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"The Limits of my Language mean the Limits of my World"

Multilingualism in Medieval Iceland

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ABSTRACT

Multilingualism studies is a rapidly developing field. In recent years, exciting leaps have been made in approaching medieval European societies from the understanding that they were less monolingual than has previously been assumed, especially within western Christian sphere. This has furthered the study of cultural diversity and sociolinguistics in the Middle Ages. This thesis approaches medieval Iceland as a peripheral region within Europe. Nevertheless, it had strong practical and cultural ties with mainland Scandinavia and further abroad. In this thesis, I discuss how medieval Icelanders would have considered foreign languages and those people who could speak them. A particular link is made between language and Christian philosophical thought in light of the Tower of Babel story and its transmission, and also of the connection between multilingualism and kingship ideology as suggested in *Konungs skuggsjá*. A suggestion is made that multilingualism and the medieval Icelandic conception of their own language closely relate to the formation of social identity. Having established a theoretical framework, several saga protagonists are considered from the *Íslendingasögur*, *fornaldarsögur*, and *Biskupasögur* to analyse how their multilingualism is portrayed within the narrative. This then provides clues as to how medieval Icelanders viewed their own language.

Rannsóknir á fjöltyngi hafa farið vaxandi á undanförnum áratugum. Á nýliðnum árum hefur átt sér stað áhugaverð framþróun í skilningi á fjöltyngi í kristnum miðaldasamfélögum Vesturlanda, en áður var talið að eintyngi hefði verið ríkjandi. Í ritgerðinni er fjallað um Ísland sem jaðarland sem eigi að síður er í sterku efnislegu og menningarlegu sambandi við Norðurlönd og önnur lönd í Evrópu. Grafist er fyrir um hvernig Íslendingar á miðöldum litu á erlend mál og þá sem töluðu þau. Sérstök tenging er við heimspekilega hugsun um tungumálið á miðöldum, ekki síst við söguna af Babelsturninum og birtingarmyndum hennar. Einnig er litið til sambands milli konungshugsjónar og tungumálakunnáttu en þetta samband er gefið í skyn í *Konungs skuggsjá*. Rædd er sú hugmynd að fjöltyngi og hugmyndir Íslendinga á miðöldum um eigin tungumál séu nátengd sjálfsmynd, bæði persónulegri og félagslegri. Á grundvelli þessara athugana eru nokkrar persónur úr ólíkum tegundum sagna, fornaldarsögum, biskupasögum og Íslendingasögum, teknar til skoðunar í ljósi þess hvernig fjöltyngi er lýst í frásögninni.

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The title quote is from: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. *The German Text of Ludwig Wittgenstein's Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung with a New Translation.*, trans. D. F Pears and B. F. McGuinness, International Library of Psychology, Philosophy, and Scientific Method (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1992). §5.6

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a world which seems increasingly small and fast paced and where every city is a buzz of different languages and cultures, it is perhaps inevitable that there is a temptation to look to the past as a simpler time. Globalisation, immigration, and international communication are often perceived to be modern concerns only relevant to an increasingly mobile global population. Yet to think of communities in the past as static, monocultural and monolingual is, in many ways, an oversimplification. Medieval people travelled great distances and for many reasons and brought their own languages with them into metropolitan areas and remote villages. In this thesis, I start from the assumption that Iceland, although an island in the periphery of Europe, was very much connected to the rest of the world throughout the Middle Ages. Although the population of Iceland was almost certainly predominantly monolingual during this period, for those communicating with anyone outside of the Nordic diaspora a certain knowledge of other languages would have been vital. The language situation in Iceland is also particularly interesting due to the early predominance of vernacular literature, as opposed to Latin, which was more common elsewhere in Europe.

A great many of the sagas in the Icelandic corpus are particularly interested in overseas travel, and many other types of nonfictional literature in the vernacular focus on geographical texts and connections between Iceland, Scandinavia and the rest of the known world. In order to participate in an international community, mutual intelligibility is a vital skill and the ability to communicate becomes a key concern for the traveller. This thesis then seeks to answer the question of how medieval Icelanders viewed multilingualism, both in terms of philosophy of language and as a personal skill, by analysing the available literature which discusses foreign language and communication.

Throughout the Middle Ages, classical thought was developed and adapted in order to understand and create a philosophy of language. The first half of this thesis will explore to what extent this philosophy was known and engaged with in Iceland in order to establish a worldview from which saga compilers would approach the language abilities of their protagonists. The focus will be on the way in which Icelandic texts

adapted common medieval learned thought to their specific local reality. In the latter half of this thesis, this framework will be applied to the saga evidence to analyse the way in which polyglot characters are presented in order to see if there are specific motifs which are common in the depiction of multilingualism. In the course of this thesis, I do not suggest that every saga which depicts Norse travellers also comments on their language ability, nor that it is necessarily factually true that those characters who are explicitly stated to speak more than one language could, in fact, do so. The intention behind depicting characters with exceptional language skills by the compiler of the text is the focus of this thesis, rather than trying to unearth historical fact as to how common multilingualism might have been throughout the various strata of Icelandic society. The aim of this study is that an understanding of how medieval saga writers viewed language learning and language abilities could go some way to providing an understanding of how medieval Icelanders saw themselves connected with the rest of Europe, and to what extent this defined a sense of cultural identity.

1.1 CURRENT TERMINOLOGY

Studies in bi- and multilingualism have been of increasing importance in the last half century. This development is linked to a growing interest in, and awareness of, globalisation and multinationalism. The situation within Europe, and especially within the European Union, has meant that increasing amounts of government spending has been assigned to the study of multilingualism and the difficulties and effects of cross-language communication.¹ The field's rapid development has meant that many terms are used interchangeably, or are, despite their usefulness, rather recent coinages. Given these facts, and especially due to the problematic implications of using modern terminology and applying it to the Middle Ages, it seems prudent to spend some time defining the main terms which will be used in the course of this thesis.

¹ cf. The European Commission for Multilingualism ['Languages Homepage - European Commission', accessed 24 April 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/languages/index_en.htm.] which was set up in 2007; Sonderforschungsbereich 538 – Mehrsprachigkeit (Collaborative Research Centre 538 – Multilingualism) at University of Hamburg ['Collaborative Research Center : Research Centre 538 - Multilingualism : Universität Hamburg', accessed 24 April 2016, <https://www.uni-hamburg.de/en/sfb538/forschungsprogramm.html>.] from 1999-2011; The Institute of Multilingualism at the University of Fribourg and the University of Teacher Education, Fribourg ['Institute of Multilingualism » Welcome', accessed 24 April 2016, <http://www.institute-multilingualism.ch/en/>.]; and many others

“Monolingualism” refers to the ability to only communicate in one language – one’s “mother tongue”. In contrast, “bilingualism” is a term which refers to the ability to communicate in two languages and “multilingualism” to the ability to communicate in three or more languages. Deciding at what level of ability one moves between monolingual and bilingual or bilingual and multilingual is inherently problematic. A person who can communicate in three or more languages may be called either “multilingual” or a “polyglot”. The term “plurilingualism” has been suggested² as a catchall term for referring to bi- and multilingualism; however, I see no need to introduce another, unfamiliar piece of terminology here and instead will prefer to use “multilingualism” throughout this thesis. This is because it is rare in the saga corpus that we are given specific details as to how many languages any given person can speak and it rather more usual that characters are said to have learnt languages with no further elaboration. I also prefer “multilingualism” because while a modern speaker’s assessment of their own language ability is defined in terms of the ability to speak “perfectly”, this is not true for medieval speakers. Language standardisation is a relatively modern development:

Since the early nineteenth century, nation, language and identity have become closely intertwined. A direct consequence of this development was linguistic standardisation, meaning that one common, written and often also spoken ‘national’ language to be used by all fellow-citizens was created in order to exhibit an overt, i.e. a visible and audible, indicator for national unity and common (ethnic) descent.³

The link between *national* identity and *national* language is anachronistic when discussing the Middle Ages. In terms of the construction of an Icelandic identity, this was therefore connected more to locality and connections than by any ability to speak “Icelandic” in the medieval period (cf. §1.2).

For the purpose of this thesis, therefore, I define multilingualism as the ability to communicate in two or more languages at a standard whereby the speaker can be

² Tej K. Bhatia and William C. Ritchie, eds., *The Handbook of Bilingualism and Multilingualism*, Second edition (Chichester, West Sussex, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), xxi.

³ Kurt Braunmüller, ‘Receptive Multilingualism in Northern Europe in the Middle Ages: A Description of a Scenario.’, in *Receptive Multilingualism. Linguistic Analyses, Language Policies and Didactic Concepts*, ed. Jan D. ten Thije and Ludger Zeveaert, vol. 6, Hamburg Studies in Multilingualism (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 2007), 27.

understood by a native speaker without difficulty when conversing in a language other than their mother tongue.

1.2 LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Language and identity are intrinsically linked;⁴ the way in which we express ourselves and communicate with others is a vital component of forming personal identity. Equally the ability to communicate is a large part of forming a cultural or community identity. In *The First Grammatical Treatise*, the First Grammarian states that he has composed an alphabet for “off iðlendingvm”⁵ (us Icelanders), which clearly points to a kind of Icelandic ethnic identity which is constructed through geographical boundaries and numerous other factors.⁶ Nevertheless, while people would define themselves as being Icelandic as one part of a social identity, their language is a different matter.⁷ Indeed, the language in Iceland during the Middle Ages wasn’t considered by the Icelanders themselves to be *íslensku*, but *norraena* or *ðönsk tunga*, and was not distinguished from what was spoken throughout the Nordic countries until the 17th century.⁸

There are many different components which inform the construction of a personal or social identity.⁹ However, while the language that was being spoken would, obviously, have been important to Icelanders and informed Icelandic ethnic identity, it also could be considered to be part of a larger cultural identity outside of Iceland. The Norse-speaking diaspora was connected through mutual intelligibility which confers a connectivity between people of different geographic regions. For the purpose of this thesis, therefore, I will refer to Icelandic people, but will refer to the language being

⁴ cf. John Edwards, *Language and Identity. An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁵ Hreinn Benediktsson, ed., *The First Grammatical Treatise*, trans. Hreinn Benediktsson, University of Iceland, Publications in Linguistics 1 (Reykjavík: Institute of Nordic Linguistics, 1972), 208. [All translations are my own.]

⁶ I refer throughout this thesis to an “Icelandic” worldview due to the overwhelming majority of medieval Norse literature being from Iceland. To what extent we can construct an Icelandic world view distinct from that in Norway is unfortunately not addressed in this thesis due to the limitations of space.

⁷ Einar Haugen, *The Scandinavian Languages. An Introduction to Their History* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1976), 24. He refers to “Common Scandinavian” rather than Norse.

⁸ Ian McDougall, ‘Foreigners and Foreign Languages in Medieval Iceland’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XXII (1986-89): 225. n. 25

⁹ Stephen Pax Leonard, ‘Social Structures and Identity in Early Iceland’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 6 (2010): 147–59. This article discusses the importance of building social structures and institutions as a part of the development of a distinct Icelandic identity.

spoken in Iceland as Norse. While the linguistic differences between Old Icelandic, Old Norwegian and especially East Norse are well recorded¹⁰, I will refer to them under the same name as this seems to be how the language was perceived by medieval Icelanders.

The First Grammatical Treatise notes that “Enn af þvi at tvngvrn[ar] | erv [v]likar hverr annarr. þær þegar er ór æinni ok hinna fóm tvngv hafa gengiðz”¹¹ (But because the languages are different from each other, those which out of one and the same tongue have split) which Kirsten Hastrup has interpreted to mean that “The distinction between languages here is made on the basis of a sense of original (linguistic) unity. Already at this stage, learned Icelanders saw themselves in the mirror of a larger and literate world.”¹² So there may be a distinction in terms of country of origin, but there is a unity of language – regardless of whether mutual intelligibility was possible in reality at the time when the sagas were written down.¹³

1.3 A SYNOPSIS OF CURRENT RESEARCH¹⁴

In the Anglophone world, it is a common misconception that monolingualism is the global norm. It is increasingly clear that this is not the case. According to *Ethnologue*, there are currently 7,097 living languages in the world;¹⁵ split between 195 countries, this is an average of approximately 36 languages per country. Bearing in mind that many languages, such as English, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic etc., are spoken in numerous countries around the World, it is clear that the monolingual tendencies of many Anglophone countries are the exception rather than the rule.¹⁶ In fact, for most of

¹⁰ cf. Kjartan Ottosson, ‘Old Nordic: A Definition and Delimitation of the Period’, in *The Nordic Languages. An International Handbook of the History of the North Germanic Languages 1*, ed. Oskar Bandle et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 787–93.

¹¹ Hreinn Benediktsson, *The First Grammatical Treatise*, 206.

¹² Kirsten Hastrup, ‘Northern Barbarians: Icelandic Canons of Civilisation’, *Gripla* XX (2009): 110.

¹³ The distinction between language and social identity deserves greater study than is afforded it here. Particularly in terms of the development of the names given to the language spoken by Icelanders throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period by the Icelanders themselves. It would be interesting to discuss in greater detail the distinction, if any, which can be seen between the use of *norraena* and *dönsk tunga* and whether this usage shifts as there is less mutual intelligibility between them.

¹⁴ I am indebted in this section to John Edwards, ‘Bilingualism and Multilingualism: Some Central Concepts.’, in *The Handbook of Bilingualism and Multilingualism*, ed. Bhatia and Ritchie (Chichester, West Sussex, UK ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 5–25.

¹⁵ ‘Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Nineteenth Edition.’, accessed 1 March 2016, <http://www.ethnologue.com/world>.

¹⁶ cf. Bhatia and Ritchie, *The Handbook of Bilingualism and Multilingualism*. xxi

the history of the Western world, many people lived in a multilingual environment. This only began to change during the modern period, with the rise of romantic nationalism.

In the seventeenth century, Samuel Butler wrote “For the more languages a man can speak, / His talent has but sprung the greater leak”¹⁷ and this was a sentiment which came to predominate in academic and popular circles by the eighteenth century. The idea that knowing several languages lowered intelligence was very much *de rigueur* for several centuries and this idea affected the first socio-linguistic studies being done on multilingualism in the early twentieth century. Much of the earliest scientific work in this area was being carried out in America, which was especially concerned at the flood of European immigrants arriving. As John Edwards notes, “The intelligence tests of the time were very culture-specific, and non-white, non-English-speaking, non-northern-European, non-educated individuals fared poorly.”¹⁸ This early work has been systematically disproven as more rigorous, less culture-specific, more scientific testing has been produced. Elizabeth Peal and Wallace Lambert’s 1962 monograph¹⁹ was fundamental in linking bilingualism to intelligence, though they note that there is no way to say whether naturally intelligent individuals are more likely to become bilingual or if bilingualism causes an individual to become more intelligent.

Once these early biases had been thrown off, multilingualism studies began to develop and, also, to diversify. Perhaps inevitably, eventually the field garnered the attention of medieval scholars as a useful tool for exploring the unique language landscape of the Middle Ages. A major output of this was the research programme *Multilingualism in the Middle Ages* (2007-9).²⁰ The aim of the programme was “to further research into the cultural consequences and manifestations of multilingualism in the medieval west”.²¹ It was a multinational collaboration between scholars from the universities of Bergen, Bristol, Leeds, Wisconsin-Madison, Manchester, Oslo,

¹⁷ Butler, Samuel (1612-1680), ‘Satire, in Two Parts: Upon the Imperfection and Abuse of HUMAN LEARNING. Part 1.’, in *The Poetical Works of Samuel Butler. In Three Volumes. From the Texts of Dr. Grey and Mr. Thyer. With the Life of the Author, and Notes.*, ed. Bell, John, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Edinburgh: The Apollo Press, 1784), 124–32.

¹⁸ Edwards, ‘Bilingualism and Multilingualism’, 15.

¹⁹ Peal, Elizabeth and Lambert, Wallace E., ‘The Relation of Bilingualism to Intelligence.’, *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*. 76, no. 27 (1962): 1–23.

²⁰ <http://external.wun.ac.uk/multilingualism/index.html>

²¹ Ibid

Pennsylvania State, Utrecht, and York, in association with Brepols Publishing.²² Other recent works on medieval Western European multilingualism are *Multilingualism in Medieval Britain (c. 1066-1520)*,²³ *Medieval Multilingualism: the Francophone World and its Neighbours*,²⁴ and ‘Multilingualism in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age: The Literary-Historical Evidence’.²⁵

The study of medieval multilingualism is not without its difficulties and, as with any field of study, there are numerous problems, which must be acknowledged even if they cannot be overcome. The complexity of the surviving evidence, and the problems which this causes for studies into a multilingualism, ensures that any study will struggle,

in part because of the nature of the surviving evidence (inevitably written rather than spoken) and in part because the mix of languages in most regions of Western Europe in the Middle Ages was a complex one. In most areas, one or two local vernaculars were spoken, and in addition there were at least two prestige languages with pan-European currency.²⁶

These “prestige languages” are, of course, Latin and French, both of which were acrolects throughout Europe during the (High) Middle Ages. This mixture of local vernaculars is particularly clear in the Angevin Empire. The impact of the Norman Conquest on the language of the British Isles was as large as its political impact. There was an abundance of authors switching between writing in different languages depending on the subject matter of the text, such as John Gower (c. 1330 –1408),²⁷ and even of code switching within a single text, for example when William Langland writes in *Piers Plowman* (c. 1380):

Holy writt quod þat wye · wisseth men to suffre
Propter deum subiecti estote omni creature.

²² Ibid

²³ Judith Anne Jefferson and Ad Putter, eds., *Multilingualism in Medieval Britain (c. 1066 - 1520): Sources and Analysis*, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 15 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

²⁴ Keith Busby and Christopher Kleinhenz, eds., *Medieval Multilingualism: The Francophone World and Its Neighbours*, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 20 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010).

²⁵ Albrecht Classen, ‘Multilingualism in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age: The Literary-Historical Evidence’, *Neophilologus* 97, no. 1 (January 2013): 131–45.

²⁶ Ad Putter and Keith Busby, ‘Introduction: Medieval Francophonia’, in *Medieval Multilingualism: The Francophone World and Its Neighbours*, ed. Keith Busby and Christopher Kleinhenz, vol. 20, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers n.v., 2010), 1.

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

Frenche men and fre men · affaiteth þus her children:
[B]ele vertue est soffrance · mal dire est pety veniance.
Bien dire et bien soffrer · fait lui soffrant a bien venir (Bx, XI, 400-04)²⁸

[‘Holy writ’, said that man [Reason], ‘teaches men to endure’ / *For the sake of God be subject to every creature.* / French men and free men educate thus their children: / *a good virtue is patience, cursing is a poor vengeance.* / *Speaking well and enduring well make the one who endures come through well.*]

This has readily lent itself to the study of multilingualism within this cultural area. Icelandic texts do not appear to demonstrate the same level of code switching;²⁹ but we do know that texts were translated back and forth between the vernacular and Latin, and loan word evidence in Old Norse amply demonstrates that lexical borrowings from other languages were entering the language and we can similarly see the influence of Norse on other European languages in the Middle Ages as well.

One of the key difficulties in the study of multilingualism in the Middle Ages is that we, of course, only have written sources and so can only extrapolate what the spoken register may have been in this time period. It is also uncommon that foreign language learning is explicitly mentioned in texts and the resources which show foreign language teaching are very limited in Europe and are non-existent in the Icelandic corpus. Rather than assume that monolingualism was, therefore, the most common *modus operandi*, Albrecht Classen has convincingly argued that the silence in many literary works around the need for foreign languages “probably reveals more about the lower hurdles which foreign languages represented at that time than any explicit discussion of linguistic issues”.³⁰ In regions such as the Angevin Empire, where multiple vernaculars and two acrolects lived side by side, it seems unlikely that there would be any need for an author to comment on the language skills of a protagonist unless it was important to the narrative development of the plot. Marianne Kalinke has

²⁸ William Langland, *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive, Vol. 9: The B-Version Archetype*, ed. John Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, SEENET Series A.12 (The Society for Early English and Norse Electronic Texts, www.seenet.org, 2015), <http://piers.iath.virginia.edu/exist/piers/restricted/crit/docs/B/Bx/11/scribal/0>. [Emphasis my own]

²⁹ There are instances of words and phrases being left in Latin in otherwise vernacular texts. This has commonly been assumed to be a hallmark of the translation itself (for example by Scott D. Westrem, ‘Nicholas of Thverá [Nikulás of Þverá] (d. 1159/1160)’, *Trade, Travel, and Exploration in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Pub, 2000), 450.) but it may be an indicator of code switching.

³⁰ Classen, ‘Multilingualism in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age’, 143.

rightfully said that “[a]uthors of medieval romance appear to be blissfully ignorant of linguistic borders — and their heroes immune to linguistic unintelligibility.”³¹ It may be that rather than living in a remarkably monolingual fictional universe, these romantic heroes move from one linguistic region to another with the ease of practised multilingual communication and that this would be expected from people of noble rank and so does not need to be mentioned in the course of the narrative. This is, of course, purely speculative, but does demonstrate Classen’s point: the fact alone that language skills are not frequently mentioned does not mean that the ability was not there, and it may in fact point to them being more widespread than one might previously have suspected.

The modern Nordic countries are constantly being researched within the subfield of receptive multilingualism, or cross-language (dialectal) comprehension,³² but relatively little work has so far been done on the medieval period. The major contribution in terms of Old Norse/Icelandic literature is Kalinke’s ‘The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance’.³³ She demonstrates that there appears to be a need for foreign language skills for the protagonists, male and female, in the indigenous *riddarasögur*. The source of this motif, however, does not appear to have been from the French Romances of Chrétien de Troyes. Kalinke suggests rather that it is a tendency born of the pragmatism of the Icelandic writers themselves:

The fictional heroes reflect a traditional Icelandic reverence for learning and the pragmatism of an insular people with an uncommon language and devoted to travel. To ensure that their fictional itinerant protagonists are as successful on foreign soil as in their native country, the authors of the Icelandic *riddarasögur* instituted a foreign language requirement for those aspiring to eminence in the world of romance.³⁴

I do not intend, in the course of this thesis, to review the *riddarasögur* corpus. Kalinke’s overview is thorough and her conclusion is convincing. I will, however, suggest that, in addition to this pragmatism, it could be possible that as Icelanders may have been less

³¹ Marianne E. Kalinke, ‘The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance’, *The Modern Language Review* 78, no. 4 (1983): 850.

³² Ludger Zeevaert, ‘Receptive Multilingualism and Inter-Scandinavian Semicommunication.’, in *Receptive Multilingualism. Linguistic Analyses, Language Policies and Didactic Concepts.*, ed. Jan D. ten Thije and Ludger Zeevaert (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Pub. Co., 2007), 103–36.

³³ Kalinke, ‘The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance’.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 861.

exposed to foreign languages at home, they then mention this skill more in writing, as multilingualism is not a skill which is taken for granted as much as it is in continental Europe. There is, of course, no way to prove that this is the case. Nevertheless, in the course of this thesis, I hope to see whether this same “foreign language requirement” may be seen in other genres of the Icelandic saga corpus.

The other major study is Ian McDougall’s ‘Foreigners and Foreign Languages in Medieval Iceland’ which has been fundamental in the conception of the present study. In the course of his article, he focusses explicitly on Iceland, from the (legendary) earliest arrival of Irish monks to the English tradesmen who travelled to Iceland in the fifteenth century. McDougall uses saga evidence as well as what information can be found in the Icelandic annals throughout his article to discuss both the language skills of the settlers of Iceland and to give an overview of later foreigners who visited Iceland and the languages which they spoke. The article has been invaluable as the starting point of my research for this thesis due to its thoroughness in discovering instances of foreign languages and foreigners in Iceland, and also in approaching the philosophical framework which would have been available to medieval Icelanders when they conceptualised the idea of language.

1.4 WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT GENRE

It has not been my intention here to challenge the current academic consensus on the Old Norse generic system.³⁵ To that end, I will identify sagas by their common attribution to either the *fornaldarsögur*, *konungasögur*, *Biskupasögur*, *riddarasögur* or *Íslendingasögur*.³⁶ While I acknowledge the intrinsically problematic aspects of assigning (for the most part) modern terminology and concepts to a much older generic system, there is no room in the course of this study to review this in detail. When discussing sagas which sit uneasily within this commonly understood generic system, such as *Yngvars saga víðförla* (§3.3) for example, a brief comment on why it is

³⁵ A good example of the ongoing disagreements which exist in the issue of generic distinction in the saga corpus can be seen in ‘Interrogating Genre in the Fornaldarsögur: Round-Table Discussion’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (January 2006): 275–96, doi:10.1484/J.VMS.2.302026. While aimed specifically at discussing the *fornaldarsögur*, many of the generic distinctions which are found in the corpus are discussed.

³⁶ It is now common practice to leave the Icelandic names for the genres untranslated when discussing them in English language academic work, and I will do so throughout this thesis.

considered problematic will be made. This is because, while this study is not aimed at further understanding the motifs of the saga corpus, generic styles do affect not only the attitude of the author/compiler of the text but also influence our perception of the text as a reader. As I aim to see if some hints as to a medieval Icelandic world view can be gleaned by looking at attitudes towards multilingualism, a discussion of genre cannot be completely avoided.

2. TOWARDS A MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC WORLDVIEW

2.1 INDIGENOUS IDEAS AND FOREIGN INFLUENCES

Throughout the saga corpus characters - from poets to law speakers - are expected to be eloquent and well spoken. Icelanders seem to have traded their native eloquence throughout the Nordic countries, becoming renowned for their abilities as court poets, storytellers and the keepers of history. The *Prose Edda* and *The First Grammatical Treatise* are indigenous works which point explicitly to the importance of reaching an understanding of their own language. These texts also exist in a nebulous space between classical and indigenous styles of learning. It has not been necessary for many years to justify oneself in discussing the connections between medieval Icelandic literature and the cultural links to continental Europe. The plethora of works which have been published on the topic, across a variety of genres and from numerous frameworks, have clearly demonstrated the validity of discussing foreign influence on Icelandic works.³⁷ It seems clear that this came not only from Latin clerical culture, but also from French Romances, the British Isles, and elsewhere in Europe throughout the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This influence can frequently be seen, not just in the form of literal translation, but also in the translation and adaption of ideas in a uniquely Icelandic manner.³⁸ As Gunnar Harðarson has succinctly put it,

³⁷ For a good overview see Torfi Tulinius, 'The Self as Other: Iceland and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages', ed. Vésteinn Ólason, *Gripla XX* (2009): 199–216; Torfi Tulinius, 'The "Matter of the North": Fiction and Uncertain Identities in Thirteenth-Century Iceland.', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 42 (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 242–65; Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson's ars poetica and Medieval Theories of Language*, The Viking Collection, v. 4 (S.I: Odense University Press, 1987).

³⁸ It is important to recognise that when we talk about the translation of Latin texts into Old Norse, it is exceptionally rare that we have the exemplar from which the translation has been made.

S'il ne s'agit donc seulement d'une réception de la culture latine mais aussi d'une création culturelle à l'intérieur du cadre de la latinité, on peut tout de même dire qu'en tant qu'elles se manifestent dans la langue vernaculaire, il est légitime de parler d'influences latines.³⁹

[If there is therefore not only a reception of Latin culture but also of a cultural creation within the framework of Latinity, one can still say that even though they are manifested in the vernacular, it is legitimate to speak of Latin influences.]

A particular example to this is the prologue to the *Prose Edda*, in which the adoption of learned Christian material into a secular academic tone has long been noted.⁴⁰ This is, of course, not to underestimate the uniqueness of Icelandic literature throughout this period. While there are clear parallels and influences from elsewhere in Europe, there are also very many parts of the Icelandic saga corpus, and indeed of Old Icelandic vernacular works in general, which have no parallel at all in European literature of the time. A notable example is the oft-noted similarity between saga style and the novel, which wasn't to appear for another half millennium after the sagas first began to be written down.⁴¹ It is this delicate balance in determining the extent of foreign influence which is one of the many difficulties facing scholars when discussing Icelandic literature. The balance is problematised because there is still some contention as to whether Iceland or the Nordic countries had a culture which was in some way unique to that which was found in the rest of Europe.⁴²

2.2 CONSTRUCTING WORLDVIEW

In order to establish the attitude of Icelanders towards foreign languages in the medieval period, some attempt must be made to come to grips with the Icelandic

³⁹ Gunnar Á. Harðarson, *Littérature et Spiritualité En Scandinavie Médiévale: La Traduction Norroise Du De Arrha Animae de Hugues de Saint-Victor; étude historique et édition critique*, Bibliotheca Victorina 5 (Paris: Brepols, 1995), 1.

⁴⁰ Ursula Dronke and Peter Dronke, 'The Prologue of the Prose Edda: Explorations of a Latin Background.', in *Sjöttíu Ritgerðir Helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. Júlí 1977*, ed. Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), 153–76; Anthony Faulkes, 'Pagan Sympathy: Attitudes to Heathendom in the Prologue to *Snorra Edda*', in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. R. J. Glendinning and H. Bessason (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 283–316, <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Pagan-sympathy.pdf>.

⁴¹ See for example: Paul Edwards and Hermann Pálsson, eds., *Arrow-Odd: A Medieval Novel*, trans. Paul Edwards and Hermann Pálsson (New York: New York University Press, 1970).

⁴² An edition of *Gripla* has been dedicated to this topic: Vésteinn Ólason, ed., *Gripla XX: Nordic Civilisation in the Medieval World.*, (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 2009); see also: Sverre Bagge, 'Icelandic Uniqueness or a Common European Culture?: The Case of the Kings' Sagas.'

worldview. The assumption is that to a certain extent learned, clerical, attitudes towards language would almost certainly inform the saga “author” when it came to saga writing, as well as older indigenous ideas. Unfortunately, attempting to understand a medieval Icelandic worldview is not without its difficulties, not least because of the near impossibility of fully understanding a medieval conception of the world from a modern point of view. Rudolf Simek has written an article in which he sets out to prove that a medieval worldview, and particularly an Icelandic worldview can be uncovered.⁴³ An attitude which, with reservations, will be adopted here.

What is meant by worldview is not clear cut. In his doctoral dissertation, Sverrir Jakobsson states that,

By “world-view” is meant a system for describing the world, more precisely the visible world and the people who inhabit it. A world-view provides meaning to events in the given surroundings, placing them in the context of things known and tangible. At the same time it is exclusive and creates silences around whatever does not suit it and is therefore incomprehensible. [...] world-view is a part of general mentality, especially related to the way in which different groups are distinguished, how the identity of a group is formed in relation to other groups and notions about those who do not belong to the group.⁴⁴

Simek states that he disagrees with Sverrir. His definition, which he claims is less abstract and hermeneutic, is that worldview is “the sum of all our concepts of the physical and spiritual world which allows us to come to terms with all the eternal human questions”.⁴⁵ Both Simek’s and Sverrir’s definitions seem, broadly speaking, to be two ways of saying the same thing: in this context that worldview is the framework through which one approaches and understands the world. That medieval Icelanders were unaware of the specific academic concept of worldview seems to be entirely probable; however, medieval Icelandic writers were working not only within a specific, western Christian worldview⁴⁶ and with the knowledge of what medieval texts called

⁴³ Rudolf Simek, ‘The Medieval Icelandic World View and the Theory of Two Cultures.’, ed. Vésteinn Ólason, *Gripla* XX (2009): 183.

⁴⁴ Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin: heimsmynd Íslendinga 1100-1400* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2005), 363. It is important to add that Sverrir’s definition of worldview asserts that the concept was unknown to medieval Icelanders and so is a subconscious mechanism.

⁴⁵ Rudolf Simek, ‘The Medieval Icelandic World View and the Theory of Two Cultures.’, 183.

⁴⁶ Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin*, 366.

*Imago mundi*⁴⁷ but were also constructing their own specific identity within this framework. As this thesis is specifically focussed on a medieval conception of language and multilingualism, I will use a synthesis of these two definitions: that worldview is a framework by which people construct – consciously or not - their social identity in relation to their community’s socio-cultural reality. This social identity may well be defined against those with whom they do not share a cultural sphere.

While we can certainly attempt to reconstruct worldview, a complete picture can probably not be made, mostly due to the fact that we have lost innumerable texts. Of the extant manuscript witnesses, it has been suggested that these represent only 10% of the total which were produced.⁴⁸ This proportion is likely even lower if we consider the manuscripts which contain texts in Latin. Any attempt to reconstruct a worldview is therefore limited by the extant material, though it is possible that it is the most popular texts which have survived, by sheer weight of numbers if nothing else. As well as the uncertainties of lost texts, the dating of a large number of the extant works are not clear, which hinders being able to track any major cultural shifts on a more specific timescale. This, as well as the growth of the field of new philology, may be why many of the attempts to reconstruct an Icelandic worldview have focussed on a specific manuscript, for example, *Hauksbók*.⁴⁹

Another difficulty in constructing a clear worldview lies in the fact that there can’t have been a static Icelandic consensus for the entirety of the period of saga writing, extending as it does from inception c. 1100 to approximately 1400. No matter how small the population, it is exceedingly unlikely that there would have been a consistent outlook across the entire population from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. Due to the very nature of written culture during this period, the picture of any kind of Icelandic worldview will be exceptionally narrow. While there is always a hope of being able to understand broader society, the written record really only points with any certainty to the ideologies held by the educated elite, most of whom would most

⁴⁷ Rudolf Simek, ‘The Medieval Icelandic World View and the Theory of Two Cultures.’, 183–4.

⁴⁸ Matthew Driscoll, ‘Postcards from the Edge: An Overview of Marginalia in Icelandic Manuscripts’, in *Reading Notes*, ed. Dirk van Hulle and Wim van Mierlo (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2004), 21.

⁴⁹ i.e. Sverrir Jakobsson, ‘*Hauksbók* and the Construction of an Icelandic World View.’, ed. Alison Finlay et al., *Saga-Book for the Viking Society XXXI* (2007): 22–38.

likely be a part of the chieftain class and probably male. One can presume some kind of saturation of ideas within a cultural sphere, but the most learned elements of the literature were presumably not accessible to every stratum of society. In terms of understanding the concept of language, the inherent elitism in the written record is somewhat problematic. The scribes and compilers of literature in medieval Iceland would presumably be more likely to have been exposed to different languages than a poor farmer who has never received a formal education.

2.3 GEOGRAPHY AND MYTHOGRAPHY

In terms of scholarly or scientific study in Iceland, the *Septem Artes* (Seven Liberal Arts), which had been codified by writers such as Vallo and Martianus Capella in late antiquity, were certainly known.⁵⁰ Aspects of the *Trivium* (Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic/Dialectics) are covered in the Four Grammatical Treatises, and the *Quadrivium* (Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy) seems to have been a particular focus of study within Medieval Iceland.⁵¹ There is little manuscript evidence that music was much studied, although saga and poetic evidence suggest that music was considered to be important and that it was a valued skill.⁵² We do however have extant manuscripts with tracts on arithmetic, geometry and astronomy.⁵³ Astronomy particularly was a specialised skill, most of the technical terms are either borrowed or translated from Latin, and most tracts are direct translations as opposed to having any especial native input, unlike what we can see in the geographical texts.⁵⁴

As Simek has suggested, Geography can be seen to have held a particular interest in the medieval Icelandic imagination. For example, even in the late *fornaldarsaga*, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, which is generally seen to have very little “factual” information at all and is considered to have been composed purely for entertainment, there is an astounding number of references to specific geographical locations, which

⁵⁰ i.e. GKS 1812 4to, 4v

⁵¹ Rudolf Simek, ‘The Medieval Icelandic World View and the Theory of Two Cultures.’, 188.

⁵² cf. John Bergsagel, ‘Music and Musical Instruments’, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1993).

⁵³ cf. AM 194 4to, AM 685 d 4to, GKS 1812 4to, AM 764 4to

⁵⁴ Rudolf Simek, ‘Cosmology’, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1993), 111. This is not to ignore the contribution of Icelanders such as Stjörnu-Oddr to the field of astronomy.

are all exceptionally accurate (in terms of medieval conceptions of world geography). The maps which we have in Icelandic manuscripts are also evidence of this interest in geography. There are not only a surprising number of maps extant - of the fourteen surviving medieval maps of Jerusalem, three are found in Icelandic manuscripts - but the maps show interesting additions to the conventional European worldview. Icelandic maps include Greenland as part of Europe, are consistently far more detailed in terms of place names in the East (particularly in the Baltic regions), and of course include the transatlantic discovery of Vínland. It has been claimed that,

[t]aken together, the corpus of Icelandic texts shows perhaps the most advanced understanding of the geography of Europe held anywhere during the Middle Ages even if the writers believed that northern Russia and Greenland were connected by land and that “Vinland” and Africa were similarly conjunctive in southern latitudes.⁵⁵

This geographical focus is a reflection not only of an Icelandic interest in international travel but also suggests that Icelanders were engaged with determining their exact position in the world in relation to other countries. Medieval identity, far more defined by connections to neighbours than by connection to a sovereign nation, can be seen to be under construction. In these maps, Iceland is situated by and defined against its neighbours in the world. It may well be that for the medieval Icelanders, whose settlement was still very much an active part of their cultural memory, maps not only connected them to their recent ancestors from the settlement but were a very real depiction of their historical movement across the known world as is told in the prologue to the *Prose Edda*.

Most of the surviving Norse texts on geography, cosmography and astronomy are from the fourteenth century, but they reflect ideas which were already present in Iceland from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁵⁶ People in the Middle Ages travelled for many reasons; for trade, pilgrimage, exploration, and crusades and the medieval Icelanders were no different. It was this propensity for travel throughout Europe, to

⁵⁵ Scott D. Westrem, ‘Iceland’, *Trade, Travel, and Exploration in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, (2000).; Presumably far more detailed descriptions about Icelandic mapping traditions are given in Rudolf Simek, ‘Skandinavische Mappae Mundi in Der Europäischen Tradition’, in *Ein Weltbild Vor Columbus: Die Ebсторfer Weltkarte: Interdisziplinäres Colloquium 1988*, ed. Hartmut Kugler, Eckhard Michael, and Horst Appuhn (Weinheim: VCH, 1991).167–184. But I have not been able to read it.

⁵⁶ Simek, ‘Cosmology’, 110.

share “ideas and techniques, goods and diseases”⁵⁷ which helped turn the region into a cohesive cultural sphere. Travel and Christianity were intrinsically linked, whether it was by missionaries, priests, or pilgrims. A key factor of missionary work was the necessity of learning the language of those whom you wish to convert. This is a theme which is tied to both the story of Iceland’s own conversion and to the interaction between Norse Christians and Heathens (cf. §3). Pilgrimage was another major reason for travel and brought its own unique communication problems along the road. Sadly, we have no extant phrasebooks for Norse/Icelandic travellers such as those found elsewhere in Europe,⁵⁸ and it is impossible to guess whether this is because there never were any or if it is that they have all been lost.

While there may be no extant phrasebooks, we do have Icelandic itineraries. A classical genre of medieval travel writing, the *itinerarium* was a development of the Roman Empire, as the large and complicated road system within its vast borders necessitated a road map to guide travellers. In late antiquity, these itineraries became more descriptive and most commonly were used to describe major pilgrimage routes, especially to Jerusalem. In Iceland, there is only known to be one complete vernacular itinerary extant, *Leiðarvísir*.⁵⁹ We know of two lost travel books: *Flos peregrinationis* which recorded the travels of Gizurr Hallson (d. 1206; law-speaker from 1181-1200) in Southern Europe, and *Reisubók* (c. 1400), which related the travels of Björn Jórsalafari Einarsson to both Rome and Jerusalem and is now known only from an 18th century manuscript.⁶⁰

Leiðarvísir is attributed to Bishop Nikulás Bergsson (or Bergþórsson) of Þverá (d. 1159/60) and is an account of his pilgrimage to both Rome (*Rómaborg*) and Jerusalem (*Jórsalaborg*). *Leiðarvísir* survives in 2 medieval manuscripts: AM 194 8vo (1387) is the only complete version of the text, and is followed by a list of places in Rome and Jerusalem which may also be by Nikulás; and AM 736 II 4to (c. 1400),

⁵⁷ Norbert Ohler, *The Medieval Traveller*, trans. Caroline Hillier (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 1989). p. ix

⁵⁸ Bernhard Bischoff, ‘The Study of Foreign Languages in the Middle Ages’, *Speculum* 36, no. 2 (1961): 209–24.

⁵⁹ Kristian Kålund, ed., *Alfræði Íslenzk I. Cod. Mbr. AM. 194, 8vo*, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur (København: S.L. Møller, 1908), 3–31.

⁶⁰ Scott D. Westrem, ‘Iceland’, 273.

which contains the portion of the text describing the journey between Iceland and Rome.⁶¹ That there is an uncomfortable gap between the date Nikulás went on pilgrimage (c. 1150) and the earliest textual witness is undeniable, but the route itself is still remarkably accurate. It has been suggested that *Leiparvísir* may be a translation from an earlier Latin text as the description of the measurements of St. Peter's Church are given in a complete sentence in Latin.⁶² Despite its extensive detail in other respects, there are few specific mentions of language usage in *Leiparvísir*, which may well be because, as an educated Bishop, Nikulás could communicate perfectly comfortably in Latin and so had few communication issues along the way. He does mention that speakers of the *ðönsk tunga* have the cost of their wine covered by royal donations in one location, and their food in another.⁶³ In terms of linguistic borders, there is an interesting note in the text that as he crosses the border between Minden and Paderborn (both in modern day Germany) that, “nu skiptazt tungur”⁶⁴ (now the language changes). Of course, there was no change in language between Minden and Paderborn. Kristian Kålund has suggested that this mistake has been caused by an accidental scribal rearrangement of the text and that the phrase should actually appear a couple of sentences earlier when Nikulás crosses from Denmark into Saxony, a border when we would expect the language to change.⁶⁵ This would suggest that the border is seen not only as a political movement from one country to the next but also a linguistic border from one language to another. Presumably, this linguistic barrier would hold especial significance because it is the crossing between Nikulás' own mother tongue, and a completely different, possibly unknown, language. This border, therefore, has a specific resonance of crossing into the “other” that other language changes would not cause throughout his journeying. It is perhaps why he also mentions the two inns which give away free goods to speakers of his native language; it is not only a sign of royal munificence but also a symbol of an easy connection to commonality, achieved through mutual intelligibility. If we return to the idea of worldview as being constructed in relation to the familiar and opposition to the other, language can clearly form a

⁶¹ Scott D. Westrem, ‘Nicholas of Thverá [Nikulás of Þverá] (d. 1159/1160)’.

⁶² Ibid., 450.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Kålund, *Alfræði Íslenzk I. Cod. Mbr. AM. 194*, 8vo, 13.

⁶⁵ Discussed in McDougall, ‘Foreigners and Foreign Languages’, 212.

component of this. Identity is informed by easy mutual intelligibility in contrast to those with whom it is impossible or difficult to communicate.

2.4 THE TOWER OF BABEL AND THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE

The medieval Icelandic worldview was very much a Christian one, which means that the educated literary class would have known their Bible. The Christian aetiology for the multitude of languages in the world was the Tower of Babel story. Found in the Old Testament, the story tells of how in the age after the Flood, a united humanity, speaking one language, agreed to migrate East and build a city and a tower: Babel. Seeing this God was enraged and made it so no one could understand each other and scattered the people around the world. This tale was translated into the vernacular and survives in several versions in Iceland, both in translations of biblical texts such as *Stjórn*⁶⁶, in *Veraldar saga*⁶⁷ a book of universal history book which is partially based on the Bible, and in other texts. *Veraldar saga* describes the six “ages” of the world from creation to the reign of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (r. 1155-1190). It is dated to the second half of the twelfth century. Several sources have been suggested for the text itself, particularly the *Historia Scholastica* of Peter Comestor⁶⁸, but it is not a literal translation of a Latin text. Rather, it uses a framework of the six ages, which was used frequently in universal histories in the twelfth century, in order to tell the history of the world. Once God has noticed that the people of the world, who all speak Hebrew, have started to build the Tower, *Veraldar saga* says:

En gvð hnekði sva því ofmetnaþar verki at engi þeirra matti skilia hvat annarr mælti ok stvckv þeir I brvt af þessum bysnvm a sins vegar hverr ok gerþoz þaðan af sva margar tvngvr i heim<i>num sem þeir varo en þat erv .ii ok .l.xx. En adr <var> Ebreatvnga ein.⁶⁹

[But God thwarted their pride by making it so that none of them could understand what the others said and they took to flight from these portents each

⁶⁶ *Stjórn* is not the medieval name for this text but is rather the name of the compilation made in C. R. Unger's edition, 1862 cf. Ian Kirby, 'The Bible and Biblical Interpretation in Medieval Iceland', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 42 (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 287–301.

⁶⁷ Jakob Benediktsson, ed., *Veraldar Saga* (København: Bianco Lunos Bogtrykkeri A/S, 1944).

⁶⁸ James Cross, 'The World's Saga: An English Translation of the Old Norse "Veraldar Saga", a History of the World in Six Ages' (Master's Thesis, Háskóli Íslands, 2012), 2.

⁶⁹ Jakob Benediktsson, *Veraldar Saga*, 14.

his own way and from there were made as many languages in the world as there were [those who took flight], seventy-two. But before there was Hebrew alone.]

The saga tells of the exact moment when the previously united people of the world are divided, not only by moving to separate geographical locations but also by their sudden inability to understand each other. This loss of mutual intelligibility is a specific punishment from God for the communal sin of hubris. Loss of communicative ability between ethnic groups, within the Christian worldview, is not an accident of geography but a form of divine punishment. This belief in the original unity of language is also seen in *The First Grammatical Treatise* and the prologue to the *Prose Edda* and the belief in the “branching” out of languages, as seen above.

The conception that post-Babel there were seventy-two languages in the world was, by and large, consistent throughout the Middle Ages. The number represents the number of nations in the world, which was determined by a count of the descendants of Adam, a detail which is discussed by, among others, Isidore of Seville.⁷⁰ The seventy-two languages are then split between Noah’s three sons and each represents one of the three known continents. In Icelandic manuscripts, as with elsewhere in Europe, there is no one concept of the division of languages. Instead, it changes slightly between the different manuscript witnesses. In *Stjórn*, in a section which is a translation of Vincent of Beauvais’s *Speculum Historiale*, Europe is peopled by Japheth and has fifteen languages, Africa by Cham and has thirty languages, and Asia by Sem and has twenty-seven languages.⁷¹ AM 194 8vo states that there are twenty-seven Asian languages, twenty-two African and twenty-three European and that they are spoken in a thousand countries.⁷² However, in a separate part of the compilation, the total is given to be nine hundred and one.⁷³ Hauksbók contains a translation of Bede’s *De Temporum Ratione* and says that Asia has twenty-seven languages spoken in four hundred and six countries, Europe has twenty-three spoken in two hundred and fifty countries and Africa

⁷⁰ Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi: Etymologiarum Sive Originum - Libri XX. (Tomus I: Libros I-X Continens)*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Isidore/9*.html#1. §2

⁷¹ C. R. Unger, ed., *Stjórn. Gammelnorsk Bibelhistorie* (Christiania: Feilberg & Landmarks Forlag, 1862), 64.

⁷² Kålund, *Alfræði Íslenszk I. Cod. Mbr. AM. 194, 8vo*, 8. Though the numbers within the text do not add up to 1000.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 45.

has twenty-two languages spoken in three hundred and ninety-four countries, which it claims totals one thousand countries, but is in fact one thousand and fifty.⁷⁴

A confusion over numbers in manuscripts is very common, and so the numerical discrepancies between these versions are not important to the present thesis. What is important is that these passages show the link between language and conceptions of geography; rather than a language being associated with a particular “nation”, it is more an association of locality, or of political power on the part of the king. Language can, therefore, be as much an expression of distance between two people as the physical distance between them, and is a key component in the conception of the self *vis à vis* the “other”.

2.5 MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY WITH ENGLISH

The relationship between English and Norse has long been discussed.⁷⁵ There is a much-quoted passage in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, a late thirteenth-century *Íslendingasaga*, that says, “Ein var þá tunga á Englandi sem í Nóregi ok í Danmörku. En þá skiptusk tungur í Englandi, er Vilhjálmr bastardr vann England; gekk þaðan af í Englandi valska”⁷⁶ (There was then the same language in England as in Norway and Denmark. And then the languages in England split when William the bastard conquered England; thereafter [the language] in England was French). This passage is not only a literary device used to explain why the protagonists of the saga have no problem communicating with the English, but also explains the closer connection between the Nordic countries and England by saying that they used to share a common language. The conception that English and Norse is, or at least used to be, the same language is also present in *The First Grammatical Treatise*, which says of Norse and English that “ver ervm æinnar tvngv”⁷⁷ (we are of one tongue). McDougall has noted that this can also be seen in *Grágás*; the laws pertaining to the provision of compensation for

⁷⁴ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Hauksbók. udgiven efter de Arnemagnænske håndskrifter No. 371, 544 og 675,4°* (København: Thieles, 1892), 165.

⁷⁵ See particularly: Matthew Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, v. 6 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2002).

⁷⁶ Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, eds., *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, in *Borgfirðinga Sögur. Íslensk Fornrit III* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1972), 70.

⁷⁷ Hreinn Benediktsson, *The First Grammatical Treatise*, 208.

foreigners who die in Iceland explicitly reference the language which they speak.⁷⁸ The law says, “Nv andaz enskir men her. eða þeir er hingat ero en okuNare”⁷⁹ (when English men die here, or those who are more foreign to here), and McDougall claims that this means that “of those races whose language made them ‘strange’ to Icelanders, the English were, at least, the *least* foreign.”⁸⁰ This would certainly make sense in the context of the branching of languages from one common language such as is seen in the Babel story. Norse and English shared a common background and are now less unfamiliar to each other than a language such as Latin. The perceived close relationship between the Norse/Icelandic people and the English in these texts is explicitly linked to the language similarities between the two nations, even if it is apparent to the authors that English and Norse are no longer mutually intelligible.

Some doubt as to the actual accuracy of the perceived closeness between English and Norse may be seen in the prologue to the *Prose Edda*. In this euhemeristic account of the origins of the Norse people, the origin of the Æsir was in Troy, the centre of the world, and Óðinn travelled from there to the North. Thereafter,

Þeir Æsir tóku sér kvánföng þar innan lands, en sumir sonum sínum, ok urðu þessar ættir fjölmennar, at umb Saxland ok allt þaðan um norðrhálfur dreifðisk svá at þeira tunga, Asiamanna, var eigintunga um öll þessi lönd; ok þat þykkjask menn skynja mega af því at skrifuð eru langfeðga nöfn þeira, at þau nöfn hafa fylgt þessi tungu ok þeir Æsir hafa haft tunguna norðr hingat í heim, í Nóreg ok í Svíþjóð, í Danmörk ok í Saxland; ok í Englandi eru forn lands heiti eða staða heiti þau er skilja má at af annarri tungu eru gefin en þessi.⁸¹

[They, the Æsir and some of their sons, took wives for themselves from those lands, and their families grew, so that they spread throughout Saxland (Saxony?) and from there throughout the northern half (region) so that their language, [the language] of the people of Asia, was the one language throughout all these lands; and people think that this may be understood because the names of their ancestors are written, that these names have followed this language, and the Æsir have brought the language [with them] to here in the northern world, to Norway, and to Sweden, to Denmark and to Saxland; and in England, are old regional names and place names which may be understood to have come from another language than theirs.]

⁷⁸ McDougall, ‘Foreigners and Foreign Languages’, 190.

⁷⁹ Vilhjálmur Finsen, *Grágás. Islændernes Lovbog I Fristatens Tid*, vol. I, det nordiske Literatur-Sámfund (Kjøbenhavn: Brødrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852), 229.

⁸⁰ McDougall, ‘Foreigners and Foreign Languages’, 190.

⁸¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2nd ed. (University College London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), 6.

The prologue claims a common heritage for Scandinavia and Saxland, which are linked through a common, ancient language. The placement of England within this same cultural milieu, defined by mutual intelligibility, is put in jeopardy by the differences in place names which suggest a different language origin. Yet, there is a similarity there. English is clearly seen as related in some way to Norse, but the lack of familiarity in the language means that it cannot be considered to be a completely connective link between the Norse and English people. Despite this specific concern as to the reliability of believing that English and Norse were closely connected, the prologue does clearly allude to the Tower of Babel story.⁸² The text states: “hefir þessi átrúnaðr á marga lund breyzk svá sem þjóðirnar skiptusk ok tungunnar greindusk.”⁸³ (their beliefs have changed in many lands as peoples were divided and languages branched). While the Tower is not explicitly mentioned, the association is clear.

2.6 PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

In medieval philosophical thought, Hebrew was the original language of mankind and it, Latin and Greek were seen as holy languages. These three languages are explained to be holy in the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville: “Tres sunt autem linguae sacrae: Hebraea, Graeca, Latina, quae toto orbe maxime excellunt. His enim tribus linguis super crucem Domini a Pilato fuit causa eius scripta.”⁸⁴ (There are, however, three sacred languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, which are throughout the world most exulted. For above the cross of the Lord, the charge against him was written in these three languages at Pilate’s order.) This same idea can be found in learned Icelandic literature. The idea of these three languages being sacred is particularly interesting in juxtaposition with the fact that the multiplicity of languages was a punishment from God.

Iceland, as with much of Christian Europe, had several different myths about the origins of each of these sacred languages. According to *Breta sögur*, Latin owes its beginnings to Lavinia⁸⁵, the daughter of King Latinus of the Latini and the wife of Æneas: “Konvngur reð fyrri italia fa er latinvs dottir hanf het latina hon fan fyrst latinu

⁸² Dronke and Dronke, ‘The Prologue of the Prose Edda: Explorations of a Latin Background.’, 157.

⁸³ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 4.

⁸⁴ Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi*.

⁸⁵ Her name has been corrupted to Latina for etymological purposes.

nafni heita aller látínv menn þeir er þa tvngv kvnnv var þat”⁸⁶ (A king ruled over Italy, that was Latinus, his daughter was called Latina. She was the first to discover the Latin alphabet, and all men call it Latin, who know that language, after her). *Veraldar saga*, however, has the much more popular myth that the Latin alphabet was discovered by the nymph Carmenta (also known as Carmentis and Nicostrata). “Eneas gek at eiga Lavinia dotvr Latinvs konvngs er latinvtvnnnga er við kend þvi at Nicostra<t>a kona hans fan latinv stafrof.”⁸⁷ (Æneas went on to marry Lavinia, the daughter of King Latinus, for whom the Latin language is known because Nicostrata, his wife, invented/discovered the Latin alphabet). *Veraldar saga* “marries the aetiological tale of Nicostrata/Carmentis with that of Latinus”⁸⁸ so that neither myth has to be missed in the retelling of the story. Russell Black has suggested a link between this section of Hauksbók and *Veraldar saga* and a possible shared source for both passages.⁸⁹ Yet, clearly, there is a different mythic tradition between each of the texts, which suggests that there cannot have been a common source for this particular section – unless *Veraldar saga* had combined it with a different exemplar as well.

AM 764 4to, a fourteenth century manuscript about world history, claims that Enoch (an ancestor of Noah) first discovered the Latin alphabet⁹⁰ and in AM 194 8vo, a composite manuscript which has been linked to AM 764 4to⁹¹, Enoch is said to be the first to discover the runic alphabet.⁹² This is a much rarer aetiology and its origin is not completely clear. Enoch is said to be the first person to learn the art of writing in the pseudepigrapha *The Book of Jubilees* 4:16-18⁹³, but how this may have come to Iceland is not clear.⁹⁴ Yet, what seems most interesting here is the appropriation of runic

⁸⁶ Russell C. Black, ‘*Breta Sögur* from AM 544 4to: An Edition and Translation’ (D.Phil, University of Washington, 2014), 4.

⁸⁷ Jakob Benediktsson, *Veraldar Saga*, 46.

⁸⁸ McDougall, ‘Foreigners and Foreign Languages’, 194.

⁸⁹ Black, ‘*Breta Sögur*’, 5. n. 9

⁹⁰ AM 764 4to, 2v quoted in McDougall, ‘Foreigners and Foreign Languages’, 195. I have not seen the manuscript myself.

⁹¹ Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, ‘Universal History in Fourteenth-Century Iceland: Studies in AM 764 4to.’ (PhD, University of London, 2000), 69–73.

⁹² Kålund, *Alfræði Íslenzk I. Cod. Mbr. AM. 194, 8vo*, 46.

⁹³ R. H Charles, ed., *The Book of Jubilees, or The Little Genesis: Translated from the Ethiopic Text.*, trans. R. H Charles (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/jub/jub17.htm>.

⁹⁴ McDougall, ‘Foreigners and Foreign Languages’, 196 suggests that this may have been transmitted to Iceland through a manuscript containing Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica* as this information was often an addition in the text.

writing, already with its own indigenous Icelandic aetiology of being discovered by Óðinn, into the Christian sphere. Runes are not, to my knowledge, explicitly linked to Enoch elsewhere in Icelandic literature and so this may be in some way revelatory of the particular collection interest of the compiler of AM 194 8vo. The scribe made use of the information about Enoch in order to move runic writing out of the pagan, poetic sphere and uses the opportunity to bring runes into the Christian worldview. Enoch is not only the first to learn the art of writing, “he was the first among men that are born on earth who learnt writing and knowledge and wisdom and who wrote down the signs of heaven according to the order of their months in a book.”⁹⁵ (4:17). The collection of texts in AM 194 8vo are concerned with geography and pilgrimage, by bringing runes into this sphere through Enoch, runic writing is sanitised and normalised. This suggests not only a good knowledge of Christian philosophy but an innovative understanding which allows the scribe to manipulate the philosophical topoi available to them in order to better fit their own social reality. This is an apt demonstration not only that the “knowledge and understanding of the Bible shown by the medieval Icelandic scholars is impressively high”⁹⁶ but also that they understood it well enough to adapt it to the indigenous material.

3. MULTILINGUALISM AND CHRISTIANITY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Between the settlement period (c. 874-930) and the Christianisation of Iceland (c. 1000), Icelanders would have spoken languages other than Norse in order to help with international trade, because they immigrated from a country where Norse was not the mother tongue, or because they were slaves. It seems likely, given the paucity of loan words from Irish in particular which made it into the Norse language,⁹⁷ that neither the non-Norse speaking settlers nor the slaves kept their mother tongues for very long, and they must have assimilated quickly into the conversing in Norse. We have no surviving texts from the *landnámsöld* so it is impossible to know whether any of the settlers from countries which had already been Christianised, who therefore could

⁹⁵ Charles, *The Book of Jubilees, or The Little Genesis: Translated from the Ethiopic Text*.

⁹⁶ Kirby, ‘The Bible and Biblical Interpretation in Medieval Iceland’, 297.

⁹⁷ McDougall, ‘Foreigners and Foreign Languages’, 183.

already have been exposed to the Roman alphabet, wrote anything in their own language. Of the 400 settlers who are named in *Landnámabók* 50 are supposed to be from the British Isles but there is no indication that they passed their native tongues down to their descendants, despite the fact that the majority would surely have been bilingual in Norse and Gaelic. It may well be that this was not mentioned due to the distance in time between the written sources and the settlement period, it certainly seems likely that there was little knowledge of Gaelic from the thirteenth century onwards.

In the years leading up to, and following the conversion to Christianity, there would have been a sudden increase in the knowledge of foreign languages in Iceland. With the coming of Christianity came the rise of Latin and it also motivated Icelandic travel specifically for educational or pilgrimage purposes. When Christianity became the national religion, this prompted the wealthiest strata in Iceland to start sending their children overseas for study. As well as learning the languages spoken in the countries in which they were being educated, they also would have been learning Latin so that they could understand the liturgy, and so that the earliest converts could translate the Latin teachings into the vernacular. With the establishment of churches, there also was the establishment of schools which would have focussed on providing an education within a similar system as that found within the rest of Christianised Europe. The impact of Christianity on Iceland, and Icelandic literature in general, has been much discussed (cf. §2.1). In the course of this chapter, I will use the saga evidence in order to look at the presentation of language ability in two ways: firstly, by tracing the relationship between the clerical and lay (sometimes pagan) community in Iceland during the conversion period as it is related in the *Biskupasögur*; secondly, by approaching the relationship between Christian protagonists in the sagas and heathens that they encounter in the peripheries of the known world.

3.2 *BISKUPASÖGUR*

The *Biskupasögur* relate to the bishops of Iceland's first two medieval dioceses, Skálholt and Hólar. For the purpose of this thesis, I will also include *Kristni saga*. While technically not a *Biskupasaga*, it is particularly helpful in elucidating the relationship between Christian and heathen Icelanders at the time of the official

conversion to Christianity (c. 1000). It is important to note with these sagas that there is some distance between the time when the events happened and when the sagas were written down, which makes them problematic as historical sources. The majority of our sources about the conversion are from the thirteenth century, a time of great upheaval in Iceland, symbolised most radically by the end of the Icelandic commonwealth as it came under the Norwegian power (c. 1262/4). The sagas discussed here then cannot be seen to be factual historical accounts, but are generally considered to be revealing about the attitudes at the time when they were written down: predominantly during the thirteenth century. Given the shifting relationship between Norway and Iceland as the Icelandic commonwealth period ended, it is important to consider the influence that this would have had on narratives about the Norwegian King Óláfr Tryggvason⁹⁸ (c.960s – 1000) who we are told played a key role in the conversion.

Kristni saga is a church history which is commonly dated to the mid-thirteenth century, its action takes place from the end of the tenth-century to the beginning of the eleventh. It is extant in only one medieval manuscript witness, the fragmentary AM 371 4to section of Hauksbók.⁹⁹ In terms of its style, it has been said that,

Kristni saga is more in tune with the Latin European hagiographical tradition than either *Íslendingabók* or the family sagas, and provides more of what one expects from a ‘missionary’ history: fierce conflict between heathens and Christians, miracles, exempla and Christian symbolism.¹⁰⁰

Prior to the Christianisation of Iceland, foreign missionaries arrived with the hope of converting the country. Bischoff has noted that “[m]issionary practice *demanded* in the first place the study of the vernacular languages, if the missionary did not content himself with the mediation of an interpreter.”¹⁰¹ This is, of course, no different in the case of Iceland than it was anywhere else.

⁹⁸ Óláfr Tryggvason was surely multilingual himself as a result of extensive travelling during his youth and also his marriages: first to a Wendish woman and then to an Irish woman.

⁹⁹ Siân Grønlie, ed., *Íslendingabók. Kristni Saga. The Book of the Icelanders. The Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie, Text Series / Viking Society for Northern Research 18 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006). xxxii

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., xxxi

¹⁰¹ Bischoff, ‘The Study of Foreign Languages in the Middle Ages’, 223. (emphasis mine)

According to the saga evidence, the first missionary priest to visit Iceland was Bishop Friðrekr.¹⁰² According to *Kristni saga*,¹⁰³ Þorvaldr víðförli Koðránsson meets Friðrekr in Saxland and is converted to Christianity by him. After being baptised, Þorvaldr asks the bishop to come to Iceland in order to convert the rest of his friends and family. They begin with Þorvaldr's family and the rest of the Northern Quarter. However, it is Þorvaldr who is tasked with speaking to the heathen Icelanders and attempting to convert them because “byskup undirstóð þá eigi norrœnu”¹⁰⁴ (the bishop did not then understand any Norse). They must have made an odd pair, the widely travelled warrior and his friend who couldn't communicate with anyone else in the country. Indeed, they were met with mockery wherever they went, and only had some small success in converting the heathen population. Þorvaldr was particularly angered by the mockery he received; he is laughed at by a child in the Western Quarter¹⁰⁵, and then at the *Ping* they are mocked with a poem:

Hefir börn borit
byskup nú,
þeira er allra
Þorvaldr faðir.¹⁰⁶

[The bishop has born
nine children,
Þorvaldr is the father
of them all.]

Þorvaldr is furious and kills two men, but the Bishop asks him why he has reacted in this way and says that he has misinterpreted the words of the poem. Friðrekr's explanation of the meaning of the poem only works for somebody who understands the dual meaning of the word *borit* (inf. *bera*) which can mean both “to bear (i.e. children)” and “to carry”. Given that Friðrekr does not speak Norse this is certainly an authorial invention rather than something the historical Friðrekr actually said and this demonstrates the literary nature of this source. The account of Þorvaldr and Friðrekr ends with them being made outlaws and they escape to Norway, where Þorvaldr kills some heathens in revenge for his humiliation in Iceland. At this final violent action

¹⁰² “Þess er getit at byskupar kómu út hingat til Íslands um daga Ísleifs byskups, en Friðrekr einn kom áður út” [It is said that bishops came hither to Iceland in the days of Bishop Ísleifr, but that Friðrekr alone came before.] Ásdís Egilsdóttir, ed., *Hungrvaka*, in *Biskupa Sögur II. Íslensk Fornrit XVI* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), 11. He is also mentioned in *Kristni saga*, *Íslendingabók*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonnar inn Mesta*, *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Grettis saga*.

¹⁰³ Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote, eds., *Kristni Saga*, in *Biskupa Sögur I. Íslensk Fornrit XV* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2003), 3–13.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 12.

Þorvaldr and Friðrekr part ways, with Friðrekr returning to Saxland. Þorvaldr resumes his mercenary journeying, and it is not said whether he returned to Iceland after this.

It seems that Þorvaldr's multilingual abilities do not bring him much luck. While he is clearly an enthusiastic missionary, he is tested throughout the story and has very little success during his career as an interpreter, in the times when Þorvaldr and Friðrekr are successful in converting people, it is normally a result of Friðrekr's actions (consecrating fires or singing over the spirit rock) which demonstrably give signs of God's power rather than Þorvaldr's words. We are repeatedly told that either few or no people changed their beliefs "af þeira orðum" (because of these words). Clearly, not being able to find the right words was not the only reason why Þorvaldr was unable to convert a population which was unready to give up its heathen beliefs. Yet, it seems suspicious that he is acting as an interpreter whenever he is speaking of the Christian faith and so in each quarter his words fail to move people. This seems especially poignant when the saga goes on to say that Bishop Þangbrandr, who apparently doesn't need a translator despite being from Bremen, "flutti sköruliga Guðs erendi á þingi, ok tóku þá margir men við trú"¹⁰⁷ (preached magnificently [about] the news of God at the - þing, and took then many men the true faith). Þorvaldr's language abilities make him a joke, rather than being a beneficial tool at his disposal and it is his role as a translator which is instrumental in this.

The opposite of this can be seen in *Lárentíus saga*, where rather than a multilingual Icelander being the subject of the joke, a multilingual foreigner is. Jón *flæmingi* is a Flemish priest who studied in Paris for a long time: "hann kunni ekki norrænu at tala, ok skildi alþýðan ekki mál hans því at hann talaði allt á latínu, fransisku eðr flæmsku."¹⁰⁸ (he knew not how to speak Norse, and the common people¹⁰⁹ did not understand his speech because he spoke only Latin, French or Flemish). Lárentíus uses Jón's lack of knowledge in order to play a joke on him:

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰⁸ Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, ed., *Lárentíus Saga Biskups*, in *Biskupa Sögur III. Íslensk Fornrit XVII* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1998), 239.

¹⁰⁹ For an interesting discussion about the translation of *alþýðan* and its repercussion for the intelligibility of Jón see Alaric Hall, 'Jón the Fleming: Low German in Thirteenth-Century Norway and Fourteenth-Century Iceland.', *Leeds Working Papers in Linguistics and Phonetics* 18 (2013): 7–9.

En sem Jón flæmingi sá þat, vildi hann gjöra honum nokkot athvarf ok talaði einn tíma við Laurentium á latínu ok mælti:

“Kennið mér at heilsa á þennan yðar kompán upp á norrænu.”
Laurentio þótti mikít gaman at Jóni ok sagði: “Heilsaðu honum svá:
Fagnaðarlauss kompán!”

“Ek undirstend,” sagði Jón, “at þetta mun vera fögr heilsan, því at gaudium er fögnuðr, en laus er lof,” – gengr síðan at Klængi steypir, klappandi honum á hans herðar ok mælti: “Fagnaðarlauss kompán!”

Hinn hvessti augun í móti ok þótti heilsunin ei vera svá fögr sem hinn ætlaði.¹¹⁰

[and when Jón *flæmingi* saw that, he wished to greet him courteously and he spoke one time with Láréntius in Latin and said: “it seems to me (a good thing) to greet this your companion in Norse.”

To Láréntius, it seemed great fun at Jón’s expense and he said: “Greet him thus: *Fagnaðarlauss kompán* (Joyless companion)!”

“I understand,” said Jón, “That this should be a fine greeting because *fögnuðr* is ‘joy’, and *laus* is ‘praise’” – he goes afterwards to Klængr *steypir*, clapping him on the shoulder and says: “Joyless companion!”

He (Klængr) glared at him and it appeared that the greeting was not as fair as he intended.]

The joke lies in the fact that Jón recognised the first part of the word, and assumed that *laus* was the same as the Latin *laus* meaning ‘praise’, as opposed to its Norse meaning ‘-less’.

Unlike the wordplay in *Kristni saga*, this is clearly a light-hearted joke, but the fact that it can be made suggests that this kind of multilingual humour was popular. There must have been enough people in Iceland who struggled to speak Norse and, conversely, enough people who understood Latin that this kind of joke would have resonated. Alaric Hall has noted “the false friends may do more to inflate the audience’s sense of its own Latinity than to represent a likely misunderstanding by Jón”¹¹¹ and the deliberateness of the wordplay has also been noted by Bjarni Guðnason, Jakob Benediktsson, and Sverrir Tómasson.¹¹² Hall notes the connection between *Láréntius saga* and *Gísls þáttr Illugasonar*.¹¹³ This *þáttr* contains a similar greeting trick to that

¹¹⁰ Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, *Láréntius Saga Biskups*, 244.

¹¹¹ Hall, ‘Jón the Fleming’, 17.

¹¹² Bjarni Guðnason, Jakob Benediktsson, and Sverrir Tómasson, ‘Um Formála íslenskra Sagnaritara: Andmælaræður Bjarna Guðnasonar Og Jakobs Benediktssonar Við Doktorsvörn Sverris Tómassonar’, *Gripla* 8 (1993): 148–9.

¹¹³ Hall, ‘Jón the Fleming’, 17.

found in *Lárentíus saga* and interestingly is written in (a much-debated approximation of) Irish.¹¹⁴

There are numerous examples of multilingual priests, both foreign and Icelandic, who are praised for their language skills in the sagas. In *Orkneyinga saga*, Bishop Vilhjálmr is asked by Jarl Rognvaldr to go with him to Jerusalem as an interpreter, because Vilhjálmr was educated in Paris.¹¹⁵ In *Hungrvaka*, there is a list of foreign priests who had come to Iceland in order to promote Christianity in the years following the conversion, some or all of whom were surely able to speak Norse, and who would certainly have been multilingual in any case.¹¹⁶ *Hungrvaka* also discusses the education of the first Icelandic priests; Bishop Ísleifr Gizursson was educated in Herford in Westfalen,¹¹⁷ his son Gizurr was taught in Saxony and travelled widely.¹¹⁸ Both were praised for being highly educated and their travels ensured that they both were multilingual. For a saga which is explicit in its praise for the education of the first bishops of Skálholt, Hallr Teitsson is singled out as exceptionally talented in languages: “fór utan Hallr Teitsson ok mælti alls staðar þeira málo sem hann væri ávallt alls staðar þar barnfœddr sem þá kom hann.”¹¹⁹ (Hallr Teitsson went abroad [for ordination] and in all places he spoke their language as if he had been there from birth as he came to them). This emphasis on the language abilities of one priest, within a narrative which is preoccupied with education and intelligence, suggests that there was a cultural belief that multilingualism is, in some way, a sign of merit. It certainly would have been a requirement that all priests had, at the very least, some Latin.

While there is clearly humour to be found in the increasing multiculturalism of Iceland, as with any change in the status quo, this also gave rise to tension in the community. Conversion marked not only a shift in religious beliefs but also a marked increase in influence from outside of Iceland onto the day to day workings of the

¹¹⁴ Rosemary Power, ‘Cursing the King: An Irish Conversation in *Jóns Saga Helga*’, *Saga-Book XXV* (2001 1998): 310–13.

¹¹⁵ Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ed., *Orkneyinga Saga*, in *Íslensk Fornrit. XXXIV* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 204.

¹¹⁶ Ásdís Egilsdóttir, *Hungrvaka*, 11. Even if they did not speak Norse they must have been able to communicate in at least their mother-tongue and Latin.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

community. While there is no literature from the time of conversion, the tension between the lay chieftains and the bishops in Iceland in the thirteenth century, as the balance of power shifted between them, means that there is a peculiar mirroring between the literature about conversion and real life.

Guðmundr góði Arason (1161–1237), was an especially controversial figure in medieval Icelandic society; his struggle over the rights of the church with the lay-chieftains and moderate clerics after he was elected to be Bishop of Hólar have caused him to be compared to St. Thomas á Beckett not only now, but at least by the time of the earliest saga about him.¹²⁰ The sagas of Guðmundr have a complicated textual history¹²¹ and for the purposes of this thesis, I shall focus on *Guðmundar saga A*. The depiction of Guðmundr in his saga is in many ways stereotypical for a priest: he is well educated and people admire him. His religious conviction is the defining motif of the saga. Throughout the Middle Ages the liturgy would have been performed in Latin, as would much of the day to day particulars of clerical life. Guðmundr's voice becomes the symbolic representation of his position within the church and of his sanctity, and most frequently he is said to be speaking in Latin.

Once, while Guðmundr was reciting the *Dominus vobiscum*, an elderly woman in the congregation sees fire escape from his mouth. This is interpreted to be a clear sign of the Holy Spirit working through him and may be an allusion to the Pentecost:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.¹²²

It is also through the power of his words, when he blesses water at various times throughout the saga, that he performs miracles. Given the clear reference to the power

¹²⁰ Stefán Karlsson, ed., *Guðmundar sögur biskups I*, Editiones Arnarnagæanæ. Series B, vol. 6 (Kaupmannahöfn: C.A. Reitzel, 1983), 98.

¹²¹ cf. Stefán Karlsson, 'Guðmundar Saga Biskups', ed. Phillip Pulsiano, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1993).

¹²² Acts 2:1-4, King James Version. It is interesting to note Acts 2:6, "the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language." But it is too far to state that this is intentionally being connected with Guðmundr.

of his voice, which has obvious connections to Christian conceptions of the Holy Spirit, his ability to speak Latin is a key component of his presentation as a Holy man. In the literary construction of Guðmundr as a saint-like figure, it is his Latin abilities and not his mother tongue which is the symbol of his faith. Latin ties him intrinsically to the church and is a key component of his identity within the Christian sphere.

Nevertheless, *Guðmundar saga* has an interesting moment where Guðmundr's success comes from speaking his mother tongue. Guðmundr attempts to excommunicate Kolbeinn Tumason three times.¹²³ Twice very little attention is paid to the pronouncement, but the final proclamation of excommunication cannot be ignored: "Byskup ok hans men voro a husum uppe. ok var hann skryddr ok las upp þan setning anoræna tungu."¹²⁴ (The Bishop [Guðmundr] and his men were on the roof and he was in his vestments and he said the sentence of excommunication in the Norse tongue). The imagery is striking – the priest and his following on the roof and proclaiming bans to Kolbeinn and the many followers that were with him. It is a powerful scene which forces arbitration between Kolbeinn and Guðmundr and it is interesting that it is specifically stated that Guðmundr speaks in Norse.¹²⁵ This demonstrates that Latin was by no means universally understood in Iceland and also an authorial intent to show this fact. Hall has suggested that the North Icelandic Benedictine School of priests were "acutely conscious of their relationship, as Old-Norse-speakers, with Latin"¹²⁶ and while *Guðmundar saga A* has not been connected with this school, it would be of great interest to explore this consciousness of the interrelation between Norse and Latin throughout the *Biskupasögur*.

3.3 THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE HEATHEN

Medieval Icelandic literature is full of people who travelled to the furthest reaches of the known world and it is in these extreme locations, meeting strangers who are unlike them in every way, that their ability to communicate is most challenged. This manifests itself in the sagas in the interactions between Norse Christian heroes and pagans living in the furthest parts of the world.

¹²³ Stefán Karlsson, *Guðmundar sögur biskups I*. ch. 123-128, 148- 153

¹²⁴ Ibid., 151–2.

¹²⁵ I presume here that Latin would be the usual language for pronouncements of excommunication.

¹²⁶ Hall, 'Jón the Fleming', 19.

The most famous example of Nordic travelling is the discovery of North America at the end of the tenth-century. It is in the sagas which refer to these voyages, *Grænlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*, where the Norse people first meet the *skrælingjar* – a term generally taken to refer to the indigenous peoples of Greenland and Vínland. The first extensive interactions between the Norse people and *skrælingjar* is the attempt by Þorfinnr Karlsefni to settle Vínland. In *Grænlandinga saga*, it says that neither side understood the other's language.¹²⁷ This motif also appears in *Eiríks saga rauða*. When the Norse and *skrælingjar* begin to trade with each other, they communicate through signs of peace but even this sign language does not come easily, and the meaning of the various actions of the *skrælingjar* is a cause of uncertainty.¹²⁸ On the way back from Vínland, Karlsefni and his party meet a group of *skrælingjar* who have two children with them. Karlsefni captures the children but the adults sink down into the earth,¹²⁹ an action which is associated in the Norse tradition with magic and witchcraft. Nevertheless, Karlsefni and his followers teach the children to speak Norse and baptise them.¹³⁰ There is a duality in the presentation of the *skrælingjar*; the adults are impossible to communicate with, even via sign language, and they are associated with heathenism and witchcraft. Yet, there is an implicit understanding that they are not completely "other". The children can be taught to communicate with the Norse people, and even are baptised. This conversion symbolically shows that the children have been completely assimilated into the familiar.

There is a similar dualism at work in *Yngvars saga víðförla*, which has travel and multilingualism as key motifs. It is this tension between heathen and Christian which drives the plot. *Yngvars saga* doesn't fit comfortably into the saga corpus, it "stands on the margin between *konungasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, but is commonly classified as belonging to the latter genre."¹³¹ It was not included in C. C. Rafn's corpus defining edition of the *fornaldarsaga*, as the action takes place in the first half of the eleventh century, but it was included in later editions of the *fornaldarsögur*, such as

¹²⁷ "Hvárigir skilðu annars mál." Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds., *Grænlandinga Saga*, in *Íslensk Fornrit. IV* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), 262.

¹²⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds., *Eiríks Saga Rauða*, in *Íslensk Fornrit. IV* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), 226–231.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 233. "sukku þeir Skrælingar í jörð niðr"

¹³⁰ Ibid., 234. "Þeir kenndu þeim mál, ok váru skírðir"

¹³¹ Kirsten Wolf, 'Yngvars saga víðförla.', ed. Kirsten Wolf and Phillip Pulsiano, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1993), 740.

Guðni Jónsson's and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson's three volume *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* from 1943-44. The saga is a fantastical retelling of a Viking expedition from Sweden to the East, wherein the protagonist and later his son, Sveinn, battle dragons and giants, which certainly gives it something of the air of a legendary saga. Yet despite its fantastic nature, it is based on a kernel of historical truth. There are at least 25 Swedish rune stones which commemorate people who died with Yngvarr on his expedition to the East, he is also mentioned in some Georgian sources,¹³² and *Konungsannáll* states that Yngvarr died in 1041.¹³³ It has been suggested that the saga has hagiographic influences, especially with the increasing acceptance of Dietrich Hofmann's theory¹³⁴ that the saga was originally written in Latin c. 1200 by Oddr Snorrason of Þingeyrar. This presumed lost work has been dubbed **Vita Yngvari*.¹³⁵ Its dating is problematic as the saga survives in only two, incomplete, medieval manuscripts: AM 343 a 4to and GKS 2845 4to, both from the second half of the fifteenth century. If the version which has been transmitted to us is a translation of Oddr's Latin text, this saga might represent the earliest *fornaldarsaga* in the saga corpus. However, we have no way of knowing how closely it might resemble the Latin original if, indeed, it existed.

In the saga, Yngvarr leaves Sweden to search for a foreign land where he can be king. Yngvarr and his men travel to Russia, and it is here that Yngvarr “nam þar margar tungur at tala.”¹³⁶ (learns there to speak many tongues). This is then echoed by Sveinn, Yngvarr's illegitimate son, in the final part of the saga.¹³⁷ Yngvarr and Sveinn are both idealised heroes, skilled in every way that they would be expected to be, and their proficiency with languages gives them opportunities which they would not otherwise

¹³² cf. Mats G. Larsson, ‘Yngvarr's Expedition and the *Georgian Chronicle*’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, The Viking Society of Northern Research, XXII (89 1986): 98–108.

¹³³ It is not possible to say that this is definitely an independent date from that found in the saga itself.

¹³⁴ cf. Dietrich Hofmann, ‘Die *Yngvars Saga Viðförla* Und Oddr Munkr Inn Fróði’, in *Specvlvm Norroenvm: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), 182–222; Dietrich Hofmann, ‘Zu Oddr Snorrasons *Yngvars Saga Viðförla*’, *Skandinavistik* 14, no. 2 (1984): 106–8. This theory does still have its detractors, for a recent example see: Carl Phelpstead, ‘Adventure-Time in *Yngvars Saga Viðförla*’, in *The Legendary Sagas. Myth and Reality. Studies in the Old Icelandic Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, and Agneta Ney (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2008), 339–54.

¹³⁵ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, eds., *Vikings in Russia: Yngvar's Saga and Eymund's Saga* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), 2.

¹³⁶ Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Yngvars saga viðförla*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda II* (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1981), 434.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 448–49. “þann vetr gekk Sveinn í þann skóla, at hann nam margar tungur at tala, þær er men vissu um Austrveg ganga.” (that winter Sveinn goes to that school so that he learns how to speak many languages, those which men know who travel East)

have had. They both go out of their way to learn the languages which they could be expected to need in the east, which shows a strong practical sensibility and logically suggests that language learning to facilitate travel was seen as a pragmatic act.

Despite the practical emphasis which has been placed on Yngvarr and Sveinn becoming multilingual, both Yngvarr and Sveinn have problems with communicating in the course of their journey. Sveinn and his men are attacked by heathens three times and in every meeting it states that neither side can understand the other. Indeed, in two of the meetings Sveinn and his men manage to trade with these strange heathen people using a rudimentary sign language but, as soon as one of Sveinn's men makes the sign of the cross, the heathens are furious and try to attack them.¹³⁸ Even non-verbal communication breaks down between the devoutly Christian Sveinn and these heathen people and there appears to be no resolution possible between the two sides. The heathens are completely incomprehensible and so completely alien.

Yngvarr also struggles in his interactions with heathens, but rather than faceless mobs, his interactions are with high-born rulers with whom he can communicate. When he meets the maiden-king Silkisif, and later King Jólfr, he performs a strange charade in which he refuses to speak to them. When meeting Silkisif he stays silent,

því at hann vildi freista, ef hún kynni fleiri tungur at tala; ok svá reyndist, at hún kunni at tala rómversku, þýversku, dönsku ok girsku ok margar aðrar, er gengu um Austrveg. En er Yngvarr skildi hana þessar tungur mæla, þá sagði hann henni nafn sitt ok spurði hana at nafni ok hverrar tignar hún væri.¹³⁹

[Because he wanted to know, if she knew more languages; and so found out that, that she knew Latin, German, Norse and Greek and many others which were current in the East. And when Yngvarr knew that she spoke these languages, then he said to her his name and asked her what was her name and rank.]

He also performs a similar trick with Jólfr when they meet later in the saga. This trick, apparently performed in order to establish the number of languages which these two characters speak is perplexing. While it is certainly possible that Yngvarr is testing the intelligence of his opponents, the considerable anxiety throughout *Yngvars saga* towards heathenism, and female heathens in particular, suggests another consideration.

¹³⁸ The parallels with Þorfinnr Karlsefni's interactions with the *skrælingjar* are obvious.

¹³⁹ Guðni Jónsson, *Yngvars saga víðförla*, 437.

Both Jólfr and Silkisif are the rulers of heathen cities and Yngvarr will only speak to them and not to any of the other people in their kingdoms. Perhaps Yngvarr is using this charade to discover how “civilised” these people are: if they can communicate, then this is an indication that the two can learn and understand Christianity well enough to be converted. It seems especially notable that with the exception of Silkisif and Jólfr, no heathen is given a voice in the saga, in fact, all attempts to communicate between heathens and Christians, even through sign language, ultimately fail and end in deaths for both sides. Silkisif is different, not only can she apparently speak Norse, she can also speak Latin and Greek. Yngvarr can be certain that she will be able to understand the teachings of Christianity. Her early interest in learning about his religion probably also helps him to overcome his fear of non-Christian people - and heathen women in particular. Her promise to convert appears not to have been an idle one, as even after Yngvarr’s death she asks his companions to return with priests to convert her and her people to Christianity, a request which prompts Sveinn’s journey to the East.

This theory is complicated by the fact that when Sveinn returns with a bishop to teach Silkisif about Christianity a translator is required for the bishop and queen to communicate: “höfðu þau túlk í milli sín, því at biskup kunni eigi þá tungu at mæla, er hún mælti”¹⁴⁰ (they [Silkisif and the bishop] had a translator between them, because the bishop did not know how to speak that language which she spoke).¹⁴¹ It is tempting to suggest that the author purely forgot what had been said before. But it may be that, despite the desire to finish the story with a happy ending, the anxiety about Silkisif’s heathen past remains. This seems especially plausible given that the only other heathen character who is given a voice in the saga, King Jólfr, betrays Yngvarr by turning on him in battle. This treacherous behaviour is consistent with the portrayal of heathenism throughout the narrative. Therefore, it may well be possible that the lack of mutual intelligibility between the bishop and Silkisif is indicative that not everything is as happy as it appears. Both Silkisif and Jólfr are made familiar through their ability to communicate with the hero, but their foreignness remains their defining characteristic.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 455–6.

¹⁴¹ For an analysis of the role of translators in the sagas: Maurice Gravier, ‘*Tulkr - tulka*. Interprètes et interprétation au temps des sagas’, in *Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie 15. Festschrift für Oskar Bandle. Zum 60. Geburtstag am 11. Januar 1986*, ed. Hans-Peter Naumann, Magnus von Platen, and Stefan Sonderegger (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1986), 159–66.

3.4 CONCLUSION

In terms of the literary depictions of multilingualism in specific relation to Christianity and conversion narratives, language and religious belief seem to be linked as a marker of connection to the community and therefore to conceptions of identity. The strangest people who can be encountered in Old Icelandic literature are those who are not Christian, and not being able to communicate is symbolic of complete foreignness. However, the narrative is not based on a static binary, if a heathen person can communicate then they become part of the known and familiar and even someone who is completely familiar can become suddenly strange if they suddenly lose the ability to communicate. This is seen when Leifr Eiríksson's beloved foster father Tyrkir is suddenly rendered strange when he is so surprised that he can only speak German. His friends are confused and worried when they cannot understand him.¹⁴² There appears to have been a great pride in the Icelanders who joined the priesthood and were exceptionally well educated and, conversely, there was a comical aspect to those foreign priests, such as Jón *flæmingi* and Bishop Friðrekr, who are unable to communicate in the vernacular. There is an awareness of the relationship between Latinity and Norse which can be seen throughout these texts.

4. MULTILINGUALISM AND KINGSHIP IDEOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Middle Ages, there was an expectation that rulers would be multilingual.¹⁴³ In 1356, The Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, himself fluent in five languages, decreed in the Golden Bull that sons, heirs, or successors should be trained in Latin, Italian, and a Slavonic language, in addition to their mother tongue of German, from the ages of seven to fourteen.¹⁴⁴ The Norwegian educational text *Konungs skuggsjá* (c.1250) was well known in Iceland. It was written to educate King Magnús *lagabætir*, the son of King Hákon Hákonarson and is in the form of a dialogue between father and son. In this didactic text, the father tells his son “æf þu villt værða

¹⁴² Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Grænlendinga Saga*, 252.

¹⁴³ Charlemagne's command of languages was often mentioned by his biographers. Bischoff, 'The Study of Foreign Languages in the Middle Ages', 220.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

fullkomenn í froðleic. þa næmðu allar mallyzkur en alra hælzt lat'i'nu oc valsku. þviat þær tungur ganga viðazt”¹⁴⁵ (If you wish to become perfectly wise, then you (should) learn all languages and especially Latin and French, because those are the tongues which are spoken most widely.) This is a sentiment which very much follows what can be seen elsewhere in Europe about the skills which are expected in a perfect and wise ruler; however, the text then continues: “En þo tyn þu æigi at hælðr þinni tungo” (And yet, do not neglect your own language). This implies that while being able to communicate with foreigners is an important skill one should not learn other languages at the expense of one’s own. This may be a reaction to the knowledge that Scandinavian emigrants, such as the Normans, were well known for their swift assimilation¹⁴⁶ or, alternatively, demonstrate that Norse-speaking people had less need of learning other languages to be successful within their own communities.

Iceland did not have a king from the *landnámsöld* until the end of the commonwealth period (c. 1262) and the king was never based in Iceland itself but rather in Norway and later Denmark. The relationship between ruler and subject is, therefore, different to that which is seen in more established monarchies in Europe. Nevertheless, there is still an ideology of kingship which can be seen in the Icelandic literature, not just in the didactic *Konungs skuggsjá* but also in the sagas. I assume in this chapter, based both on *Konungs skuggsjá* and the Golden Bull, that as a King would have been expected to be highly-educated, there would have been an expectation that he should be multilingual. As discussed above, multilingualism, especially proficiency in Latin, is symbolic of the educated elite and intimately connected with the classical education which was perpetuated in the medieval period.

By looking at the presentation of polyglot protagonists from the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* we can see that the rare characters who display language skills become particular leaders within their community, even if they do not become kings. Unlike in the indigenous *riddarasögur*, there does not appear to be a “foreign language

¹⁴⁵ Ludvig Holm-Olsen, ed., *Konungs skuggsjá*, Universitetsforlaget (Bergen: J. D. Beyer A.s, 1970), 18–19. This is a section which is referring to trading, as opposed to kingship specifically.

¹⁴⁶ Haugen, *The Scandinavian Languages. An Introduction to Their History*, 135.

requirement”¹⁴⁷ in these genres. Either sagas do not mention languages at all, especially the *Íslendingasögur* which rarely report journeys outside of the Nordic sphere, or, as with the French romances, characters can travel widely without being hindered by language barriers. In the fictional world, for the most part, mutual intelligibility is assured. For example, Haraldr *harðráði* Sigurðarson travels through over 15 countries - in Asia, Africa and Europe - without any reference to language borders. Presumably, the historical Haraldr could communicate in a language other than Norse, his extensive stays with the Varangian guard would imply a degree of linguistic ability, but his saga is not interested in this skill. The times in which language ability is mentioned suggest that there is no “requirement” to be multilingual, but multilingualism is a bonus which provides rewards which are unavailable to monolingual characters.

In terms of Icelandic kingship ideology, Ármann Jakobsson has noted that “there is an interesting tendency in the literature of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century to fit Icelandic magnates to the mantle of royalty.”¹⁴⁸ His main example is *Hungrvaka* and *Kristni saga*’s presentation of Gissur Ísleifsson in which he is presented as an Icelandic king. In *Hungrvaka*, Gissur is explicitly called a king. This same tendency can be seen in the presentation of Jón Loptsson in *Sturlunga saga*. Both Gissur and Jón are exceptionally well educated, and it is partly their wisdom which leads to their elevation above their peers. Ármann extends this tendency to include *Laxdæla saga*:

Its author has certainly no qualms about presenting an Icelandic noble family as a royal family. To him, it cannot have seemed a far-fetched idea that this one country without a monarch in Europe could have an Icelandic king. At any rate, he depicts Icelanders as worthy of royal status in his saga, just like the author of *Hungrvaka*.¹⁴⁹

This idea will inform the discussion of the multilingualism in the *Íslendingasögur* below (§4.3).

¹⁴⁷ Marianne E. Kalinke, ‘The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance’, *The Modern Language Review* 78, no. 4 (1983): 861.

¹⁴⁸ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Royal Pretenders and Faithful Retainers. The Icelandic Vision of Kingship in Transition.’, *Gardar* 30 (1999): 48.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

4.2 FORNALDARSÖGUR

The presentation of kingship is, unsurprisingly, a major theme in many of the *fornaldarsögur*. The preoccupation of the legendary sagas with great heroes and kings makes this unsurprising. As the Icelandic genre which is also most invested in depictions of foreign travel – by its very definition – it is perhaps to be expected that it is also the genre which has the most examples of multilingual characters. Those characters who are polyglots in the *fornaldarsögur* are very often men of exceptional talent and skill, such as Herbrandr from *Piðreks saga*:

Hann er allra manna þeira víðförlastr, er hann hefir fréttir til, ok nálíga hefir hann verit með öllum inum göfgustum höfðingjum, er fyrir norðan haf eru, ok víða í Girklandi hafði hann verit, ok hann veit hvers þeira siðu. Hann kann nálíga allar tungur, er mæla má, ok hann er inn mesti hreystimaðr.¹⁵⁰

[He was of all men the most widely travelled, that he [King Piðrekr] had heard about, and he has nearly been with all the noblest men, who are south of the sea, and also had widely travelled in Greece, and knew all their customs. He knew nearly all the languages, which may be spoken, and he was the most courageous man.]

Immediately after this introduction, Piðrekr asks Herbrandr to be one of his followers and he swiftly becomes one of Piðrekr's most trusted knights and wisest counsellors. The prestige which Herbrandr gains through his wide travels and extensive language skills allows him to rise quickly within the court. His skill set is obviously exaggerated, it seems unlikely that one man could learn close to all of the languages in the world – even if 72 is meant, rather than c. 7000, but it is clear that part of his reputation and the renown that he has made for himself is explicitly linked to his language abilities.

Sigurðr from *Völsunga saga*, possibly the most famous figure in Norse literature, is also multilingual. In the description of his education by Reginn it says that “Hann kendi honum íþróttir, tafl ok rúnar ok túngur margar at mæla, sem þá var tíðt konúngasonum, ok marga luti aðra.”¹⁵¹ (He taught him skills, *tafl* and runes and to speak many languages as then was customary for kings' sons, and many other things). This comment, outside of the reference in *Konungs skuggsjá*, is the most specific

¹⁵⁰ Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Piðreks Saga Af Bern*, 2nd ed. (Iceland: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 197.

¹⁵¹ C. C. Rafn, ed., *Völsunga Saga*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda I* (Kaupmannahöfn: Hærdvig Fríðrek Porr., 1829), 149.

reference to language skills being a requirement of a good ruler in the medieval Icelandic corpus. Its inclusion is particularly interesting because, despite the note about Sigurðr's multilingualism, this talent does not play any part in the rest of the saga narrative at all. Kalinke has noted that "[p]roficiency in foreign languages, or its lack, has a noticeable impact on the course of events in not a few romances"¹⁵² and, even in other genres, a character's multilingualism will ordinarily impact the narrative. The only reason for the inclusion here is as an indicator of Sigurðr's nobility. Nonetheless, languages do still play a role in the saga, but via more supernatural means. After killing Fafnir, and tasting the blood of the dragon, Sigurðr can understand the language of the birds. The ability to speak with birds is found in other Icelandic sources and is a common motif in folklore.¹⁵³ The ability to speak to birds is very frequently associated with royalty, and in the context of Norse/Icelandic literature, it seems improbable that the skill was not meant to evoke Óðinn in some way.¹⁵⁴ If the languages which Reginn teaches Sigurðr are exactly what he should know in order to fulfil his royal duties, then this additional, supernatural variation of this skill has been suggested to mean that Sigurðr is not just an archetypal pre-Christian king but that he is a "prototype of a descent of Óðinn himself".¹⁵⁵ Sigurðr's language skills imply his perfect fulfilment of kingship ideology on two levels: both that of an idealised ruler, but also as a symbolic representation of Óðinn – an especially interesting connection in terms of Óðinn's presentation as the founding King of the Nordic people.

To briefly return to *Yngvars saga*, which is explicitly concerned with the royal bloodline of its protagonists and their utter conviction of their right to rule, Yngvarr and Sveinn's multilingualism is a vital part of their education at the beginning of their quest for kingship and is the skill which allows Sveinn to become the ruler of Silkisif's kingdom. While not a *fornaldarsaga*, *Knýtlinga saga* is a perfect example of the recognition that multilingualism is a symbol of good kingship. King Eiríkr Sveinsson of Denmark (d. 1103) is such a well-loved king that he is nicknamed "the Good" by the

¹⁵² Kalinke, 'The Foreign Language Requirement in Medieval Icelandic Romance', 858.

¹⁵³ Timothy Bourns, 'The Language of Birds in Old Norse Tradition' (Master's Thesis, Háskóli Íslands, 2012), 2.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵⁵ Jens Peter Schjødt, *Ideology of the Ruler in Pre-Christian Scandinavia: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion.*, trans. Victor Hansen (Viborg: The University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 298.

people of Denmark. He imposed harsh punishments on criminals, was a fair judge, a strict Christian, he was intelligent, eloquent, with a good memory, and he was fluent in many languages.¹⁵⁶ Eiríkr is the perfect embodiment of kingship. His pilgrimage to Rome is important not only as a sign of his devoutness but also for the success that he had with meeting many famous people, including befriending the Pope and being given permission to build an archbishopric in Denmark, which would have been the first north of Bremen. We are reminded that Eiríkr didn't need a translator just before he meets the Pope for the first time, and the gifts given to Eiríkr by Pope Paschalis are linked in verse to Eiríkr's eloquence. King Sigurðr *Jórsalafari*'s speech in Greek to thank King Kirialax for a gift, betrays a similar purpose. The eloquence of his speech, in a language which was significantly less common than Latin in Northern Europe, is a sign of his nobility, and also provides Sigurðr himself with a great deal of prestige, both at home and abroad.¹⁵⁷ The ability of these two kings to speak a variety of languages brings them a great deal of prestige, but possibly more importantly, their actions bestow prestige on the nations which they lead. Multilingual kings provide an opportunity for international renown, not just for themselves but for the Norse-speaking people. While, of course, these are literary representations of kingship, they point to a desire by the authors of the text to portray multilingualism as a significant skill and a token of nobility.

4.3 *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR*: THE CASE OF ÓLAFR PÁI

In the *Íslendingasögur*, which are primarily focussed on Iceland and the Norse-speaking world, it is perhaps understandable that it is rare for multilingualism to be addressed. Obviously, the *Íslendingasögur* have significantly fewer opportunities for international travel outside of the Nordic cultural area than the other genres, and there is, therefore, less reason to comment on the language skills of the protagonists or even minor characters. As has been addressed, a saga character is generally multilingual in order to play a specific role within a narrative: either in order to reinforce the intelligence of the character (Hallr Teitsson) or because it directly impacts the plot of

¹⁵⁶ Carl af Petersens and Emil Olsen, eds., *Knytlinga Saga*, in *Sögur Danakonunga*, Samfund Til Udgivelse Af Gammel Nordisk Litteratur (København, 1919), 169.

¹⁵⁷ Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, eds., *Morkinskinna II*, in *Íslensk Fornrit XXIV* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2011), 97.

the narrative (Yngvarr Arason). In those sagas in which multilingualism directly impacts on the narrative, language skills allow the speaker to gain either honour, prestige, or money in a way which is not available to the majority of their society. The most famous polyglot in the *Íslendingasögur* is Ólafr pái¹⁵⁸ Höskuldsson (c. 938–1006) from *Laxdæla saga*.¹⁵⁹ It is his family line which Ármann specifically pointed to as having connections to royalty and which he states “seems determined to award royal status to its heroes.”¹⁶⁰

Ólafr is the illegitimate son of Höskuldr Dala-Kollsson, a wealthy chieftain, and an Irish slave girl. The slave woman, Melkorka, is presumed to be *ómála*¹⁶¹ (mute) until Höskuldr overhears her speaking to their son.¹⁶² When it is discovered that she can speak, she is revealed to be an Irish princess, the daughter of King Mýrkjartan.¹⁶³ It is not disclosed in the text whether she could speak Norse before her captivity or if she learnt it while she was in Iceland. Yet, the characterisation of Melkorka does seem more literary than historical: the mute slave girl who happens to be a princess seems more the stuff of fairy tales than of real life. It is hard not to notice the similarities between Melkorka’s story and that of Áslaug Sigurðardóttir in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. Both pretend to be mute, lower class women and they are revealed through the power of speech to be princesses to their noble suitors.

Melkorka says to her son Ólafr pái that she has taught him Irish so that it doesn’t matter where he lands in Ireland.¹⁶⁴ The intention, for both Ólafr and his mother, is that he should be given the skills necessary so that he can travel to Ireland and so gain the wealth and honour of royal lineage. His ability to speak Irish, and to speak it well enough that he will be understood by native speakers, is not only a necessary skill for him to be able to claim his royal birthright, but also is symbolic of his royal blood.

¹⁵⁸ *Pái* – the peacock

¹⁵⁹ As well as *Laxdæla*, Ólafr is mentioned in *Egils saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Grettirs saga* and *Landnámabók*

¹⁶⁰ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Royal Pretenders and Faithful Retainers. The Icelandic Vision of Kingship in Transition.’, 49.

¹⁶¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla Saga*, in *Íslenzk Fornrit. V* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), 24.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶³ Probably the Irish name 'Muirchertach'

¹⁶⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, 51. “kennt þér írsku at mæla, svá at þik mun þat eigi skipta, hvar þik berr at Írlandi.”

While he is the son of a slave, Melkorka's royal bloodline is a sign of status, and this is transposed onto Ólafr when he manages to make contact with his Irish kin. Despite being an illegitimate son in Iceland, his uncommon connection to Ireland, symbolised by his language skills, allows him to gain honour and prestige above that which is available to his legitimate siblings – or any other Icelfander.

When Ólafr and his ship first encounter Irish people things do not go well. The distance between the Norse and the Irish are emphasised by the Irish citing their laws that they can confiscate all of the Norsemen's goods. Ólafr points out that that only counts when there is no interpreter with them. Once the king has been brought to Ólafr's ship, Ólafr explains their kinship. The king tells his followers that whether he is his kin or not "hann mæfir allra manna bezt írsku"¹⁶⁵ (He speaks of all men the best Irish). He is not just good for a foreigner, but the implication seems to be that Ólafr is even better than native Irish people.

Ólafr's success in Ireland is contingent on the presentation of a family heirloom and on his ability to speak Irish fluently. The foreignness of the Irish in comparison to the friendliness and familiarity of the Norwegian court is an important distinction in the saga. While Icelandic people knew of Ireland, that the Irish were Christian people, and that they even had a provision of laws on how to interact with each other, Ireland is specifically foreign within the wider cultural sphere of the Nordic countries. Ólafr is in many ways the ideal saga hero: he is judicious, wise, imposing, attractive, good in battle and wise in law. His one "failing" is his illegitimate birth. His exceptionalism lies in the fact that he can speak Irish, and it is this uncommon skill which allows him to overcome the shadow of his birth to have his connection to royalty acknowledged. While Ólafr turns down the right to be Mýrkjartan's preferred heir, both the Irish and Norwegian kings are convinced of the fact that he is an exceptional character. While he isn't a king like Sigurðr and Eiríkr, Ólafr's is a depiction of idealised kingship in a similar way to Yngvarr. Both are men of exceptional talent and skill, and their unique grasp of languages bring them advantages which are not available to anybody else in their community.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 57.

4.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have seen the connection between multilingualism and kingship ideology in the *fornaldarsögur* and the *Íslendingasögur*. It appears, that while there is not a “requirement” to be able to speak foreign languages, those characters who are multilingual are able to gain considerable wealth or prestige which would otherwise not have been available to them and which is not available to their monolingual contemporaries. Generally speaking, multilingual characters are rare and when they are mentioned in sagas their capabilities as polyglots often directly impacts the plot – as with Ólafr *pái* – or represents their exceptional wisdom – as with Herbrandr. Within the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* – and this would probably also be seen with the *konungasögur* – multilingualism is a skill which is often related specifically to noble or royal virtues. Being represented as multilingual elevates the polyglot above and beyond the rest of their immediate social or ethnic group.

5. CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of the thesis, an attempt has been made to understand the conception of multilingualism in medieval Icelandic society. An exploration of the Christian perception of geography and the origin of languages in Iceland reveals that the lack of comprehension between the people of the world was seen as being a direct result of divine punishment. This association certainly has ramifications when saga heroes meet heathens at the very periphery of the known world; the inability to communicate with these strange people is a specific indication of their foreignness and otherness. In these interactions even sign language, the last resort of the medieval – and modern! – traveller is shown to be inherently dangerous and ultimately futile.

The conversion brought significantly more consistent access to language learning than had previously been available in Iceland. The connection to Latin as the language of the church opened up a realm of possibilities in terms of educational understanding and travel. The ability for the learned population of Iceland to interact with this Christian, European, educated milieu provided part of the impetus which led to the first sagas being written down and engagement with this cultural sphere was a cause of pride. In a culture which already valued wisdom and intelligence, these new methods

of proving Icelandic relevance on a supra-national scale were willingly embraced and translated to the reputation – cultivated by the Icelanders themselves – of a people who were caretakers of Northern European history and culture. Icelanders interacted extensively with the learned milieu from elsewhere in Europe. Not only adapting Christian learning to absorb their own culture, as with the attribution to Enoch as the originator of runic writing, but also being inspired by the vast quantity of literature to produce their own texts, such as *The First Grammatical Treatise*, which began to codify a specific Icelandic identity.

Finally, language skills become very much an embedded part of kingship ideology during the course of the high Middle Ages. This is a pragmatic expectation of being able to communicate on behalf of your people with a wide variety of nations, and also a romantic idealisation of the properly educated, intelligent ruler. This literary and cultural ideal may of course not have been the actual reality, but if one was to look in further detail at the *konungasögur*, I would expect that there would be more examples of multilingualism as one of the signifiers of ideal kingship. It would be interesting to see if this were equally true for women as well of men of noble rank. The presence of Melkorka and Silkisif would certainly suggest that both men and women of a certain rank and education level would have been expected to be able to communicate in their native language and at least Latin and French.

To conclude, the perceptions of multilingualism are demarcated in the Icelandic worldview along a clear geographical model. If we were to draw a line from those places viewed as the periphery of the world (Vínland, the East), through the more familiar Christian West and finally to the local (Iceland), the depiction of language appears to undergo a paradigm shift. When in the peripheral regions, language skills are exceptionally helpful, but there is a knowledge that there is a fundamental failing of language as the people become more alien to the protagonist. Within Christian Europe, polyglots move freely and their abilities provide them with opportunities and honour which reflects well on themselves and also on Iceland as a whole. To a certain extent, this sentiment is also apparent within Iceland itself, where there is an idealisation of multilingualism, a pragmatic acceptance of its importance and value in connecting Icelanders with the rest of Europe generally and specifically with the church.

Nevertheless, the day to day reality of life in medieval Iceland did not require people to be multilingual. Perhaps multilingualism is more a useful skill for when one is travelling and abroad, rather than necessary at home.

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