

## Textual Efflorescence and Social Resources

### Notes on Mediaeval Iceland<sup>1</sup>

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#### STATUS, SYMBOLICITY AND INSTRUMENTALITY OF TEXTS

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various scholarly traditions in a variety of ways, but somehow the operation of texts as a major factor in the creation of social resources and energy has not yet become a high priority issue on the agenda of whatever related disciplines. In this paper, I will attempt to draw attention to the relation between textual activity and social energy in connection mostly with the puzzling case of mediaeval Iceland.

«Textual symbolicity» means that the possession of texts *per se* is a symbol of prestige and status, thus allowing possessors to assume more privileges in any relevant context – an inner circle, a whole society, or a group of different societies – thus playing a role in the competition between individuals and groups. As I argued elsewhere (EVEN-ZOHAR 2002), shifting has been taking place along history between individual (power-holders) and common possession (an entire group). In periods when the very existence of a group has become contingent upon solidarity and cohesion among its members, common possessions have become indispensable. In such instances, language and texts were often pushed to the top of priorities for their easy diffusion and immediate consumability, in contradistinction to immovable objects (though even such objects could be diffused for sharing via language and texts).

The notion of «texts» should not be restricted to written ones only, though ever since the invention of writing, roughly by the end of the 4th millennium BCE in Mesopotamia, written texts tended to assume continually higher values than oral ones. However, oral texts persevered along history as natural production of everyday speech, as peripheral products of low status or dissident and subversive groups, or as the very opposite, that is, as the epitome of high authority and exclusive knowledge. Many texts of high status, which have become enduring items of institutionalized canons, were produced orally, *or presented as such*, before eventually making their way to script. Texts like the Gilgamesh epic, the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, the Quran, the Mahabharata, the Iliad, the Talmud, the Kalevala are all just few examples of this long-lasting tradition. It is accepted that the texts of the evangelists, for example, had to be perpetuated orally and partly in subversion before Christianity assumed power to become able to freely spread its gospel. The Talmud, on the other hand, was written down as a planned project when it was feared that the texts rehearsed by generations (from 200 to 500 CE) could no longer be safely maintained orally.

In Iceland, the Law remained an oral text until the very end of the Commonwealth era, its reciting being the major obligation of the Law-Speaker (*lögsögumaðr*) at the *Alþingi* («General Assembly») several centuries after the dominance of textual writing in the country. Thus,

Snorri Sturluson, a prolific author of prominent historical and narrative texts, remained loyal to oral textuality in his long and repeated tenures as law-speaker, in spite of the fact that a written compilation of laws (the now lost *Haflíðaskrá*) had already existed since 1117-1118 as a consequence of the *Alþingi*'s decision. As Gísli Sigurðsson (2004a, p. 57) puts it, «[the law-speaker's] power and prestige was based not on a book, as happened within the Church, but on knowledge that the lawspeaker had had to acquire from the lips of other wise men». Quoting a passage from *Grágás*, Gísli comments:

it [i.e., the quoted passage] gives an idea of the power this lack of a book to consult on points of dispute put into the hands of a small group of legal experts who were able to decide among themselves on what was law and what was not. In light of what is said later about Haflíði Masson's connections with the episcopal sees of Skálholt and Hólar, the writing up of the law at Breiðabólstaður in the winter of 1117-8 may be viewed as the first step in a movement led by the allies of the Church to encroach upon the secular domain of the lawspeakers, a domain in which the Church was later to exercise considerable influence (SIGURÐSSON 2004a, p. 58).<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, there is no reason to assume that the law-speakers «necessarily have found it a great relief to their overtaxed memories to have the law fixed in writing – as modern scholars seem to assume when they express astonishment that the law was not put into writing earlier» (p. 59), which finally leads Sigurðsson to the conclusion that «there is in fact *no* compelling reason to suppose that it came as a relief to the lawspeakers to have the law in written form. On the contrary, they may well have been proud of their knowledge and looked upon the oral exercise and learning of the law as an essential part in the training of young lawmen» (p. 60; see also KJARTANSSON 2009).

The oral or written state of the so-called Icelandic sagas, on the other hand, seems to be less clearly settled, with evidence pro and con alternately propounded through the last two hundred years, though it seems that no one contests the plausibility of oral traditions at the basis of at least some of the family sagas, and Gísli Sigurðsson's strong advocacy in his significant book (2004a [Icelandic: 2002]) for dropping the controversy altogether to benefit from the advantages of oral traits analysis is very appealing.

Both oral and written texts could thus get and confer power, status and prestige. The ability to produce or have produced them as well as

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2. This view was propounded by Gísli Sigurðsson already in SIGURÐSSON 1994.

materially possess them has become a matter of value. Groups with a rich canon could look down upon groups with a poor or no canon at all, and the possession, whether symbolic (like «we have got Shakespeare») or material (like «we have got the original manuscripts of the sagas») conferred better competitive positions, which in turn could serve as legitimation for all sorts of actions and claims over territories and resources. For example, even though Iceland declared its independence in 1944, it was only in 1971, when the agreement with Denmark on the return of the manuscripts was signed, that «the final confirmation that Iceland had gained its independence from Denmark» was received (SIGURÐSSON 1996, pp. 60-61).<sup>3</sup> An opposite case, which I find to be rare evidence of the frustration of the non-possessors, was delivered by the Ukrainian writer Oksana Zabuzhko, who claimed that «if at the time Lesya Ukrainka and Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi had been known in the world to the extent Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are, our country need not have given up its nuclear weapons. And this is not just a metaphor» (ZABUZHKO 2007). In contradistinction to the failure of the Ukraine, in her view the USSR gained success even in its darkest terror days on the basis of the reputation of the Russian literary texts:

Let's not forget: over a hundred years Tolstoy and Dostoevsky have been Russia's trademark, and to a large extent all of the Bolshevik revolution was mediated in the consciousness of western political and intellectual elite through Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as the «guides» to the «mysterious Russian soul». Lenin, Bolsheviks, even Chekists headed by Dzerzhinsky were perceived from behind the iron curtain not as political criminals, who were liquidating every living soul, including the «Russian» one, but as heroes from Russian classics, anxious to «save the world» - and this had the most direct impact on the international success of Stalinist politics (ZABUZHKO 2007).

According to the rule of canon (SELA-SHEFFY 2002), prestigious texts need not be at the same time texts in circulation as working tools (EVEN-ZOHAR 2002). Tokens of status, whether material or semiotic, may shift between direct and indirect instrumental states. Thus, a text that is no longer directly active as such may be recycled or «revived» to become one at some point. On the whole, it is not always clear which the major

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3. Jón Karl Helgason discusses a previous repatriation attempt, the transfer of the national poet Jónas Hallgrímsson's bones from Denmark to Iceland in 1946 (HELGASON 2003, 2011), but the initiative in that act was a private matter, it did not involve any animosities between Denmark and Iceland, and above all, as Helgason describes in detail, it did not create a spirit of national unification like the later repatriation of the sagas. However, it might have inspired the Icelandic government to initiate its more audacious project of «bringing the sagas home».

function is in a given case, thus allowing us to think of a given situation of textual activity as potentially always doubly functional. Actually, the distinction may become important not for periods when texts are directly active, but when they cease to be so and yet keep maintaining their impact via the market of valued goods.

By «directly active» I am referring to texts consumed by their contents. As such, they may become «tools» for a large range of tasks, the major ones being a source for interpreting the world as well as for acting within it. In other words, they function as loci of cultural repertoires, where solutions for the management of life that are known implicitly through cultural practices become explicitly formulated. As written grammars have made people conscious of the ways they use language and served as tools for teaching new generations how to maintain the language of their ancestors, so did texts deliver sets of options for managing life. This applies to all kinds of texts, direct and indirect, practical and non-practical. Since antiquity, we have got direct explicit sets of instructions, like compilations of laws and manuals. The Laws of Hammurabi (HARPER 1904; DRIVER, MILES 1952-1955), or Kikkuli's ancient Hittite manual for the training and treatment of chariot horses used in warfare<sup>4</sup> are certainly ones of the most prominent in world history. Certainly most people would not find it conceptually difficult to think of such texts as directly instrumental.<sup>5</sup> The question would arise for texts that seem to serve no instrumental purpose whatsoever. The *Gilgamesh epic*, for example, may appear a puzzling case because it is difficult for us to understand what purpose it might have served in the context of societies so remote to our own, since thinking of it in terms of «literature», an institution already taken for granted nowadays, would be extremely anachronistic. However, no doubt it served an important purpose in view of the fact that it has been repeatedly copied all over the Fertile Crescent for several centuries and kept in royal libraries, quite

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4. This text, found in the royal archive of the Hittite capital Ḫattuša (now Boğazkale in Turkey), is a 13th century BCE Neo-Hittite rendition of the original. According to some scholars, this redaction corrects the non-proficient use of Hittite in previous redactions (from the later 15th and 14th centuries), a feature I find to reinforce the practical nature of the original redactions, and possibly evidence of the high standing of the latest one (known in Hittitology as CTH 284; see RAULWING 2006 for a detailed discussion, and RAULWING 2006, p. 62, for discussion of the level of linguistic mastery).

5. The Laws of Hammurabi contain not only laws, but also self-praises where Hammurabi describes himself as someone who has come to rule under the aegis of the gods, and made laws «to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, [...] to enlighten the land and to further the welfare of the people» (HARPER 1904, p. 3, p. 99).

like the Kikkuli manual, as well as almost verbatim embedded in texts produced by other groups.<sup>6</sup>

The instrumental function of non-practical texts must then be acknowledged in view of their production and consumption by so many human societies along history. There is of course a well-known argument which explains their existence by the primeval human proclivity for telling stories as pastime entertainment. It is believed to have been permeating the life of human societies to such a degree that groups that lack this trait are therefore often considered to be exceptional rather than typical.<sup>7</sup> Whether this is true or not, beyond entertainment, or perhaps as its very *raison d'être*, these texts may function like the overtly practical sets of instructions, or even more powerfully than the latter, since indirectness may often work more efficiently than directness. Telling a story about a poor peasant robbed on his way to the town market, but then compensated by the local governor as a gesture of *Mâat* (justice; see ASSMANN 1989) may be a more powerful promotion for the advantages of the state than some abstract law that stipulates such a treatment (like Hammurabi's Law, §23).<sup>8</sup> By not instructing but providing representations of possible situations, such texts may thus better function as models for matters allowed, possible or prohibited. As such, they have been able to serve along history variegated purposes of human and societal control, obviously also playing for power and domination. We may therefore conceive of them not as some secondary type, one that may have emerged as it were in the history of humankind when people got some free time from more urgent tasks (such as training horses or regulating traffic), but as a primary one that may have emerged prior to or in parallel with practical texts.

In short, while urgent tasks of regulation must often be addressed by overt and explicit instructions, persuasion and cohesion can better be achieved indirectly through what might be taken as credible life-illustrations in the form of parables and stories. A commonly accepted

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6. For example, the main story and certain phrases in the history of the flood in the book of Genesis are fully identical to those in the *Gilgamesh epic*, though the narrative framework and the names of the protagonists are different. Another reincarnation surfaces in *Landnámabók* in the story of Flóki (see CLEWORTH 2009 with further bibliography).

7. For example, Daniel Everett (2011) considers the Pirahã people in the Amazonas to be such a case.

8. «If the brigand be not captured, the man who has been robbed, shall, in the presence of god, make an itemized statement of his loss, and the city and the governor, in whose province and jurisdiction the robbery was committed, shall compensate him for whatever was lost» (Hammurabi's Law, §23, HARPER 1904, p. 19).

«legitimizing discourse, a mode of persuasion which would secure consent» (Lawrence 1996, p. 59) turns out to be a profitable investment. Clearly, when at unsettled states, namely either emergent, in the process of getting organized, or in crisis, a group is in critical need to create agreements for regulating the relations among its members, such as tell each other who is who, that is, who has got more rights and who must obey, who can claim possessions and who cannot, and so on. This is why we often find textual efflorescence to be more intense at such moments and perhaps more so within small rather than large entities. Although this requires much more historical scrutiny, it seems that the governing principle here is the degree of establishedness. The more established the power, the less efflorescence takes place. The more there is need for justification, legitimation and creating consent, the more likely it is for texts to multiply.

Societies in flux obviously need to establish themselves rather intensely. Flux situations may arise under diverse conditions, such as migration, loss of political control, forced or voluntary unification, secession, and more. Establishing agreements, setting up a system of trust (FUKUYAMA 1995), or otherwise accumulating social capital (LIN 1995, 2010) become an urgent task both on the collective and individual levels. It concerns the group as well as each single one of its individual members, since the chances of both to survive and proceed for better positions in the internal and external competition networks depend on the amount of social capital eventually accumulated.

#### ICELANDIC TEXTUAL EFFLORESCENCE

The case of mediaeval Iceland perfectly suits these conditions at several historical points. The long-perpetuated puzzlement as to how we can explain the fact that more texts have been produced in Iceland than in almost any other territory in Europe may get one more answer added to the stock of extant ones. Indeed, if one thinks in terms of large and small, or central and peripheral societies, one could have expected to find such textual efflorescence rather elsewhere, that is, anywhere in Scandinavia or Europe between the Black Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. However, it is precisely because such countries as Denmark, Norway or Sweden are relatively established entities in the 11th century, and because their population has been sedentary, their basic cultural - including socio-political and economic - agreements accepted, there is no wonder why no major efforts had to be invested there in creating or diffusing what seems to have been basically resolved. In contradistinction,

Icelanders had to deal with their origins, create genealogies to legitimize their possession of lands or make explicit their relations with the other members of society, establish their system of government, and invest much energy in regulating their language – all in order to make life possible in the new territory they had come to occupy. Like the ancient Israelites they probably memorized their genealogies for several centuries before these were written down, described who has taken which territory (*Landnámabók*, «The Book of Settlement»), put forth histories of the Nordic past, Norway, Iceland and Greenland, the Faroe Islands and even went back to telling about mythical times (*Íslendingabók*, «The Book of the Icelanders», *Heimskringla*, «The History of the Norwegian Kings», and more). They wrote stories that served for all of the above, combining genealogies with the histories of prominent families involved in struggles over a large range of various claims.

What should not be overlooked in this context, although too often taken for granted, is the fact that all this activity took place in the vernacular, which became comparatively standardized in terms of the times. Icelandic thus was not marginalized as most vernaculars in other parts of the Latinized Europe. On the contrary, the adoption of the Roman alphabet has given it its very operational fundament. It soon developed as a language sufficiently distinct from the other Nordic languages, including Norwegian.<sup>9</sup> This is strong evidence of domestic rather than «international» targeting, in sharp contrast with the rest of mediaeval Christendom. Just for illustration, in contrast with *Landnámabók*, *Íslendingabók* and *Heimskringla*, texts written in Latin like *Gesta Hungarorum* (see note 15 below) that eventually played a formative role in 19th century Hungarian nationalism, were targeted towards Italy and other parts of civilized Europe and hardly had any significance for the contemporary local population.<sup>10</sup>

The Israelites wrote down the story about their exodus from Egypt and their occupation of the Land of Canaan. If this was a true account

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9. See Stefán Karlsson's extensive discussion (1979) of the difference between Icelandic and Norwegian, in particular the characteristically Norwegian traits («norvagismer») in the manuscripts imported from Iceland to Norway. «The divide between the languages increased in the thirteenth and still more in the fourteenth century» (KARLSSON 2004, p. 9), when even norwegianized Icelandic could no longer be understood in Norway.

10. «[...] the work was originally commissioned for propagandists purposes, specifically with a view to an Italian audience. [...] The whole structure of the work is influenced by the intention to demonstrate that Hungary was always a lawful polity, in which even its Hunnish predecessors lived and were ruled *Romano more*, and where the workings of government as well as the relations between free and servile elements were based on customary and statute law» (VESZPRÉMY, SCHAEER 1999, p. XX).



of their history, they had to explain to themselves where they had come from and in what right they had taken the land from other groups who lived there. If this was not a true account, as maintained by some modern archaeologists (see FINKELSTEIN ET AL. 2007), then they had to invent those stories in order to legitimize their separate identity. The Icelanders, a similarly immigrant group, created the story of their exodus from Norway and told the story about how the land they discovered was empty and hospitable. This story, too, does not appear to be fully credible. Various testimonies in the Icelandic sources themselves mention the Celtic origins of Icelanders. Some thoughts by revisionist historians based on carbon tests and other materials,<sup>11</sup> and the Icelandic genome project that has revealed that «63% of Icelandic female settlers were of Celtic origin and had ancestral lines traceable to the British Isles» (*The Origins of the Icelanders* 2010; see also HELGASON 2004) now reinforce the view that the mediaeval narrative was created within the framework of a propagated historical image. Nevertheless, no doubt the fact that most males indeed derived from Norway had its impact on both self-image and actual relations between Iceland and Norway, eventually leading to Norwegian claims over Iceland, which were fully realized in the 13th century by the Icelanders' acceptance of Norwegian sovereignty. This could not have occurred without the long-held treatment of Norway as the mother homeland of Iceland, a position that had allowed the Norwegian kings to meddle between settlers (at least according to Hauk's version of *Landnámabók*), enforce Christianity around 1000, and otherwise interfere in Icelandic politics and trade during the Commonwealth era.

The idea that the Icelandic texts emerged and proliferated for concrete purposes of self-promotion, political and social gains has been expressed time and again by many, especially Icelandic, scholars often in connection with particular texts. Jakob Benediksson's (1978) and Sveinbjörn Rafnsson's (1974; 2001) argument that *Landnámabók* «manipulates genealogical and historical traditions to legitimate twelfth- and thirteenth-century elite families' claims to property and prerogative» (SMITH 1995, p. 320) are well known. Lönnroth, who extensively supports the idea that *Njál's Saga* was written «from the standpoint of the Svinfelling family» (1976, p. 178) to promote the family's status claims, acknowledges Barði Guðmundsson as probably the first to have raised this hypothesis (GUÐMUNDSSON 1937; 1958). Another well-known example is the case of *Erik's Saga*, succinctly summarized by Birgitta Wallace:

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11. An account of some of these studies is given by SMITH 1995. For some later studies see WALLACE 2003 and 2009.

Scholars have shown that *Erik's Saga* was written to support the canonization of Bishop Björn Gílmsson, who died in 1162 [...]. An account of illustrious and exceptional ancestors was expected to accompany any petition for beatification and Bishop Björn was a direct descendant of Thorfinn Karlsefni and Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir. Furthermore, Law Speaker Hauk Erlendsson, who edited the *Hauk's Book* version of *Erik's Saga*, was himself also a direct descendant of Thorfinn and Gudrid, removed from them by nine generations. Hence, the roles of Thorfinn Karlsefni and Gudrid were greatly magnified and embellished, while those of Leif Eriksson and his family almost vanished altogether (WALLACE 2003, p. 10).

Similar assertions have been expressed in connection with various other sagas. In general terms, it has been suggested by major scholars of the saga texts, like Hallberg, Durrenberger and Hastrup, that «these texts were written to preserve a sense of cultural unity when Icelandic independence was crumbling or to create a sense of identity when the society was developing» (SMITH 1995, p. 320).

Quite recently, however, a more comprehensive position was powerfully propounded by Axel Kristinsson in a number of works (KRISTINSSON 2003; 2004; 2010, esp. pp. 211-228), where he made a connection between 13th century text production and the *political division* of Iceland. In contradistinction to other mediaeval societies, where similar texts may have served the same purpose,<sup>12</sup> Axel Kristinsson believes that Iceland produced more saga texts simply because «it was divided into a large number of autonomous political units, all requiring some means to help them survive in a hostile environment» (KRISTINSSON 2003, p. 2). He thus accepts the idea that the need for self-promotion grows where the environment is hostile, while a relatively peaceful environment that is free of conflicts might not have necessitated the release of such energies.

Kristinsson's convincing argument (substantiated by a detailed discussion of the relevant texts) has the advantage of being concretely linked to more specific conditions of the 13th century than hitherto suggested. My argument, in contrast, is less concrete and thus may

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12. For example, Ström believes that in the 10th century «the struggle for power, lasting through several generations, between the Norwegian royal house and the dynasty of the jarls of Northern Norway» (1988, p. 456) produced a plethora of skaldic poetry that overwhelmingly supported the case of the *jarls*, in particular Hákon Jarl's (937-995) case against Ólafr Tryggvason and Ólafr Haraldsson. However, I would like to recall that when the struggle eventually terminated with the victory of the royal dynasty, these skaldic texts were no longer preserved in Norway, probably because no longer necessary and certainly because grossly at clash with the now dominating Christianity. The texts are mostly known to us from the Icelandic compilations, in particular Snorri's *Edda*.

seem weaker in the sense that it does not refer to concrete relations between specific texts and specific power-holders. However, beyond the matters of defending by verbal products the positions of particular power-holders in conflict with their peers, my contention is that the texts eventually created, even if not intended to do so, *social agreements* and consequently *increased social capital*.<sup>13</sup> While there is no contradiction between the arguments, they do present somewhat different perspectives. In Kristinsson's view *each division* had to make an utmost effort to produce self-images for self-legitimation. My contention is that the *totality* of the production may have helped create the overall balance of power which is basically what we normally call «social pacts» without which society as a whole, and not just certain of its members, would not survive. In other words, my argument is that the accumulated «noise» generated by those texts actually produced social energy, meaning access to resources and a network of sustained interactions.

A support for this view as a whole I dare say to have found in an exceptional insight – by some sort of a closer insider – about the relation between textual efflorescence and textual decline in connection with status and power struggles. I am referring to the 19th century Jón Espolin, «Bailiff of the Skagarfjord County», who made a heroic effort to revive historical records mostly for the periods when there was no longer interest in continuing the records or anything like the older texts. In his preface to the second volume of his monumental *Íslands árbækur í söguformi* («Iceland's Annals in a Narrative Form»), he briefly expressed the view that security in power makes texts and records dispensable. In his view, the fact that after the death of so many people in the plague of 1402-1404 wealth accumulated at the hands of so few made these very few so secure in their social positions that they no longer had to toil for keeping it against competitors.<sup>14</sup> Actually, this may also be a correct de-

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13. As for the function of this kind of industry in generating cultural capital, see TULINIUS 2004, esp. pp. 8-12.

14. «Enn í hinni xvdu öndverðri kom plágann mikla, féll þá allr forn dugnadr, ok allt atferli af fólksfæd, enn sumir menn urdu sva audugir, at þeirra gætti einna samann í landinu, ok þurftu ei at ástunda fornra manna yðun, þó mannfólkid fjölgadi nokkuð apr, því féð vann fyrir. Við þat aflagðist allr áhugi til annars frama enn auds, ok giörðist vanþekking mikil um allt þat er ádr var, ok hyrduleysi á því at terkna upp þat er á þeirra dögum skedi, ok hverskyns lærdomsléysi, enn rostr urdu þat at eins, er rikismönnum, fraendum eda mágum bar samann um fiár edr arfadeilr, ok efdust þær því meira, sem þeir fiölgudu meira, ok urdu fiærskyldari» (ESPOLIN 1823, «Formáli» [no page number]; the quotation is brought here in its original spelling). «But during the first half of the 15th century a great plague struck, consequently all earlier vigor disappeared, but some men became so wealthy that they were the only ones of significance in the country, and did not have to work as people did in the earlier days, even if the population grew again, since the capital worked for them.

scription of the situation that had prevailed during the first generations after the settlement.

According to the accepted dating of the Icelandic texts, they did not emerge immediately at the early time of the settlement, but at a much later time, in the 12th century and onwards. Social arrangements also took some time to crystallize. The most significant event in the emergence of social order, the foundation of the *Alþingi*, did not take place until 930, which is more than 60 years after the believed first colonization. A comparison with other societies, from the deepest antiquity to much later periods, shows that this is by no means unique. Even in such cases presented as organized mass migration and conquests, like the exodus of the Israelites and their conquest of the Land of Canaan, or the Magyars' exodus to conquer the Basin of Pannonia (896-900),<sup>15</sup> social arrangements and text production took several generations to crystallize. I believe that Birgitta Wallace's phrasing would be perfect here: «A colony is not created overnight. [...] Developing further settlement and freeing up labor for new enterprises takes time, especially in a hitherto uninhabited area» (WALLACE 2009, p. 116).

If we adopt the current hypothesis that proposes a relation between competition and the need to make socio-cultural arrangements, then clearly the first settlers may not have got involved in fierce competition because there was sufficient arable land for all, a situation that unavoidably changed in subsequent generations, when large land properties had to be divided between many offspring, border conflicts intensified and clashes of interests grew wildly. In addition, although writing was known in the runic alphabet, only the decision to become part of the Christian world – thus entering into relations of comparison, competition and interaction with various centers in Europe (like Paris, Rome or Hamburg) – enabled the Icelanders, as well as actually pressured them,

Consequently, (people) were only interested in wealth, and became very ignorant about how things were before, and uninterested in reporting (?) what happened in their own times, and lacked education, but (life) became ferocious as officials, cousins or brothers-in-law disputed over cash or inheritance, and (these classes) were more fierce as they grew in number and the parties were more distant relatives». (I am grateful to Jón Karl Helgason for the translation of this passage).

15. Hungarian historiography names the Magyar conquest of Pannonia «Land-taking» (*Honfoglalás*, «the settlement in the fatherland», literally: «the taking of the home»). It is not a mediaeval notion but rather a modern coinage, probably on the basis of the German *Landnahme* (RÓNA-TAS 1999, p. xviii), though others contest that (I am grateful to Górgy Kálmán for this communication). The first historical works, notably Simon of Keza's *Gesta Hungarorum*, were produced in Hungary in the 13th century (VESZPRÉMY, SCHAEER 1999), that is, about three hundred years after the settlement.

to engage in written textual production. The need to go through all of the procedures to establish themselves (as described above) thus did not prevail until roughly the 12th century, when history and other stories were consequently written in accordance with the contemporary views and priorities.

Some scholars, such as Callow (2006), raise doubts about the acceptability of the dating of the texts discussed above. In his view, some texts may have been produced earlier than thought. On the other hand, as mentioned above, others no longer accept the canonical history of Icelandic settlement propounded by the canonized texts. In their view, the group that originally settled in Iceland may not have been the one that eventually created order and imposed its memory through its texts. Whatever might be the case, growing rivalry and conflagration of clashing interests gradually paved the way for the creation of hegemonic versions about origins and about families. These were designed to eliminate all other voices, whether those of the possibly original descendants of the first settlers, or more plausibly those of the other contemporary contenders.

While an emerging society may quickly need to establish agreements, if, on the other hand, dominant agents immediately take the lead without the others' ability to contest, then those agents do not need to account for their actions. It is only when society proliferates and disagreement grows as a result of a larger population and larger density combined with diminishing resources (like land, water, and pastures) that the need for agreements begins to be pressuring. This process in Iceland was slow (KRISTINSSON 2010, p. 219), but around 1200 there was a «rather sudden breakthrough of elitization [...] when the level of wealth among the richest men increased about tenfold in just a few decades, [which] seems to have been the result of a positive feedback loop between the concentration of wealth and the concentration of power» (p. 219).

However, since the leaders have not been able, or had no interest, to devise a central power state like the Scandinavian ones, the need for persuading and demonstrating one's prominence, including by verbalism that appeals to peoples' imagination and emotions, must have been bigger than elsewhere. «Without central power to execute law and order, true power rested with networks of kinship and allegiance. Social and political survival depended on the number of allies that could be mustered in times of conflict» (VÉSTEINSSON ET AL. 2002, p. 19).

## FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS?

## BY WHOM AND HOW THE TEXTS WERE CONSUMED

The discussion of texts quite often stops at the level of production (and producers' intentions). The type of questions raised in this paper does not allow contending with text consumption taken for granted. The very essence of my argument has been that the Icelandic texts served for communal and public purposes, even when motivated by individual or group interests. Without «target audience» it would make no sense to support such an argument, as it would *ipso facto* become void of any meaning. I do not pretend that this is an easy question to answer. After all, generations of scholars have been engaged with this question for a large variety of text productions all over the globe. However, I believe that it simply cannot be ignored. What is meant by «consumption», however, should not be confounded with literary scholarship ideas about «reception» (as in Vodička's *reception history*<sup>16</sup> or Hans-Robert Jauss's later *Rezeptionsästhetik*). There are no «texts» here to be «read» as «literary works of art» by individual «readers» but stories to be communicated, through reading or in various degrees of oral performance, to sought after groups and individuals whose consent and support are solicited.

Assertions about the purpose of texts to confer legitimacy, and hence justify often dubious actions, permeate not only literary but also historical and philological scholarship. These texts are thus explained in the light of their assumed purpose. For example, «The entire Ögödei story is a later interpolation which served purely the legitimacy of the Tolui branch»,<sup>17</sup> explains Róna-Tas (1999, pp. 417-418) in his discussion of the story of the puzzling ascent to power of Genghis Khan's second son Ögödei instead of his elder brother, who supposedly ceded his primogeniture. However, Róna-Tas, as so many others, typically finds it unnecessary to explain who the people are from whom consent to this act as legitimate is solicited. Although the story appears in a passage in the rather obscure 13th century *Secret History of the Mongols*, it seems that the question of the sought after target group and the conjectured ways by which it has been reached to be convinced does not constitute a problem that calls for some elucidation. This example could be multiplied, and it therefore seems to me imperative to try and avoid falling into the same trap with our hypotheses about textual efflorescence.

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16. See Galan's illuminating discussion (GALAN 1982).

17. This refers to the family of Tolui, the youngest son of Genghis Khan, whose line ruled Outer and Inner Mongolia from 1251 to 1635, and Outer Mongolia until 1691.

The methods often used for checking the use of texts rely on various sorts of evidence. One method is accumulating recorded written testimonies about the ways texts have been consumed. Another one is the existence of a significant number of copies. If the relevant texts were copied in schools as part of the curriculum (as is the case in the Sumerian, Egyptian or Akkadian and Babylonian schools), this may be taken as evidence of their high consumption. The physical condition of texts can also render some information about their use: in every library there is wear and tear of the books massively loaned and read. In Jewish tradition, texts that have reached a state of complete wear have not been thrown away but buried in the ground or cached in an attic.<sup>18</sup> A criterion that deserves to be explored, particularly in the Icelandic context, is Driscoll's suggestion (2004) about writings on the margins of manuscripts, recently vividly expounded by Schott (2010).

In the case of the Icelandic texts, we have got indeed some glimpses about habits of reading. Everyone knows the passage from *The Saga of the Sturlungs* about Þorgils Skarði who is asked by his host what kind of entertainment (*gaman*) he would prefer to have in the evening: «stories or dance». Þorgils chooses to hear the story about Thomas of Canterbury, and «var þá lesin sagan» (the story was read) to him (*Sturlungasaga*, Vigfússon's edition 1878, p. 245, ch. 314). However, the enthusiasm with which this passage has been repeatedly quoted has long been toned down (notably PÁLSSON 1962). In some views, however, it is not without value as it can be supported by what some scholars describe as a long continuity in Icelandic society to justify such conclusions.<sup>19</sup>

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18. The most famous example is the invaluable treasure of some 280,000 fragments of medieval texts that was found in the attic of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo around 1896; many of them were books of unquestionably high circulation.

19. «Manuscripts were read out loud in the Middle Ages, and as book ownership became more common in later centuries this custom continued, even after printing had begun. In his description of Iceland from 1590, Oddur Einarsson says that farmers in Iceland entertained and delighted their guests by reading for them for hours from the sagas. In the eighteenth century it was still the main form of leisure in the evenings to read the old Icelandic Sagas and recite ballads, a custom which continued into the twentieth century» (SIGURÐSSON 2004b, p. 8). In Jón Karl Helgason's opinion, «[t]he contemporary documentation of how these texts were utilized between 1300 and 1600 is scarce, but as Pálsson [1962] has convincingly illustrated, we may suppose that semi-public readings of family sagas and various forms of non-secular literature were a favourite pastime on Icelandic farms in this period. [...] This tradition of reading, which continued into the twentieth century, reveals how the typical Icelandic audience of the ancient sagas initially received these narratives in oral form. And just as individual scribes rewrote the manuscripts they were transcribing – adding and omitting words, sentences, verses and even passages – so one can imagine that each reading (or performance) of a particular manuscript would be different from another» (HELGASON 2008, pp. 65-66).

As for copying, there is «likelihood that more medieval manuscripts have been lost than preserved» (ÓLASON 2004, p. 32), not to mention the disastrous Copenhagen fire of 1728 that destroyed a number of manuscripts (though the major part of Árni Magnússon's collection survived intact or in paper copies). The current state of copies thus cannot be interpreted as a safe indication of consumption. It might not be insignificant that there are more copies of certain sagas, such as *Njál's Saga*, than of other texts. This possibly points to its higher popularity than other texts for which we have got only one copy. On the other hand, of a formative text like *Landnámabók* only five copies are extant today, and only two of them are full versions, though in 18th century paper copies. This criterion need thus also be handled very cautiously.

Finally we can plausibly infer much from the physical condition of the Icelandic manuscripts. Most of them, like the Cairo *Genizah* texts, are quite worn: the vellum is inflexible and the page tends to be dark. The text is not always easily legible either, because the characters are blurred or faded. All historians of the manuscripts have interpreted that as evidence of much use, and also because the manuscripts were «kept in sooty, damp turf-built farm-houses» (GUÐMUNDSDÓTTIR, GUÐNADÓTTIR 2004, p. 46), though other explanations have been suggested. This is normally contrasted with the current good condition of the Norwegian royal manuscripts, as well as the Icelandic manuscripts kept in Norway that have remained more flexible and lighter, plausibly because they were less frequently taken to be read, and at any rate used under much better conditions and by fewer individuals. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that we cannot know anything about the condition of the manuscripts in periods closer to their making, i.e., between the 12th and the 15th centuries. Their condition might have worsened even without connection with their use as reading material, since towards the end of the 18th century, when Árni Magnússon began collecting them, many of them were simply dumped in some unused storage. The revered precautions taken with the vellums are recent. 19th century saga philologists did not hesitate to try and read difficult lines with a wet finger, and even more technologically advanced methods like quartz lamps used in the 1940s by such a prominent saga scholar as Einar Ólafur Sveinsson are now considered harmful. In short, while the state of the vellums can be interpreted as evidence of their ample use in the last seven hundred years or so, it is not at all inferable that at the time discussed here their condition was so deteriorated.

It goes without saying that the popularity of texts need not be interpreted in terms of silent reading. Since antiquity, relatively few people



could read texts by themselves, and therefore these had to be read aloud to them (GITAY 1980, p. 191; REDFORD 1992, p. 66; SILVERMAN 1990; NIDITCH 1996): «even solitary readers, reading only to themselves, read aloud. [...] Reading was therefore oral performance whenever it occurred and in whatever circumstances. Late antiquity knew nothing of the ‘silent, solitary reader’» (ACHTEMEIER 1990, p. 16). Texts that were of particular importance to power-holders would be distributed publicly by such loud reading. This method could also better guarantee more attention and certainly more control over the audience. Obviously people need not really listen if coerced to attend such reading events, but few would stand temptation if the text happens to tell an attractive story, full of adventure, conflicts, hatred, love, and humor.

When Nehemiah, assisted by the priest Ezra, re-built – or some would say invented – the Jewish nation after the return from Babylonian exile, they set up public reading of the scriptures:

And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose [...]. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up. [...] [and] all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law (*Neh.*, 8, 4-9, King James Version).

One could say that in the above description, the Israelites that were summoned to the congregation became captive audience of the reading performance. What possible parallel could be conceived for the diffusion of the stories of the sagas?

If the texts indeed had to play a role and achieve some results (as clearly is the situation surmised by Axel Kristinsson) then one should need to reach interested listeners. Can we even entertain the idea that a hostile clan might wish to listen to stories about some rival clan with whom they have some feud? I believe that this is highly unlikely. I also believe that we must exclude the possibility that in the period discussed here the texts travelled freely, like modern books, around the country, with some mediaeval colporteur as it were or a travelling entertainer. Although some texts may have circulated in such ways, and some have found their way to remote countries, like Norway (KARLSSON 1979), we must recognize that the suggested propaganda or promotion was meant primarily not for adversaries but for *actual or potential allies and friends*. It was meant to reinforce their loyalty or at least gain their acquiescence, along the same lines that national texts began to play a role in creating cohesion and consent through massive diffusion by the modern European states since the end of the

18th century.<sup>20</sup> In Iceland, it was the power-holder who probably not only made it financially possible for someone to write, compile or copy texts, as well as provide the necessary expensive materials (vellum and ink), but also had the means to gather people for reading sessions.

Such sessions were often taking place in connection with feasts and banquets. «Feasting was a central part of the chiefly societies of the North-Atlantic, a means to cement bonds of friendship and dependence and to impress competitors, and reflects the prestige-based social economy of the settlement age» (VÉSTEINSSON ET AL. 2002, p. 19). In the banquets, many good dishes were served «that included sea fish, eggs, milk, cheese, lamb, beef and even some beer» (p. 19). I would like to add to the list of «sea fish, eggs, milk, cheese, lamb, beef and even some beer» also another important ingredient that has long been acknowledged – text performance. This is not to say that it was the most important component of the party, but it must have been a unique occasion to tempt people to listening.

#### IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

This study is not about the literary nature of texts, but rather an attempt to draw attention to their major function in the creation of social resources. Without such resources, human groups, whether large or small, cannot manage efficiently. Theories of social capital have suggested that in want of such capital there is more likelihood for a general failure in terms of survival and adaptation. Icelandic society between the 12th and the 14th centuries managed to generate complex socio-cultural arrangements under the tough conditions of absence of enforcement governance and growingly wild rivalry between local power-holders. It is the modern tradition of viewing texts and their production almost exclusively in the context of «literature» that often impedes understanding what powerful role they may have had in various crucial moments in human history. And Iceland had definitely one of such moments in the specified centuries. What happens with these texts in later centuries, the emergence of text compilations as precious goods, their recycling since the late 18th century for purposes of achieving prestige, and their use for the project of nation building are of course different historical chapters.

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20. See EVEN-ZOHAR 1996 on the function of texts in the making of the new European nations.

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