

Sigurðsson, Gísli, and Vésteinn Ólason, eds. 2004. *The Manuscripts of Iceland*. Reykjavík: The Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland. 194 pages. ISBN: 978-9979-819-88-2.

The collection of sixteen essays contained in *The Manuscripts of Iceland* was originally published, in Icelandic as *Handritin*, to accompany an exhibition that opened on October 5th, 2002 in the Culture House in Reykjavik. The ongoing exhibition of fifteen manuscripts, which was organized by the Árni Magnússon Institute, is a truly impressive display of some of Iceland's most famous manuscripts. Despite the occasion of its publication and the apparent claims by the exhibition pamphlet, this book of essays by prominent scholars was never intended to function as an exhibition catalogue. Readers looking for the standard features of an exhibition catalogue will look in vain. The manuscripts featured in the exhibition are listed at the end of the introduction, but the book does not document them with descriptions or even provide photographs for each and every one—although images of almost all of them are included. Nor does it contain a floor plan or pictures of the displays. However, the comprehensiveness of the essays combined with a profusion of photographs of exceptionally high quality conveys the material aspect of the manuscripts, gives a general overview of their contents, addresses the relevance of the material in the accompanying displays, and fulfills the intention of the exhibition to offer further learning opportunities. As Vésteinn Ólason clearly states in the introduction, the book is “an independent work which aims to inform and interest readers whether they have seen the exhibition or not” (vi).

The first six essays in the collection amount to an introductory course in codicology and palaeography, along with a synopsis of the wide range of texts—mythological, historical, legal, literary, and hagiographic—that the manuscripts preserve. These initial six essays also discuss the long period of transition from a largely oral culture to a written one and the fundamental role that the Christian church played in that evolution. Despite the influence of the Church, one of the distinctive aspects of medieval Icelandic manuscripts is the early adoption of writing in Icelandic as opposed to Latin. Aside from their unique content and their use of the vernacular, Icelandic manuscripts stand out as being different from continental manuscripts due to differences in physical appearance. The vellum pages of these manuscripts tend to be very dark and the pigments of their illustrations are often not as bright, but the ink, especially after the fifteenth

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century, is black, shiny, and easy to read because it lies so thickly on the vellum that it almost stands out in relief.

Following the introductory material, the next two essays describe the transmission and reception of Icelandic manuscripts abroad that began in the early seventeenth century, when they first came to the attention of Scandinavian scholars and collectors. The rivalry between Danish and Swedish scholars centered on a dispute—which reflected the nascent spirit of nationalism—as to which of their respective nations was the rightful heir to the Nordic heritage preserved in the manuscripts. This rivalry resulted in the collection and exportation of manuscripts in large quantities to Denmark and to a lesser extent to Sweden. Iceland was a colony of Denmark during this period which gave Denmark an advantage in acquiring manuscripts, for example employees of the Danish crown, such as Arni Magnusson, could collect manuscripts while on official business in Iceland. However, Swedish collectors acquired some very valuable items including the fourteenth-century manuscript of the *Prose Edda* which Sweden purchased in 1669. This manuscript, now known as the Codex Upsaliensis, is the oldest of four complete *Edda* manuscripts and is unique because it explicitly attributes authorship of the *Edda* to Snorri Sturluson and contains the illustration showing Gylfi confronting the three enthroned figures of Odin. In 1685, the Danish king, at the urging of the Keeper of the Royal Antiquities, made it illegal for Icelandic manuscripts to be sold to countries outside of his kingdom.

The intensity of the rivalry between Danish and Swedish scholars resulted at times in questionable scholarship. Thus the Danish scholar Ole Worm was determined to link Old Icelandic literature with Danish runes, and went so far as to transliterate and publish Icelandic poetry in runic fonts. The Swedish scholar Olaus Rudbeck wanted to prove that Sweden was in fact the lost Atlantis and therefore the cradle of civilization. Rudbeck was particularly creative in his use of *Gautrek's Saga*, which actually is a parody ridiculing the Swedes, and in his contention that literary references to Atlantis could be read in the same manner as kennings of Old Norse poetry. For example, Rudbeck claimed that Plato's references to elephants in Atlantis should be deciphered as kennings for wolves in Sweden.

The next three essays concern nineteenth-century Romanticism in Scandinavia and Iceland, as well as in non-Nordic countries such as Germany, Britain, and the United States. Antiquarian Romanticism and the spirit of nationalism that accompanied it resulted in Icelandic students in Copenhagen in the 1830s agitating for Iceland's independence from Denmark, a goal that was finally realized in 1944. In Germany, Johann Gottfried Herder argued that characteristics of Norse gods and heroes were fundamental to German character traits. The Brothers Grimm shared a similar pan-Germanic view, seeking their folk materials in Scandinavian as well as in German-speaking lands. Moreover,

Richard Wagner never acknowledged his preference for Icelandic sources over the Germanic versions when composing *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Unfortunately, all of this cultural activity in Germany culminated in the Nazi's view of the Eddas and sagas as a fundamental part of Germany's national literature and therefore useful for propaganda and other wartime purposes.

In Britain, the Victorians energetically pursued their interests in the cult of the North with field trips to Iceland: to visit saga sites, to go salmon fishing, mountain climbing and birding, to study local customs, and to investigate the possibilities of commercial ventures. In 1934, Reverend William Strong's translation of the Bishop Esaias Tegnér's poetic paraphrase of *The Saga of Frithiof the Bold* provided Victorians with a model of Vikings as noble poets and virtuous pagans who were predisposed to accepting the Christian faith that was soon to reach them. Strong's dedication of his translation to Princess Victoria encouraged the fanciful notion that the entire Hanoverian dynasty, including the queen-to-be, was descended from a Viking leader named Ragnar Shaggy-breeches—despite Ragnar's obvious shortcomings as a Victorian role model.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the English translations of *Eirik the Red's Saga* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders* inspired an amateur American archaeologist named Eben Horsford not only to search for but to "discover" the site of Leif the Lucky's landfall on the Charles River. Nor did he stop there: Eben further claimed that he had also discovered the remains of a city named Northumbria, which he said had been inhabited until the late Middle Ages by the offspring of Leif's descendants and American Indians.

The last five essays in *The Manuscripts of Iceland* return the focus to Iceland and reveal the unique political and cultural legacies that these national treasures have engendered. For example, the literature preserved in the manuscripts was taken so seriously in 1941 that the Icelandic parliament passed a law, which was later declared unconstitutional, to the effect that the state had the sole right to publish Old Icelandic literature on behalf of the nation's citizens. This attempt to restrict publication was largely aimed at preventing Halldor Laxness from publishing abridged editions of the sagas that not only featured modernized spelling but were illustrated by artists whose modern style was considered to be "decadent." All three aspects of Laxness's editorial agenda were denounced by those who believed that the sagas were historical accounts whose text was to be treated with reverence and whose illustrations were expected to be historically accurate and conservative in style. The furor concerning modern editions was matched in intensity by the desire to "bring home the manuscripts" which had remained abroad ever since the mass export mentioned above.

After protracted negotiations, compromises, and law cases, Denmark began returning manuscripts, beginning with the *Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda* in 1971 and continuing over a period of twenty-six years. But manuscripts still remain in foreign libraries and private collections and on the rare occasion find their

way home to Iceland. Such is the case of the *Melsted Edda*, an eighteenth-century paper manuscript with sixteen full page illustrations of scenes from the *Prose Edda*, that had traveled with an emigrant family in the late nineteenth century from north-eastern Iceland to northern Canada. The last essay in the collection underscores once again the importance of the manuscripts: by saying that they are in some mysterious way “the birth certificate of the nation” (187-8); by including images of foreign heads of state looking at them; and by acknowledging that they provide a link to the past in a rapidly changing world.

The book ends with a concise reading list for those who wish to delve even deeper. It would have been useful to have included an index as well, not only for the scholarly reader for research purposes but also for the casual reader with specific interests. However, lack of an index is a minor fault in what is otherwise a beautifully produced book of essays that admirably fulfill the editors’ mandate to “inform and interest readers.” This book represents a valuable resource both for those who have seen the exhibition and for those who have had the good fortune to have found their way to it by other paths.

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