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A COMPANION TO  
OLD  
NORSE-ICELANDIC  
LITERATURE  
AND CULTURE

EDITED BY RORY McTURK



ARNASTOFNUN

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## Manuscripts and Palaeography

*Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson*

This chapter contains an account of Norse medieval manuscripts, the beginning of manuscript production in the Nordic linguistic area and the development of script to the end of the Middle Ages. The term 'manuscript' is used to refer to hand-written texts, irrespective of whether they are complete or fragmentary, on vellum or paper. The treatment of Icelandic manuscripts and script covers the period down to the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century; the section on Norwegian manuscripts covers the period down to about 1370, after which the production of Norwegian manuscripts went into a substantial decline and few were written in Old Norse. The main focus will be on manuscripts and documents in Old Norse (the term 'document' referring here to writings of a relatively official or legal character). These are written in a modified form of the Latin alphabet. From the point of view of palaeography *per se*, it makes no difference whether they are in Old Norse or Latin; nevertheless the language is a consideration in the present discussion because we can be fairly sure that manuscripts in Old Norse were written by native speakers, while manuscripts in Latin could have been imported from England or other countries.

### The Earliest Writings in the Latin Alphabet

Nordic people came into contact with the Latin alphabet before it was adopted in their countries. A coin inscribed with Old Norse names was struck in York before the middle of the tenth century. Furthermore, alphabetic script was well known at this time in Scandinavia, as runes had been in use there for many centuries.

Iceland adopted Christianity in the year 999 or 1000 (ÍF I: 17), at about the same time as Norway, and literacy was introduced along with the new faith. The Christian missionaries active in Norway and Iceland in the closing decades of the tenth century must have had books written in Latin with them.

The Norwegian bishops active during the reign of King Óláfr Haraldsson (d. 1030) had learnt to read and write in England (Haugen 2002: 824). Furthermore, sources refer to missionary bishops in Iceland in the eleventh century (ÍF I: 18), some of whom certainly would have taught trainees for the priesthood. The first Bishoprics (including Skálholt in Iceland) were established in the eleventh century and a few monasteries were also established in about 1100.

Ísleifr Gizurason (d. 1080), the first Icelander to be consecrated a bishop (in 1056), sat at Skálholt, where he ran a school. It is therefore almost certain that both liturgical works and educational books existed in the bishopric as early as the eleventh century, and in other bishoprics as well. Some fragments of liturgical works have survived, dating from the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, the oldest of which originated outside the Nordic countries (Gjerløw 1980). Whether these fragments represent any of the books once used in the bishoprics cannot be determined.

*Íslendingabók* states that it was decided at the Althing in summer 1117 to record Iceland's laws, and that the writing of the laws was begun at Breiðabólstaðr in northern Iceland during the winter of 1117–18 (ÍF I: 23). This decision could scarcely have been taken without some previous experience in Iceland of using the Latin alphabet for writing in the vernacular. It is probable, for example, even though this is not recorded, that the tithe laws were written down when they were introduced in 1096. In Norway, the writing of laws may have begun towards the end of the eleventh century (Seip 1954: 2–3).

## Manuscripts

### *Norwegian manuscripts*

Norway can boast a considerable number of manuscripts written in the vernacular before 1370; more than Denmark and Sweden, though far fewer than Iceland, and practically all Norwegian manuscripts in the vernacular date from before 1400. There was a marked decline in book production in Norway in about 1370. Seip (1955: 224–5) attributed this sharp break at least in part to the arrival of the Black Death in Norway in 1349–50: two decades after that, a new generation began to take over from those who had survived the plague. Part of the explanation may also lie in the increased use of paper in the later fourteenth century: paper manuscripts probably did not last as well as vellum (Seip 1954: 112). There was no decline in the writing of documents, however, so that in a purely palaeographical context the year 1370 marks no great change; nevertheless, because of the paucity of books produced after 1370, it is convenient to use this date as a cut-off point (Haugen 2002: 825).

A large proportion of Norwegian manuscripts were written in Latin; in the vast majority of cases only fragments of them have survived. The oldest fragments date from about 1000; these probably originated in England and were brought to Norway by English missionaries. Latin manuscripts must have been copied later in Norway,

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but it is difficult to decide whether individual extant fragments are of Norwegian or foreign origin, because of their poor state of preservation (Haugen 2002: 825).

To begin with, documents in the Nordic countries were written in Latin, and Latin continued to be used side by side with the vernacular throughout the Middle Ages. The oldest Norwegian documents are no longer extant, but there are records of document writing as early as the first half of the eleventh century (Seip 1954: 2). The oldest extant Norwegian document in Old Norse dates from about 1210 (Haugen 2002: 825; Rindal 2002: 803), while the oldest Norwegian document in Latin is somewhat younger. Most surviving documents are originals; this is hardly ever the case with other texts. Of the oldest documents, only a few contain dates and state where they were written, but it became customary in Norway after 1290 to date and state the place of origin (Rindal 2002: 803). About 1,650 original Norwegian documents written in Old Norse prior to 1370 are now extant, of which only about 80 are from the thirteenth century.

Sometimes it cannot be established with certainty whether individual leaves originally belonged to larger manuscripts, and partly for this reason the numbers of manuscripts cannot be stated in exact figures. In addition, it is not clear in all cases whether they are Norwegian or Icelandic. About 130 Norwegian manuscripts in Old Norse survive from before 1370, many of them in fragments only. Of this number, eight date from the twelfth century or c.1200, about 50 from the thirteenth century or c.1300, and about 65 from the first half of the fourteenth century. The vast majority of these manuscripts contain laws, both the older regional laws (those of Gulapíng, Frostupíng, etc.) and the national law code of King Magnús Hákonarson the Lawmender of 1274, which is preserved in about 70 copies, whole and fragmentary, from before 1370. Besides these law manuscripts there are about 25 other Norwegian manuscripts, most of them complete or nearly so, which contain texts of other types: sagas, chivalric literature, religious material, saints' lives, etc.

Only in exceptional cases do medieval manuscripts contain their own dates. Part of AM 309 fol. contains the national law of King Magnús the Lawmender; at the end of the text (f. 57r) is the statement that it was written in 1325 (Rindal 2002: 802). The dating of manuscripts is normally based on palaeographical evidence, linguistic features, the contents of the text and the known history of the manuscript itself.<sup>1</sup>

The oldest extant Norwegian manuscript fragments contain saints' lives. AM 655 IX 4to, which dates from the second half of the twelfth century, contains Old Norse translations from Latin of the lives of St Matthew and Saints Blaise and Placidus. Religious literature, and also liturgical books of various types, which were in Latin, were written throughout the Middle Ages. Many saints' lives – of both men and women – exist in Norwegian and Icelandic manuscripts.

There are no Norwegian paper manuscripts or documents from before 1370: the oldest extant Norwegian paper document is from 1371. A paper document is mentioned, on the other hand, in a document from 1365 (Seip 1954: 112).

Manuscripts were lost, became worn out by use and came loose from their bindings, and individual leaves became detached and separated from the works to which they

belonged. Many manuscripts must have been lost in these ways, and in addition, manuscripts were destroyed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After the publication of the *Missale Nidrosiense* and *Breviarium Nidrosiense* (the missal and breviary of Niðaróss) in 1519 – and also after the Reformation in 1537 – many Latin religious manuscripts were cut up and used in book bindings. In the nineteenth century it was discovered that the spines of many of the regional administrative accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Norwegian State Archives in Oslo had been strengthened with strips of parchment that had been cut from medieval manuscripts (Eken 1963: xiii). The archives possess about 5,000 fragments of Latin manuscripts, most of them of a religious nature. It is estimated that they come from about 1,200 original books. Vernacular manuscripts did not meet with quite such a drastic fate, partly because the law codices continued to be used throughout the sixteenth century, even though fewer and fewer people could understand properly the language in which they were written. But after Norway's national laws were published in print in 1604, many vernacular manuscripts were treated in the same way as the old Latin manuscripts. The Norwegian State Archives possess about 500 fragments of manuscripts in Old Norse; these are estimated as having originated in about 100 manuscripts, two-thirds of which were law-books (Haugen 2002: 825).

Karlsson (2000: 192–4) has established that 54 manuscripts now preserved, which contain material other than laws, were in Norway during the Middle Ages and many of them were imported from Iceland. Halvorsen (1982: 140) stressed that more medieval manuscripts were lost in Norway than in Iceland. He surmises that this was mainly due to the different paths that linguistic development followed in the two countries at the end of the medieval period: by the end of the Middle Ages, Norwegian had changed so much that people in Norway had difficulty in understanding their medieval texts. As documents tended to be important to their owners on account of their legal value, they were generally preserved with more care than were other manuscripts.

Almost without exception, the scribes of the oldest manuscripts are anonymous. The earliest Norwegian scribe known by name was Eiríkr Þróndarson, who wrote part of Sth. perg. 34 4to (hand *f*) in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. The names of a few manuscript scribes from the period after 1300 are known, particularly those who copied law texts, such as Þorgeirr Hákonarson, who copied several manuscripts (for example, AM 302 fol.), and Páll Stykársson, who probably copied King Sverrir's *Ræða gegn biskupum* ('Speech against the Bishops') in AM 114 a 4to (from c.1315–40) in addition to documents (Haugen 2002: 831).

The scribes of documents are better known, particularly those who wrote in the service of the king. During the period 1280–1345, royal scribes normally added the words 'N.N. klerkr/notarius ritaði', 'Written by the scribe N.N.'. Vågslid (1989) identified over 800 scribes by name in the period prior to 1400. Most medieval Norwegian scribes were probably members of the clergy, though many laymen were also capable of copying manuscripts (Rindal 2002: 804).



*Faeroese manuscripts*

It cannot be said with certainty that any manuscripts or documents now extant are Faeroese, that is, that they were written by Faeroese people. There is, however, an important legal reform concerning sheep in the Faeroes (known as *Sauðabréfið*) from 1298 (*Kóningsbókin*, Sth. perg. 33 4to, bl. 72–5). A very small number of documents written in the Faeroes have been preserved, among them the Húsavík documents, which are preserved in a transcript dating from 1407 (AM dipl. norv. fasc. C 1 a).

*Icelandic manuscripts*

Many of the medieval Icelandic manuscripts that have survived are incomplete, and in many cases all that survives is a few leaves or even a single leaf or part of a leaf.

Most Icelandic manuscripts containing Latin texts met the same fate as their Norwegian counterparts. Nearly all the surviving remains of Latin manuscripts in Iceland are single leaves that were preserved in the bindings of later books, and in the case of the earliest ones it is scarcely possible to say whether they were written in Iceland or elsewhere, though in a very few cases the hand that wrote a Latin manuscript has been identified as that of an Icelandic text (see Louis-Jensen 1977: 19–20; Karlsson 1982; 2000: 274–8, 366–7). No statistics are available on the number of these manuscript fragments, but they certainly run to hundreds and therefore represent the remains of some dozens of manuscripts. Documents were written mostly in Old Norse in Iceland.

The oldest Icelandic manuscript, an Easter table (AM 732 a VII 4to), consists of a single leaf, and is believed to date from the first half of the twelfth century. As it contains only individual Latin letters, it is solely of palaeographic interest.

The oldest extant Icelandic manuscript containing text in the vernacular, AM 237 a fol. (see figure 14.1), is believed to date from the middle of the twelfth century. Eleven manuscripts have survived from the twelfth century or c.1200 and about 100 from the thirteenth century or c.1300. About 300 manuscripts are dated to the fourteenth century or c.1400, 230 to the fifteenth century or c.1500, and about 100 to the first half of the sixteenth century. Altogether, about 750 manuscripts are thought to date from before the mid-sixteenth century. About 315 Icelandic manuscripts are dated to before c.1370 (compared with about 130 in Norway).

Very few medieval Icelandic texts, other than documents, exist in original copies. No documents in the vernacular from before 1300 have survived, and only 20–5 from the first half of the fourteenth century, after which their numbers increase rapidly. Altogether, about 1,500 documents in the vernacular exist from before 1540, including about 700 from the second half of the fifteenth century. Fewer than 50 documents pre-date 1370; as is stated above, there exist about 1,650 Norwegian documents in Old Norse from before 1370.

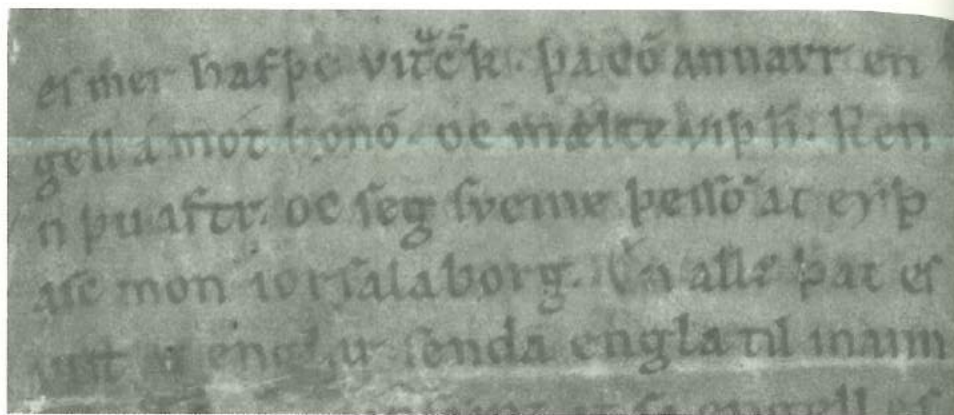


Figure 14.1 AM 237 a fol., c. 1150–75. Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi. Fol. 2ra, lines 1–5. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi.

ef mer hafpe vit<sup>sk</sup>. þa com annarr en / -gell á mót h<sup>nom</sup>. oc mælte við hann. Ren / -n þu afr. oc seg  
sveine þeffom at eyþ / -alc mon iorðalaborg. En allz þat ef / víft at englar fenda engla til manm.

(From a fragment of an Icelandic translation of Gregory the Great's gospel homily [no. 34] describing the nine choirs of angels.)

Very few Icelandic manuscripts can be dated to the year with complete certainty. Óláfr Ormsson wrote AM 194 8vo at Geirrøðarreyri (now Narfeyri) in western Iceland in 1387. AM 80 b 8vo bears the date 1473; AM 309 4to was written in 1498 and AM 43 8vo in 1507. Leaf 149r of the *Skarðsbók* manuscript of the *Jónsbók* law code (AM 350 fol.) contains the statement that it was written in 1363. Leaf 4rb of *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol.) states that it was written in 1387. This is probably the date when work on it was to begin; at the end of the manuscript there is an annal that ends in the year 1394. Few other Icelandic manuscripts can be dated with such accuracy.

When the scribe's name is established and it is known when he lived, it becomes possible to set probable limits to the period in which the manuscript was written. Others can be dated with some certainty if the same hand, or a very similar one, is found in a document that bears a date: most documents are dated by the year, many of them also by the day. A problem with this method consists in the fact that the script used in documents in the fourteenth century was different from that used by the same scribes when copying other manuscripts, which makes comparison difficult (see figures 14.2 and 14.3). Most Icelandic manuscripts have been assigned dates by scholars on the basis of their script and spelling, but these criteria generally only make it possible to date them to within the nearest half century (Karlsson 1982: 322; 2002: 833).

While some impressive law code manuscripts from the thirteenth century have been preserved, it was the fourteenth century that was the Golden Age of manuscript production in Iceland, and also a time when a lot of manuscripts were exported to Norway (Karlsson 2000: 188–205).

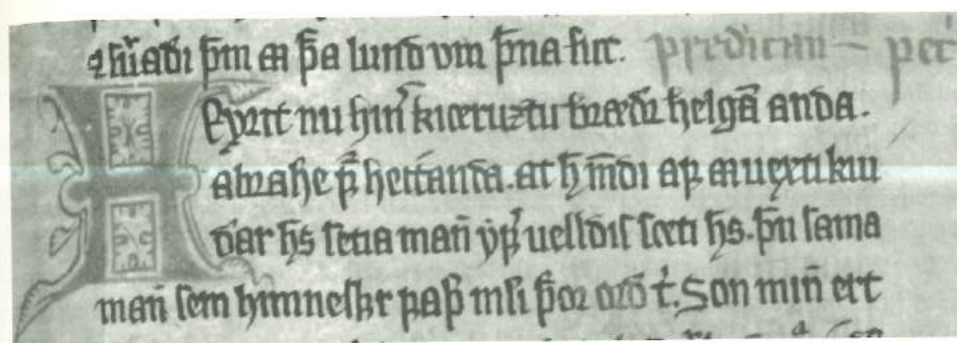


Figure 14.2 SÁM 1, c. 1350–75. Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi. Fol. 20ra, lines 7–11. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi.

*ok suaradi þeim á þessa lund vinn þina hinc. – predican petri / Heyrt nu hiner kærustu bræðr helgan anda. / abtahe fyrir heitanda. at hann mundi ap auexti kui- / dar hans setia manz yþer uellidif læti hans. þann sama / man sem himneskr þaþ mælti þessoz ord til. Son minn ert*

(From the life of St Peter in the *postola sögur* ['apostles' sagas] preserved in *Skarðsbók postulasagna* [Codex Scardensis].)

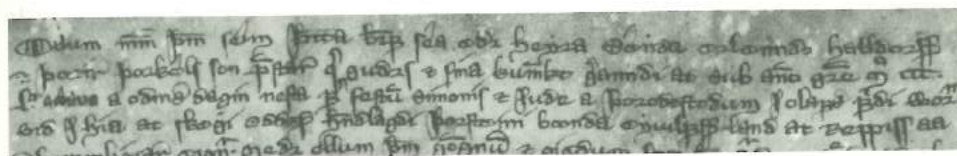


Figure 14.3 AM dipl. isl. fasc. II 8, 1358.

Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi. Lines 1–4. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi.

*Ollum monnum þeim sem þetta bræf þetta er heita Sennða eilennði halldottson / ok þóir þórkell son þeftar (quedru) gudaf ok lína kunnikt geiannði at sub anno gracie m° ccc(°). / 1° octavo a odins dagin nefta þýzi festum símonif er Jude a þozodztodum J olaps þýrdi vorum / við J hía at skeggi oddzlon handlagði þofsteini boonda eyulpsfjnr land at reppiff aa*

(From a letter written at Kviabekkur in Ólafsfjörður [in Eyjafjarðarsýsla, northern Iceland] on 24 October 1358.)

A document on paper is mentioned in a document dated 1423. The oldest extant document on paper is from 1437 and the next oldest from 1528. The oldest extant book on paper is the *bréfabók* (containing notes and copies of letters) of Gissur Einarsson, bishop of Skálholt 1542–8 (AM 232 8vo), during whose life the first Icelandic printed books were published. There are some examples of vellum manuscripts from the seventeenth century, such as the saga collection in GKS 1002–03 fol., dating from 1667–70.

A collection of translated *exempla* mentions a *ritklefi* ('scriptorium'); the fact that a term existed indicates that such places were known in Iceland (Tómasson 2002: 795). *Guðmundar saga biskups* mentions a *ritstofa* ('scriptorium') at Hólar, though it is not certain that this word was in the original version of the saga. Guðmundr Arason was bishop of Hólar 1203–37. A *skrifstofa* ('scriptorium') in Vatnsfjörður is mentioned in a

document dated 1468, and the word also appears in a marginal note in AM 433 a 12mo, from c.1500 (Halldórsson 1989: 86).

The provenance of the vast majority of Icelandic manuscripts is not known. Scholars have considered it likely that most of them were written in monasteries or on large manor farms, and also in the bishoprics, and have associated some groups of manuscripts with such centres, for example the monasteries of Helgafell and Þingeyrar (Halldórsson 1966; Johansson 1997: 66–80; Karlsson 1999: 148, 152–4; 2000: 237–9; Tómasson 2002: 797–9); if these attributions are correct, then productive scriptoria must have been in operation at these places, at least for some length of time.

Only a very small number of Icelandic scribes have been identified by name. Most of them were priests or men who had taken minor orders, though they also include some laymen. Thus, writing was not only practised in the monasteries and other church institutions, even though there is no doubt that this is where a high proportion of Icelandic manuscripts originated (Karlsson 1999: 149–54; 2000: 239, 319–27).

*Jóns saga helga* names a priest, Þorgeirr, at Hólar and describes a shock he experienced while engaged in writing. This is supposed to have happened in about 1200. His hand has not been identified. *Lárentíus saga biskups* mentions a maker of books, Þórarinn kaggi ('Keg') Egilsson (d. 1283) at Vellir in Svarfaðardalur, who ran a school there (Halldórsson 1989: 86; Tómasson 2002: 797). Karlsson (2000: 266–71) has put forward the hypothesis that this Þórarinn was the scribe of the *Kringla* manuscript of *Heimskringla* (Lbs. frg. 82). The same hand is found in the larger part of the Codex Regius manuscript of *Grágás* (GKS 1157 fol., hand B) and the *Staðarhólsbók* manuscript of *Grágás* (AM 334 fol., hand A). Fourteenth-century sources mention a maker of books, Þorsteinn Illugason (*Íslandske Annaler*: 272), Þórarinn pentr Eiríksson, who knew how to *penta og skrifa* ('paint and write'), and one Dálkr bóndi ('farmer') who is recorded as having made a book (Halldórsson 1989: 86). No works written by these men have been identified.

Another fourteenth-century scribe whose name is known is Haukr Erlendsson, who held the office of *lögmaðr* ('lawman', a senior government official) in Norway (d. 1334). He was the scribe of a large part of the manuscript compendium *Hauksbók*, which contained material of a varied nature (Karlsson 2000: 303–8). *Hauksbók* is believed to have contained the manuscripts AM 371 4to, AM 544 4to and AM 675 4to. Haukr also had other scribes in his service who wrote about two-fifths of the material, and *Hauksbók* contains 15 hands in all (Helgason 1960: ix–x).

Some manuscripts that can be originals contain annals, or at least those entries in them that were made almost contemporaneously with the events they record. *Lögmannsannáll* (AM 420 b 4to) is the oldest original manuscript the identity of whose scribe is known. It was written by Einarr Hafliðason (1307–93), priest and *officialis* (administrator) at Breiðabólstaður (Halldórsson 1989: 85).

The manuscripts AM 194 8vo and *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol.) were mentioned above. The former was written by Óláfr Ormsson together with Brynjólfur Steinraðar-

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son in 1387; Óláfr was a priest but Brynjólfur was a layman (Halldórsson 1989: 85). It is stated in *Flateyjarbók* (f. 1v) that Magnús Þórhallsson and Jón Þórðarson wrote the manuscript, for Jón Hákonarson (1350 to before 1416) of Víðidalstunga, and that Magnús illuminated it. Jón Hákonarson owned another famous manuscript, *Vatnsbyrna*, which contained several sagas of Icelanders and which Magnús Þórhallsson probably wrote. *Vatnsbyrna* was destroyed in the fire of Copenhagen in 1728 (Karlsson 2000: 336, 354).

Attempts have been made to identify other scribes who were at work in the fourteenth century. It has been surmised that Björn Brynjólfsson wrote as many as 11 extant manuscripts, including AM 62 fol., and one document (Karlsson 2000: 316–19).

A few scribes active in the fifteenth century and the first part of the sixteenth have been identified, mainly by comparing the hands in documents and manuscripts. They include the half-brothers Ólafur Loftsson, scribe of AM 557 4to, and Ormur Loftsson hirðstjóri ('royal governor'), scribe of *Benediktus saga* and other sagas in Sth. perg. 2 fol., and the identically named brothers Jón Þorláksson and Jón Þorláksson, one of whom wrote AM 80 b 8vo in 1473; fragments of many religious manuscripts in their hands are extant. Mention may also be made of Jón kollur ('pate') Oddsson, the scribe of *Bæjarbók í Flóa* (AM 309 4to) and one of the scribes of *Kollsbók* (WolfAug 42 7); the half-brothers Björn Þorleifsson, scribe of *Reykjabólubók* (Sth. perg. 3 fol.), and Þorsteinn Þorleifsson, scribe of half of AM 152 fol.; Þorbjörn Jónsson, scribe of AM 551 a 4to; the abbot Jón Þorvaldsson, scribe of most of AM 624 4to; and the priest Ari Jónsson and his sons Jón and Tómas in the sixteenth century, scribes of the *rímur* manuscript AM 604 4to and many other manuscripts (Halldórsson 1989: 85; Karlsson 1999: 141–8; 2000: 232–8, 324–7).<sup>2</sup>

## Script

### *The development of script*

Seip (1954) divided the history of Icelandic-Norwegian script into three periods. The first extended down to 1225, the second from 1225 to 1300, and the third from 1300 onwards. Svensson (1974: 169–70, 201–4; 1993: 492, 495) gave these three periods names: he divided Icelandic script into Caroline (Carolingian), Caroline insular and Gothic script, while he divided Norwegian script into older Caroline insular period, younger Caroline insular period and Gothic. The term 'Caroline insular' is not particularly apt, since even though Norwegian and Icelandic scribes adopted some letters from Anglo-Saxon insular script, their script never bore the other characteristics of insular script. It should also be mentioned that some palaeographers now use the term 'Protogothic' to refer to an independent type of script (see, for example, Brown 1990: 72–3), where formerly the terms 'Late Caroline' or 'Early Gothic' were used.

The script of the oldest Icelandic and Norwegian manuscripts is Caroline (see figure 14.1). The letters are not joined and are characterized by gentle curves. Down to the thirteenth century, no distinction seems to have been made between the script styles used for manuscripts and documents (Haugen 2002: 826).

Protogothic script was dominant throughout most of the thirteenth century and into the fourteenth in Norway and in Iceland (see figure 14.4), which can be seen in the growing Gothic influence in the thirteenth century. This first becomes evident in the angles to the curves on the letters 'h', 'm' and 'n' (Karlsson 2002: 836).

Protogothic cursive appeared in Norwegian documents after about 1280 and soon became dominant. It was characterized by joined letters, loops on the ascenders and ornamental strokes (Haugen 2002: 826).

For a time, formal book hand, used in manuscripts, existed side by side with cursive, which was used in documents. In the second half of the thirteenth century a gradual change took place: the script became denser, the letters became more compressed, ascenders and descenders became shorter, openings in letters tended to be closed off, and the letters became more angular. By about 1300, both script styles had become fully Gothic: book hand was strictly formal (*textualis*); while documentary script became simpler, more rounded and quicker in execution (Haugen 2002: 826).

Gothic semi-cursive (hybrid) script came into being in the fourteenth century, and is found in many Norwegian manuscripts. It could be written more quickly than book hand, and may have been regarded as more legible than cursive. The result was that three script styles were in more or less simultaneous use in Norway in the fourteenth century: formal book hand, which was used in books down to about 1370; semi-cursive script, which was used increasingly in books and largely replaced book hand after about 1370; and cursive, which was used in documents (Haugen 2002: 826).

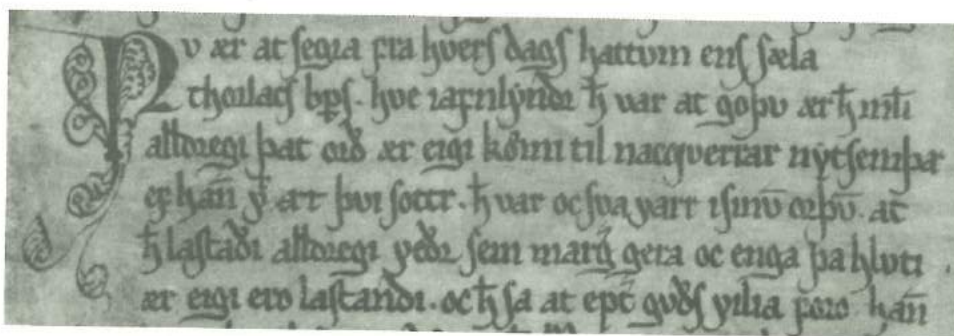


Figure 14.4 AM 383 I 4to, c. 1250. Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi. Fol. 2r, lines 16–21. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi.

Nv ær at segja frá hverf dagf hattvm enf sæla / tho:lacþ byskupf. hve iafnlýndi hann var at goþv ær hann mælti / allðiegi þat oð ær eigi kómi til nacqverrar nýtsemþar / ef hann þar at því fotttr. hann var oc fva parr ifinvm oþvm. at / hann laftradi allðiegi þeði fem marger gera oc enga þa hlvti. oc hann fa at epter gvðf þilia þoro. hann

(From Þorláks saga helga [‘The Saga of St Þorlákr’].)

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Figure 14  
Photo: Jó  
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Fourteenth-century Icelandic documents are generally in cursive, which was very similar to that used in Norwegian documents, while book hand was used for books (see figures 14.2 and 14.3). Hybrid script did not make its appearance in Iceland until about 1400, but continued in use until after the middle of the sixteenth century (see figure 14.5).

As from about 1400, there is little or no difference between the script styles used in books and in documents in Iceland: most manuscripts and the vast majority of documents were written using semi-cursive script. Only very slight changes took place in script up to the Reformation, when German influence began to make itself felt via Denmark.

#### Anglo-Saxon influence

While script spread directly to Sweden and Denmark from the European mainland, it is believed to have reached Norway and Iceland via England. The use of some insular letters in the oldest Norwegian manuscripts strongly indicate an English influence. Nevertheless, some continental influence must have reached Norwegian and Icelandic script, for example via the archbishoprics of Hamburg/Bremen (until 1103/4), Lund (1103/4–1152/3), and Niðaróss (from 1152/3). In fact there is a distinct difference between Icelandic and Norwegian script in the oldest period: there is little insular influence in Icelandic script, while in Norway it was probably evident right from the beginning of the use of the Latin alphabet for writing in the vernacular. There appears not to have been much direct English influence on Icelandic script. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Caroline script was also used in England in Latin texts in the tenth and eleventh centuries (Protogothic script became dominant during the twelfth century), while Anglo-Saxon insular script was used in vernacular writing down to the middle of the twelfth century (Brown 1990: 59, 67, 73). Thus, insular letters appear to have been adopted in Norwegian writing from English manuscripts written in the vernacular in the period c.950–1150. Insular influence was probably carried to Iceland after the establishment of the archbishopric in Niðaróss.

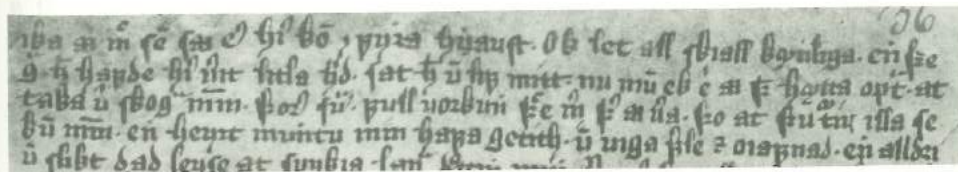


Figure 14.5 AM 556 a 4to, c. 1475–1500. Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi. Fol. 46r, lines 1–4. Photo: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi.

Íka a mik sem sá et hiet kom j pyra haufi. Ok let all skiall kænliga. enn þe / gar hann hapde hiet uerð litla huið. fat hann um lip mítt. nu mun ek eigi a þat hættu optat. at / taka uð flogat monnum. þoer suar(at). pull uoikunn þike met þet a ueta. þo at þu tuúr illa se / kun monnum. enn heyr munntu mín hapa getíth. um uiga þele ok oiapnad. enn allðu

(From *Grettis saga*.)

The Anglo-Saxons added two letters to the Latin alphabet to represent the dental fricatives, voiced and unvoiced: 'ð' (*eth*, with its capital form 'Ð') and 'þ' (*thorn*), which were derived from the Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet. Although the letter *þ* existed in the Scandinavian runic alphabet, it was probably under English influence that it was adopted into the Latin alphabet as used in the Nordic countries; this is indicated by the name of the letter in Modern Icelandic, which is *þorn*, as in Old English, not *þurs*, the name associated with the letter in the Scandinavian runic alphabet. The letter 'þ' was in use in Icelandic and Norwegian script from the beginning, though 'th' is also found for *þ* in Icelandic words in the oldest manuscripts.

Some letters in insular script had undergone greater transformations than others in the course of independent development in the British Isles. In particular, 'f', 'z', 'r', 't' and 'p' (*f*, *g*, *r*, *s* and *v*) and insular *a* differed from their counterparts in the script of the same period on the continent, and from the later Caroline script. There are no traces of insular *a*, *g* or *s* in Old Norse manuscripts; the other letters in the group listed above are used in Old Norse manuscripts, though to differing extents. The adoption of 'ð', 'f' and 'þ' in Icelandic script (see figure 14.4) was doubtless due more to Norwegian than to English influence, just as the disappearance of 'p' and 'ð' was doubtless due to Norwegian influence.

#### Norwegian script

More Anglo-Saxon influence can be seen in the script of manuscripts written in the twelfth century and about 1200 in Niðaróss than in Bergen. It can be seen most clearly in AM 655 IX 4to, in which 'r', 'p', 'ð', 'f' and 'Ð' are used. The dental fricative is represented by *þ* in initial position and by *ð* in medial and final position, as was done in England at the same time. 'r' is also found in NRA norr. fgr. 73. 'p' was used a great deal down to 1300; 'ð' continued in use into the fourteenth century (being replaced increasingly by 'ð' at the end of the thirteenth century in many manuscripts, especially in documents); and 'f' continued in use until after 1400. 'Ð' was replaced by 'P' in the thirteenth century. The influence of insular script is not as conspicuous in manuscripts other than the ones named above.

A closed two-storey *a* first appeared in about 1250, but the open-necked *a* continued in use for some decades. 'z' also became more common at this time, being used following 'o' and other rounded letters, such as 'b' and 'ð'. The arms of the letter 'f' sometimes became two dots, or else the upper arm was curved. The tall *s*, 'ſ', is the most common form; it almost never goes below the line.

From about 1300, script became constantly more and more Gothic. As it was sometimes difficult to distinguish the boundaries of letters such as *m*, *i*, *n* and *u*, which were composed of identical minims, an accent was placed above 'i' to distinguish it. A two-storey *a* became the most common form of the letter *a*. 'f' continued to be used a great deal, possibly because it was so easy to place a superscript abbreviation above it. 's' resembled the numeral '8'. 'w' made its appearance, and



long vowels were frequently represented by ligatures, for example 'aa'. There was also a tendency for rounded letters, such as 'o' and 'c', etc., to become joined.

Generally speaking, the letters had a simpler form in cursive, with loops on the ascenders and descenders, as on *b*, *þ*, *h* and *k*, and in true cursive the letters were also joined. *ð* acquired a loop on the ascender that extended all the way down to the base line. *a* was two-storey, later being replaced by a simpler (single-storey) form that was easily confused with 'o'. *l* extended down below the line and both the arms of *f* became curved: 'þ'. *j* was used for the preposition *i* and for capital *i*. Accents and decorative strokes were curved to form semi-circles. This script gives an impression of speed, fluency and elegance.

In contrast to Gothic cursive, few letters in semi-cursive were actually joined, but many have loops on the uprights, such as *b*, *l*, *h* and *k*. *a* was two-storey, but rapidly evolved into a single-storey *a*. *l* went down below the line; the same applies to the second minim of *h* and the last of *m*.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Icelandic script*

##### *The First Grammatical Treatise*

The Latin alphabet was not sufficient, without modifications and augmentations, to write texts in Old Icelandic. The *First Grammatical Treatise* was written in Iceland and is dated to about the middle of the twelfth century (FGT: 31–3). The aim of the 'First Grammarian', as the author is known, was to create 'an alphabet for us Icelanders' (FGT: 208); that is, to adapt the Latin alphabet to the demands of the Icelandic language.

The First Grammarian said that it was necessary to augment the Latin vowels 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o' and 'u' with the symbols 'ǫ', 'ę', 'ø' and 'y', that is, symbols for mutated vowels. He proposed distinguishing long vowels from short vowels by the use of accents (FGT: 218–19).

The First Grammarian saw some of the Latin consonants as being unnecessary for writing Icelandic: for *k* he proposed using 'c' in all positions instead of 'k' and 'q', and instead of 'x' and 'z' he proposed writing 'cs' and 'ds'. On the other hand, he added 'þ' and a special symbol for *ng*. As a means of indicating long (geminate) consonants, the First Grammarian proposed, instead of writing double consonants, using small capitals, such as 'n' and 'g'; as the small capital 'c' looks almost like the minuscule 'c', he employed the medieval Greek *kappa* symbol, 'k', to represent *kk* (FGT: 232–47).

##### *Orthography*

The rules set out in the *First Grammatical Treatise* are not applied systematically in any extant manuscript. Nevertheless, their influence can be detected in many manuscripts down to the fourteenth century, though practically no scribe is self-consistent in spelling.

Some scribes seldom or never distinguish between long and short vowels; when the distinction was made, it was done exclusively by means of a single accent down to about 1300; accents were also used to indicate short vowels, particularly 'i' to distinguish it from the minims of 'u', 'n' and 'm'. The use of the single accent to indicate long vowels declined gradually during the fourteenth century. Under Norwegian influence, the doubling of vowels to indicate length gradually replaced the use of the accent, where length was indicated at all, during the fourteenth century: *í* was then indicated by 'ij', and as the fourteenth century progressed, 'aa' (or 'áá') was written instead of 'aa', and *ú* was written as 'w'.

Ligatures of two (or three) letters are frequent in Icelandic and Norwegian script. A ligature can stand for a single sound, such as 'æ' and 'w', but letters can also retain their individual values, as in 'f' + 't' and 'c' + 't' standing side by side, and 'þ' + 'f' in abbreviated words with a bar through the ascender, where 'f' is just seen as a little hook bending to the right on the top of the ascender of the ligature (see 'þe/f' in figure 14.2, line 1); other ligatures of this type include 'h' + 'f' and 'k' + 'f'. Frequently used ligatures are 'aa', 'æ', 'ø' and 'a'. There were also used letters which were developed from ligatures, namely 'e' (<'æ'), 'q' (<'ø') and 'ð' (<'œ'), and the First Grammarian interpreted 'ø' as a ligature of 'e' + 'o' (FGT: 210–11). Several other combinations occur, namely 'a' + 'r', 'a' + 'n'.

é was generally represented by 'e' or 'æ'; 'e' was also used. 'e' was the more common symbol for much of the thirteenth century, but 'æ' became considerably more common during the latter part of the century and was the dominant form in the fourteenth century.

Special symbols were used for ø and ø in a few of the very earliest manuscripts, before ø merged with ø and ø with é. These were 'eo' and 'ø'.

During the thirteenth century and later, for as long as scribes distinguished, or attempted to distinguish, between ø and é, the former sound was represented by various letters and letter variants, the most common being 'ø' and 'q'. In about the middle of the thirteenth century even 'ð' began to be used; it lasted the longest in this role.

As early as 1200, ø had merged with á and was being written in the same way; in the oldest manuscripts it was indicated by the symbols used for the sound ø. In the oldest manuscripts, the sound ø is represented by 'æ', 'q' or 'o'; but later other symbols were adopted for ø, the sound produced by the merger of ø and ø; the most common were 'au', 'a' and 'ø'. In the second half of the thirteenth century 'ð' was added to the symbols for ø; in the fourteenth century it gained ground and became one of the most commonly used symbols for ø, together with 'o' and 'au'.

After 1300 there was a marked increase in the use of 'j' in initial position and for the preposition *í*, especially in documents. Often the capital form, 'J', was used.

The letters 'u' and 'v' were used to represent the sounds *u*, *ú* and *v*; 'p' made its appearance in about 1200 and was used by many scribes, especially or exclusively in initial position, until 1300. 'w' was little used until the second half of the fourteenth century. It is most commonly found in initial position, representing *v*, and in the

fourteenth century also representing *u*, and representing *ú* in all positions. Use of the letters 'u' and 'v' varies from period to period and from scribe to scribe. With many scribes, one of the two is used predominantly or even almost exclusively, without regard to the sound being represented; in the fourteenth century the general rule with many scribes was to use 'v' in initial positions and 'u' in medial and final positions.

The First Grammarian did not succeed in eliminating the Latin consonants that he considered otiose in Icelandic. Most thirteenth-century scribes used 'qu' (or 'qv') to represent the sound *kv*. In the fourteenth century it became most common to write 'ku' (or 'kv'). For the sound *k*, virtually every single scribe used both 'k' and 'c', but the use of 'c' declined during the thirteenth century.

'd' is dominant or even exclusive in the very oldest manuscripts, but 'ð' (uncial *d*) appears as early as 1200. 'ð' was dominant or exclusively used in most thirteenth-century manuscripts, and had become exclusive by about 1300.

'ð' was adopted in Icelandic script at the beginning of the thirteenth century and was used down to the late fourteenth. (Its use was revived in the nineteenth century.) 'ð' was adopted instead of 'ð', and had become the dominant form by the mid-fourteenth century, and 'ð' was not used after 1400.

'f' is used exclusively in the oldest manuscripts, but 'f' begins to appear in the first half of the thirteenth century, becoming the dominant form by the middle of the century and practically the exclusive form by its end. 'f' continued in use until the seventeenth century.

A considerable number of scribes used a special symbol, 'ŋ', as a sort of ligature of 'n' and 'g', in the first half of the thirteenth century.

'z', which originated in the right-hand part of the ligature of 'o' + 'r', was sometimes used from the earliest period after 'o' in nearly all Icelandic manuscripts, and is almost always found following 'o' as the thirteenth century progresses. It began to be used following 'ð' and 'ð' in about the middle of the thirteenth century, and this soon became the rule; it was also used, though not as regularly, following 'þ', 'g', 'p' and 'b'. It became a general rule with most fourteenth-century scribes to use 'z' following these letters; after 'g' the straight form was also used. In and after the middle of the century, 'z' could be used following more letters, including at least 'a', 'y', 'v' and 'h'. In the fifteenth century, particularly in the second half, 'z' is frequently found following any letter, but it is not found in initial position until after about 1500.

Two types of 's' are found, one tall, 'f', the other rounded, 's'. The former was used almost exclusively down to 1300 to represent the sound *s*; but 's' was used more generally in the fourteenth century, especially in final and initial positions, though 'f' remained far more common.

'z' was generally used down to the sixteenth century to represent a dental stop + *s*.

'þ' was used in the oldest manuscripts to represent the dental fricative in all positions; before the middle of the thirteenth century, 'ð' began to appear in this role in medial and final positions.

Three methods were used to distinguish between long and short consonants, where this was done:

- Consonants were repeated. This method was used from the outset, but only in a very small number of the oldest manuscripts was it the only method. *kk* was often written as 'cc' in the early period; later as 'kk' or 'ck', with 'ck' by far the most common form after 1300.
- The methods proposed by the First Grammarian were applied by many scribes, but to varying extents and with varying consistency from one letter to another, as the small capitals were not all clearly distinct from the small forms of the letters. 'k' appears for *kk* in a few thirteenth-century manuscripts; more scribes in the same century used 'Y' for *ll*; this is more likely to be a small capital than a ligature of 'll' (Benediktsson 1965: 47). The small capitals most commonly met with indicating geminate consonants, and those that were in use the longest in this function, were 'N', 'R', 'G' and 'S'. They were used by some scribes until fairly late in the fourteenth century. The last of these symbols was the least well established in this role, however, since 's' was sometimes – and increasingly as time went on – used for *s*.
- The third method of indicating geminate consonants in writing, namely placing a dot above a small letter, was a characteristic of Icelandic script, as was the use of small capitals as described above. Examples of dots above 't', 'r', 'g' and 'p' are found as early as the first half of the thirteenth century. These dotted letters were used down to at least the sixteenth century; the same applies to 'n', though a more common way of indicating *nn* was to place a 'nasal stroke' above the vowel preceding 'n' or above the 'n' itself. The same method was used to indicate *mm*.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Forms of individual letters*

Open-necked 'a' is the dominant form in the thirteenth century (see figure 14.4), the relative sizes of the belly and the curve differing widely. In the second half of the century the two-storey 'a' makes its appearance, becoming the dominant form in the fourteenth century (see figure 14.2), in addition to which a single-storey 'a' appears, first in documents, before the middle of the fourteenth century, later to be used in semi-cursive to some extent.

It became common in the first half of the fourteenth century, particularly in cursive script, to draw a hairline from the upper end of the ascender of 'ð' down to the right-hand side of the belly (see figure 14.3).

The descender of 'f' almost always extends below the base-line (see figure 14.4); the shapes of the arms vary. In some early fourteenth-century manuscripts the upper arm has become a large loop closing against the stem (see figure 14.2), and in documents the lower arm also takes this form (see figure 14.3). This double-looped 'p' became dominant in all Icelandic writing in the second half of the fourteenth century, and continued in use to a significant extent down to the seventeenth century (see figure 14.5).

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In some of the oldest manuscripts, the right-hand stroke of 'h' scarcely extends below the line (see figure 14.1). As early as the beginning of the thirteenth century, however, it becomes the rule for it to extend below the line (see figure 14.4). When the arch of the 'h' became sharply angular, the right-hand stroke generally ran straight down below the base-line, frequently curving to the left underneath the line. This form of 'h' became dominant in the fourteenth century (see figures 14.2 and 14.3).

The upper diagonal stroke of 'k' is curved, the lower drawn diagonally down towards the base-line (see figure 14.4). In the fourteenth century a variant of 'k' became more common in which the lower stroke and the foot on the right of the stem were joined, or nearly so, with the result that the letter became almost double-bellied (see figures 14.3 and 14.5).

A few thirteenth-century scribes made the stem of 'r' extend below the base-line. This variant of 'r' became more common in about 1300, becoming rare again by the mid-fourteenth century. During the fourteenth century, beginning in documents, scribes sometimes drew a line up from the lower end of the stem up to form the hook, with the result that the letter resembled 'v'.

From about the middle of the thirteenth century, some scribes made 'f' extend below the base-line (see figure 14.4), and in the fourteenth century this variant of 'f' became dominant (see figures 14.3 and 14.5) except in highly formal script (see figure 14.2). There were several variants of 's', particularly in cursive script: the curves are frequently closed, so that the letter resembles the numeral '8' (see figure 14.3).

In some of the earliest manuscripts, 'y' is written with the left-hand stroke extending below the base-line with a very slight curve to the left (see figure 14.1). A feature in common with other variants of 'y' in the thirteenth century, and on into the fourteenth, is that the upper part of the letter is 'v'-shaped and the right-hand stroke is curved (see figure 14.4). There is generally a dot above all variants of 'y'. When the left-hand stroke of 'y' extends below the line, curving slightly to the left, the letter may resemble 'p', in which case the superscript dot serves to distinguish it from 'p'. From just before the middle of the fourteenth century, both strokes are sometimes more or less vertical above the line, the right-hand one extending below the line; when this is so, it is sometimes only the superscript dot that distinguishes 'y' from 'ij'.

'z' generally has no transverse stroke in the earliest manuscripts. The variant with a stroke becomes more common as the thirteenth century progresses, and even more so during the fourteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

#### Abbreviations

Abbreviations were used freely, though much less in Norwegian than in Icelandic manuscripts. The following abbreviation methods were used:

- *suspension*, that is, omission of one or more letters at the end of a word, the abbreviation being marked by a point or by a stroke over or under the word;

- *contraction*, that is, omission of one or more letters in the middle of the word, the abbreviation being marked by a stroke over the word;
- *superscript or interlinear letters*, the omitted letter(s) being written above the word or between the lines;
- *special abbreviation signs*, known as Tironian notes.

The most common abbreviation was a simple horizontal stroke, used mainly to represent *m* and *n* and consequently referred to as the 'nasal stroke', as in 'honō' = *honom*; it was also used in suspensions and contractions. Two superscript abbreviations were the most common: the tittle, representing a front vowel + *r*, and any superscript vowel to represent *r* or *v* + the vowel; superscript *a* was generally written in the open form not unlike *u* or *w*. Abbreviations written on the base-line include the standard Tironian notes for *ac* ('and'), *us*, *per* and *pro*. The semi-colon is commonly used for *ed*. The *m*-rune, 'Y', was sometimes used for *maðr* ('man'). Common words, and words repeated frequently in the same passage, including names, tended to be abbreviated by suspensions, as in 'O.' = *Olafr*, or by contractions with a bar over the word or through the ascender of a tall letter, as in 'kgr.' = *konongr* (Benediktsson 1965: 85–94).<sup>6</sup>

See also CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY; HISTORICAL BACKGROUND; HISTORIOGRAPHY AND PSEUDO-HISTORY; LANGUAGE; LAWS; PROSE OF CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION; ROMANCE; ROYAL BIOGRAPHY; SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS.

## NOTES

- 1 The latest datings of medieval Norwegian and Icelandic manuscripts are found in *ONP*.
- 2 More general information about Norwegian and Icelandic manuscripts is given in Helgason (1958); Halldórsson (1989); Holm-Olsen (1990); Kristjánsson (1993); Karlsson (1999; 2000: 225–41); Rindal (2002); Tómasson (2002); Jørgensen (2004).
- 3 The discussion in this section is based on Haugen (2002: 829–30).
- 4 The discussion in this section is based on Karlsson (2002: 834–8).
- 5 The discussion in this section is based on Karlsson (2002: 834–8).
- 6 For further reading on Norwegian and Icelandic script, see *Palæografisk Atlas*; Spehr (1929); Þórólfsson (1950); Seip (1954); Benediktsson (1965), *FGT*: 108–15; Svensson (1974; 1993); Karlsson (2000: 46–60; 2002); Haugen (2002; 2004); Gunnlaugsson (2002).

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