1301-1400	339	91	430
1401-1500	242	0	242
1501-1600	269	0	269
Total	979	154	1133

Paper was used earlier in Norway than in Iceland, where it only became more popular than parchment in the last years of the sixteenth century. My survey of catalogues also revealed a thing or two about the preservation of vellum manuscripts and manuscript fragments, and the distribution of Icelandic

² Ezio Ornato, *Lofræða um handritamergð. Hugleiðingar um bóksögu miðalda*. Translators Björg Birgisdóttir and Már Jónsson. (Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar 36). Reykjavík 2003.

³ *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose. Indices*. Copenhagen 1989, pp. 431-494.

and Norwegian manuscripts is strangely similar. Around 40 percent of all items only consist of one or two leaves and no more than one third are sizable books. This can be seen in table 2, and it should be added that the number of manuscripts is lower than in table 1 since I do not have the required information on all of them.

Table 2: The number of leaves in Icelandic and Norwegian manuscripts

	1-2	3-32	33-80	81+	Total
1101-1200	44	38	13	6	101
1201-1300	47	37	12	5	101
1301-1400	48	26	14	13	101
1401-1500	45	23	16	16	100
1501-1600	33	24	16	27	100
Total	44	26	15	16	101
Number of Mss.	396	237	132	145	N: 910
Norway 1101-1400	39	28	12	21	N: 151

Most of Norwegian fragments come from the bindings of account books from the seventeenth century, as they were then reused for more practical purposes, but the preservation of the Icelandic fragments are due to the diligence and perspicacity of Árni Magnússon (1663-1730), professor of history and collector of manuscripts.

2

The Nordic codicological tradition has been neatly summarised by Karl Gunnar Johansson, as he says:

As early as the 19th century, readers of Old Norse manuscripts noted the fact that different scribes had worked together in scriptoria to produce the manuscripts. By judgments on the form of the writing or peculiarities in the orthography, groups were connected to one scribe or to groups of scribes.⁴

⁴ Karl G. Johansson, *Studier i Codex Wormianus. Skriftradition och avskriftverksamhet vid ett isländskt skriptorium under 1300-talet*. Gothenburg 1997, p. 246.

This school of thought and method has produced impressive results, identifying scribes, localising and dating manuscripts and manuscript groups on the basis of common hands defined by means of palaeographical and orthographical analysis and comparison. The majority of such descriptions of manuscripts are found either in introductions to scholarly editions of single works, of which there are quite a few, or in introductions to facsimile editions of single manuscripts and fragments, of which there are about 60, many of them lavishly produced. A characteristic example is a facsimile edition of the mid-fourteenth century manuscript AM 595 a-b 4to of *Rómverja saga*, published by Jakob Benediktsson in 1980. The introduction contains the following elements:

- What Árni Magnússon said about the manuscript and its history.
- An overview of the 38 preserved leaves (size, foliation, collation, initials, number of lines).
- An estimate of how many leaves are lost (apparently almost half of the manuscript).
- Palaeographic features, for instance the fact that the letter x “has a distinctive hook beneath it to the left.”
- A discussion of ten other manuscripts written by the same scribe.
- A discussion of the disputed issue of where exactly in Iceland his scriptorium was.
- Orthographic features and how different sounds were written in different ways, with statistics from examples taken from four pages at the beginning and end of the manuscript.
- Marginal drawings and annotations with the text of the latter, even those from the seventeenth century, transcribed in extenso.
- A comparison of the version of the text found in this specific manuscript with versions in other manuscripts containing the same translations.⁵

⁵ *Catilina and Jugurtha by Sallust and Pharsalia by Lucan in Old Norse. Rómverjasaga AM 595 a-b 4to*. Editor Jakob Benediktsson. Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile 13. Copenhagen in 1980, pp. 7-23.

This is all very interesting and we do have an abundance of excellent orthographic, palaeographic and morphological descriptions of single manuscripts. The goal, however, is always to illuminate some aspect of the text and its transmission. An overview of the knowledge provided by these studies is indeed needed but there is an even greater need to supplement them with research on the manuscripts as such from a historical and societal point of view, concentrating on the concepts inherent in the work of the persons involved in making, preparing, writing and illuminating them. Thorough research on Icelandic manuscripts according to the fascinating methods and perspectives defined by quantitative and physical codicology in the last three decades would for one thing complement attribution studies with new information on layout and handwriting. More importantly it would provide an entirely new understanding of Iceland's literary culture in the Middle Ages.

Some steps in the right direction have been taken by Karl Gunnar Johansson and Andrea de Leeuw van Weenen. A chapter called “Description of the codex” in the latter's *Grammar of Möðruvallabók* is replete with interesting information on the number of pages, columns and lines, quire structure, the four hands found in the manuscript and a discussion of other manuscripts written by the same scribes, prickings and rulings, contemporary corrections and younger marginals or additions, and last but not least on palaeography with statistics and lists of majuscules and minuscules, superscript letters, diacritics, ligatures, abbreviations, punctuation, corrections, chapter headings and endings, verse markings, protruding letters and word division. In the following chapters there are more details on the same aspects, for instance abbreviations.⁶ And although this wonderful book does not incorporate scholarly

⁶ Andrea de Leeuw van Weenen, *A Grammar of Möðruvallabók*. Leiden 2000, pp. 17-56 and 110-126. See also Lasse Mårtensson, *AM 557 4to. Studier i en isländsk samlingshandskrift från 1400-talet*. Uppsala 2007, pp. 28-33; Susanne Miriam Fahn, *Revealing the secrets of a medieval manuscript. Description and analysis of the manuscript AM 382 4to*. MA-thesis in Medieval Icelandic Studies, University of Iceland 2006, pp. 11-23 and 46-56.

approaches to medieval manuscripts being performed outside the Nordic tradition, it does provide some ideas on what Denis Muzerelle so nicely calls "la gestion de l'espace dans la page."⁷ One example from *Möðruvallabók* is that a certain scribe clearly wanted to let his writing coincide with vertical lines drawn to the left and right of columns.⁸

The only serious study on the layout of Icelandic manuscripts so far was published by John McKinnell in 1970. He measured the width of columns in three manuscript fragments, noting for instance that one "must distinguish between the widths of inner and outer columns, for most scribes make their inner columns wider than their outer ones."⁹ He wanted to determine whether the fragments had originally belonged to the same manuscript. To that end he also studied binding holes in about 700 manuscripts and fragments, concluding that indeed the three fragments had once been part of an otherwise lost codex of Icelandic sagas.¹⁰ Another starter is an (unfortunately) unpublished analysis made by Rannver Hannesson as part of his studies at the Copenhagen School of Conservation. He investigated 16 letters written on parchment in Iceland in the period 1386-1605, establishing by the use of a microscope and the analysis of amino-acids that only calfskin was used for parchment. He also measured the thickness of leaves (between 0,2 and 0,5 mm, the average being 0,3 mm), their rather low pH value but high shrinking-temperature. The determination of a rather limited amount of ash and other unorganic matter in the parchment indicated the use of more primitive methods of preparation than were current in Europe.¹¹ Björk Þorleifsdóttir has followed up on some of Hannesson's results by measuring – among other things

⁷ Denis Muzerelle, "Le geste et son ombre. Essai sur le rapport modulaire des écritures." *Gazette du livre médiéval* 35 (1999), p. 33.

⁸ de Leeuw van Weenen, *A Grammar of Möðruvallabók*, p. 24.

⁹ John McKinnell, "The Reconstruction of Pseudo-Vatnshyrna." *Opuscula* 4 (1970), p. 318.

¹⁰ McKinnell, "The Reconstruction of Pseudo-Vatnshyrna", pp. 320-326.

¹¹ Rannver Hannesson, *Analyser af íslandske pergamentur*. Konservatorskolen, Copenhagen 1995.

– the thickness of leaves in eight manuscripts, with 0,3 mm on average, thus indicating that vellum produced in Iceland was thicker and thus probably less treated than vellum used in Europe; for instance 0,2 mm in Italian manuscripts.¹²

Last but not least, inspired by Neil Ripley Ker, I ventured a study of an interesting aspect of the ruling of manuscripts, that is where scribes wrote the first line of text. English scribes used to write the first line of text above the frame defined by the ruling of the manuscript, or in Ker's terminology "above top line." By the end of the thirteenth century, however, most scribes wrote the first line below the uppermost ruling, in Ker's words "below top line." An investigation of 200 Icelandic and Norwegian medieval manuscripts showed that Norwegian manuscripts from the fourteenth century fit quite well into a European pattern defined by Ker and a few other scholars, being generally written below the top line and ruled with ink. Icelandic manuscripts show a more complicated pattern, more than 60% being written above top line and a majority ruled with dry ruling.¹³ Tables 3 and 4 show the methods of ruling and the placement of the first line in the whole period between 1100 and 1600.

Table 3. *Methods of ruling in Icelandic and Norwegian vellum manuscripts*

Method	Icelandic	Norwegian	Total
Ink	21	27	48
Lead	10	2	12
Dry ruling	53	0	53
Holes	52	0	52
Invisible	35	0	35
Total	171	29	200

¹² Björk Þorleifsdóttir, *Afbókfelli. Smásjárathuganir á íslenskum skinnhandritum*. BA-thesis in history, University of Iceland 2003, p. 57.

¹³ Már Jónsson, "Efstu línur á blaðsíðum skinnhandrita: fyrir ofan eða neðan efsta strík?" *Gripla* 13 (2002), pp. 217-230. Drífa Kristín Þrastardóttir, Karl Óskar Ólafsson and Magnús Lyngdal Magnússon checked this specific aspect in 200 manuscripts in Reykjavík and Copenhagen.

Table 4. Top line in Icelandic and Norwegian manuscripts in relation to ruling in %

Groups	Under	Above	Total	N:
Icelandic	41	59	100	152
Norwegian	62	38	100	29
Average	44	56	100	181

In the fourteenth century, though, Icelandic manuscripts reveal a tendency towards the same pattern as in Norway with more than 60% of the manuscripts written under the top line – see table 5. In the fifteenth century, however, and even more so in the sixteenth century Icelandic scribes turned back to older habits with respectively 70% and 89% of the manuscripts written below top line. This went together with an increased use of dry ruling, as seen in table 6.

Table 5. Top line of writing in Icelandic manuscripts in %

Period	Under	Above	Total	N:
1201-1250	17	83	100	6
1251-1300	45	55	100	11
1301-1350	63	38	100	32
1351-1400	64	36	100	33
1401-1450	54	46	100	13
1451-1500	18	82	100	28
1501-1550	8	92	100	13
1551-1600	13	88	100	16
Average	41	59	100	152

Table 6. Methods of ruling in Icelandic manuscripts in %

Period	Ink	Lead	Dry ruling	Holes	Total	N:
1201-1300	7	0	67	27	100	15
1301-1400	19	5	38	38	100	58
1401-1500	14	6	23	57	100	35
1501-1600	14	18	46	21	100	28
Average	15	7	39	38	100	136

These small-scale investigations give interesting glimpses into trends in the making of Icelandic manuscripts which seem to have been quite different from European trends, and they are truly worth pursuing.

3

When we watch a manuscript page and try not to read the words – what do we see? We see margins, columns, lines and letters; and we have to ask whether this can have been arranged haphazardly, without rumination, afterthought and know-how? Of course not, and I for one would want to know so much more on how Icelandic parchment-makers and scribes did their job, not in order to produce a better edition of a specific text but to understand the manuscripts as a cultural object, a thing in and by itself. For one thing: how big are Icelandic manuscripts? Does it suffice to say that there is a great variety and that they do come in different sizes? The usual way among codicologists of presenting and comparing the size of manuscripts is to add the width and height, which means a half of its perimeter; in Italian it is simply called *semiperimetro*. Table 7 shows the distribution of Icelandic manuscripts within groups based on the *semiperimetro*, with the most common groups in bold.

Table 7: Icelandic manuscripts: distribution in % and average of *semiperimetro*

Period	121-240	241-360	361-480	481-600	601-720	Average
1101-1200	0	57	29	14	0	374
1201-1300	0	36	48	16	0	393
1301-1400	1	26	47	24	3	420
1401-1500	9	48	34	7	1	347
1501-1600	13	63	21	3	0	320
Total	6	43	37	13	1	372

Ezio Ornato and Carla Bozzolo agree that manuscripts with a *semiperimetro* of less than 320 mm are small (*petits*). Manuscripts that measure 321-490 mm are considered to be small

to medium (petit-moyens) and they call manuscripts measuring 491-670 mm for medium-large (moyen-grands). Above that limit manuscripts are really big (grands).¹⁴ A page of A4 has a semiperimetro of 506 mm (210x296) and this collection of articles has one of 375 mm (145x230). That is exactly the average size of the oldest preserved Icelandic manuscripts from the latter part of the twelfth century! Some of them, of course, were bigger, such as the book to which Reykjaholtsmáldagi originally belonged but was later discarded. The *máldagi*-leaf is almost as big as a page of A4, and measures 502 mm (297x205).¹⁵ Icelandic vellums grew bigger and bigger in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but then became smaller and smaller again. Table 8 provides a comparison with manuscripts in other countries.

Table 8: *Semiperimetro: a comparison*

Columns	Italian humanists	Italian monasteries	French	Norwegian	Icelandic
One	512	368	403	390	346
Two	631	426	527	438	485
Total	524	408	444	408	372
N:	133	94	-	61	675

Thus, Icelandic manuscripts are on average smaller than Norwegian and continental ones, as the medium size of manuscripts written in one column (*piena pagina*) is only 346 mm. Only two Icelandic manuscripts are really big: AM 234 fol. (sagas of apostles) with 720 mm and *Flateyjarbók* with 715 mm. Both are from the late fourteenth century. From the sixteenth century only one manuscript is bigger than 500 mm., that is AM 152 fol., a collection of sagas, with 570 mm. The second biggest is 100 mm smaller.

¹⁴ Carla Bozzolo and Ezio Ornato, *Pour une histoire du livre manuscrit au moyen âge. Trois essais de codicologie quantitative*. Second edition, Paris 1983, p. 218.

¹⁵ *Reykjaholtsmáldagi*. Editor Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson. Reykholt 2000, pp. 31 and 34.

But what about the proportions of the pages? In other words, are Icelandic manuscripts nice to look at? This implies measuring the relation of width to height. It needs to be kept in mind that an A4 has the uncanny quality of an immutable proportion – that is 0,707 – and it does not change if the page is folded two or more times. Early on in the making of books, from the third century or so, things developed in such a manner that designers and makers tried to get close to exactly that proportion. This is even more interesting given the fact that the usable part of hides that were used to make vellum – calves, lambs, goats – are wider than that, and most likely have a proportion of 0,790 to 0,830. When a hide of this proportions is folded in two the proportion becomes lower than 0,707: for instance changes from 0,790 to 0,624. Then we have a manuscript in folio. If we fold it again we have a quarto and the same proportion as in the beginning: 0,790. Thus, manuscripts in quarto are on average wider than manuscripts in folio and octavo. The average of Icelandic manuscripts compared to manuscripts from a few other countries can be seen in table 9.

Table 9: *Manuscript proportions: Icelandic and other manuscripts*

Columns	Italian humanists	Italian monasteries	French	Norwegian	Icelandic
One	0,691	0,715	0,697	0,738	0,737
Two	0,701	0,724	0,704	0,724	0,749
Total	0,692	0,721	0,699	0,733	0,739
N:	133	94	-	61	675

In twelfth and thirteenth century France the proportions came closer and closer to the immutable 0,707. That, according to Bozzolo and Ornato, is a sign of a rationalization of manuscript making. Instead of letting the hides determine the looks of manuscripts, the formal beauty of the proportion was defined as a necessary and attainable goal. In Iceland this was never so, which is yet another indication of a somewhat primitive approach; and Icelandic manuscripts even became wider with time – which means clumsier in appearance. The relation of

width to hight can thus even be used in order to understand the complex issue of aesthetics, which also relates to the more important concept of readability – *lisibilité* in French. Are the pages easy to read, or in other words do they make the reader feel good? Four relevant measures can be seen in table 10, based on measurements performed on 80 manuscripts.¹⁶

Table 10: Three measures of readability

	Nero	Signs per line	UR	Signs per dm ²
Italian humanists	0,350	50,5	5,9	756
Italian monasteries	0,425	50,9	4,4	1250
Iceland	0,554	52,7	5,6	895

As can easily be seen, Icelandic manuscripts contain a higher level of “black” (nero), that is the percentage of written surface in relation to the size of the page as a whole. Icelandic scribes opted for smaller margins than their Italian colleagues, humanists as well as monks, and so used a much larger proportion of the page for the text. Another aspect of the same tendency is revealed in a higher number of characters in each written line in the Icelandic manuscripts than in Italian “monastic” manuscripts. Thus the writing is somewhat tighter. The tight writing does not, however, imply that lines are crammed together in Icelandic manuscripts, since their “*unité de réglure*” is higher than in “monastic” manuscripts but lower than in humanistic manuscripts. This number indicates the space in millimeters used for a single line of writing. The number of signs per dm² neatly summarize the other three measurements and shows that despite (probably) rather primitive methods of parchment production and a somewhat coarse or old-fashioned approach to many aspects

¹⁶ The list of manuscripts can be seen in my introduction to Ezio Ornato, *Lofræða um handritamergö*, p. 27. The measurements were done by Drífa Kristín Prastardóttir and Karl Óskar Ólafsson and were based on a protocol established with the help of Ornato. Further calculations are planned.

of manuscript design, Icelandic manuscripts are less crammed than Italian monastic manuscripts and almost as fresh and airy as Italian humanist manuscripts. The page as a whole is balanced and the text sits well, despite small margins and tight writing, which means that they are highly readable and undeniably beautiful, or put into a single word: irresistible.

Abstract

The literary production in Iceland in the period 1100-1500 was indeed impressive, and it was all written on vellum manuscripts. However, not much is known about the making of these manuscripts. A handful of recent and not so recent studies do throw light on some aspects of their physicality, so to speak, but more research needs to be done if we are to understand the material foundations of Icelandic medieval literature and thought. In this article some preliminary results of an investigation into the design or layout (*mise page*) of Icelandic vellums are presented, with emphasis on the size of manuscripts, the proportion of the leaves, methods of ruling and the positioning of the first line of writing, besides some numbers on readability. If the results are compared to available knowledge on manuscript production in Europe, they reveal an early albeit primitive mastery of the relevant skills in Iceland, but also a subsequent decline that set in shortly after 1400. Icelandic artisans were indeed old-fashioned in their approach to manuscript design, but despite the small margins and the tight writing their products are highly readable and undeniably beautiful.