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Preservation and Immortality: The Transition From Oral to Written Culture in Iceland

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Abstract

The following article comes from Dr. Barbara Crass's *Anthropology 300: The Viking World* class during the Spring 2006 semester at UW Oshkosh. It is intended to provide insight on the transition from an oral to a written culture in Iceland. A set of necessary achievements appear to have been in place that were consistent with other cultures that have established written cultures. When these pieces were put together around the turn of the last millennium (circa 1100–1200 CE) they allowed the transition to occur. The main items of this change were Iceland's excellent history or narrative storytelling, an exceptional cast of storytellers and poets, and the introduction of the written word to the Icelanders by Christian missionaries.

A fire crackles as it throws a soft, orange and yellow glow onto those who sit around it. Some of the kinsmen sit, spinning and combing wool, others tend to mending their tools and weapons, while some simply sit and pay attention to the elder who speaks to them. The old man recounts the tale of his ancestors who fought valiantly against the Celtic tribes in Ireland; of how they interacted with the gods in attempt to seal their victory in battle; of how they drank every night with Odin in the halls of Valhalla. The storyteller is animated, throwing his arms through the air like flesh-bound specters. He uses his polytonous voice to add emphasis to the parts of the story he wants his audience to remember the most. He is the living and breathing history of his kinsmen; he is their link to the past and their hope for the future. The wrinkled and tired old man is a storyteller.

Such is a scene from Viking houses or camps from days gone by. It is no secret that the Northmen were of an oral culture. Their stories were not recorded in any concrete form, but preserved in the minds of those who told stories around the fire. Even the laws of the Vikings were stored in the consciousness of those deemed worthy to memorize them and proclaim them at the pseudo-governmental gatherings of the Thing. Eventually, though, there was a transition from their oral traditions to the "modern" traditions of the written word. How was such a transition facilitated and why? The Scandinavian peoples had survived for hundreds of years without the advent of the written word, so what made them change? In a word, Christianity.

To understand this transition, it is pertinent to first observe the oral traditions of the Vikings. The paradox, though, comes from the fact that an oral culture leaves no trace as it dies off. Inquisition must then come from either a continuing oral tradition passed down over the generations, or written accounts of a literary culture's past as an oral culture. In the case of the Vikings, it is the former that provides us with our knowledge; these are the sagas. From what we know, the Northmen were an oral culture until roughly 1000CE, but was that culture sufficient? In his book *Homo Narrans*, John Niles (1999) states, "when considered as a special kind of ritual performance, oral narrative has a strong capacity to sustain social memory. Storytelling

helps members of a group maintain an awareness of how the present is the result of past action” (p. 54). It would seem then, that an oral tradition allowed the Vikings to keep, in their minds, a sense of identity as well as their laws and customs. However, the Vikings seemed to have a contingency plan; their runes.

Runes constituted a very basic Viking alphabet. This alphabet, though, was inactive in the culture’s narrative history and laws. As *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* (2000) shows, “The primary function of runestones was for memorial purposes, but their use to record missionary work or document inheritance has also been suggested” (p. 67). It appears then, that runes were not involved in the more consistent or universally important aspects of Viking society. This is not surprising though, as Tony Allan in *The Vikings: Life, Myth, & Art* (2004) adds that runes were perceived by the Vikings to have magical powers. This belief possibly stems from their story of origin in which Odin himself attained the secret of writing by hanging himself on Yggdrasil and gashing his side with his own spear (p. 26–27). In *Ring of Seasons*, Terry Lacy (1998) adds to the runes’ mysticism; after they were carved into wood or stone, “the runes were then accentuated with dye or blood and a formula spoken over them to empower them. The rune stick could then be carried for protection” (p. 105). It becomes clear that runes were not viewed as a predecessor of an overarching written language, but something closer to sorcery. Lacy (1998) continues:

In a day and age when relatively few could write, the mere use of runes or letters, even for normal communication, was magical, and the Latin of the church was similarly a magical code to the uninitiated. Thus many of those reputed to be sorcerers in Icelandic history were churchmen. (p. 106)

Even as they neared a written culture, Vikings apparently viewed literature (or the written word) as more magic than science.

Other aspects of the Vikings’ oral traditions were the orations of their myths and the practices of their religion. These too, however, can only be viewed clearly in correlation to the introduction of the society’s literacy. It is no secret that this introduction went hand in hand with the adoption of Christianity.

Most (if not all) of the Vikings’ written works have come from Iceland. It is then important to study the island’s contributions and access to literature. In light of this, Lacy (1998) states:

With the advent of Christianity in 1000 as Iceland’s religion, the church brought the concept of schools, the Latin alphabet, and Gregorian chants as part of the mass...literacy and the ability to write became widespread. Chieftains and others were authors and farm-houses were centers for producing and copying manuscripts. (p. 34)

Common knowledge proposes that the acceptance of Christianity was not an instantaneous event. There are familiar stories of how the Vikings would pray to God on land, but set their fates in the hands of Thor at sea. The transitional pagans also wore two-sided amulets; one side being a Christian cross, the other Thor’s hammer. Allan (2004) adds, “the effects of the switch were gradual but profound, affecting all aspects of Norse culture. Conversion was accompanied by a shift...from an oral culture to one based on writing” (p. 113). Eventually (as previously stated) the nation of Iceland adopted Christianity as a whole. Even Thorgeir Thorkelsson, a well respected Law

Speaker at the time, “tossed his images of the old gods over the beautiful falls in the north still called Godafoss, waterfall of the gods,” says Lacy (1998, p. 101).

Jack Goody in *The Power of the Written Tradition* (2000) states that, “even cultures without writing may be influenced by the products of written cultures—for example, by their religions of conversion. Features associated with the existence of a text may be transmitted to individuals and cultures that do not possess writing” (p. 48–49). This was certainly the case in late Viking Age Iceland. The introduction of Christianity and subsequent literature had set the wheels in motion. No longer would one have to remember and recount either the people’s stories or their laws. In the essay “Eddas and Sagas in Medieval Iceland,” Gisli Sigurdsson (2000) proclaims:

Law texts were among the first secular materials to be put in writing in the early twelfth century. A little more than a century after the coming of Christianity, the professional status of the orally trained *Loegsoegumathur* had been undermined; he could no longer decide which law was applicable but had to consult a book of law that was kept by the bishop. The direct transfer of power from the secular chieftain to the church is evident in this transition as well as the evolution from oral to written culture, and from the pagan heritage to the Christian world where the book had a central function. (p. 186)

The apparent shift in power to the church looks to be disheartening to the identity of Icelandic natives. They would, however, maintain their sense of identity by taking the Latin alphabet and adapting it to suit their own needs. Lacy (1998) explains, “the important thing is that almost all the extant books are written in Icelandic, not Latin” (p. 34), to which Sigurdsson (2000) adds, “the fact that Latin was not used for this literary production puts these works in the same class as the Irish sagas, the only other secular heroic prose literature in this part of the world that was written in the vernacular” (p. 186). It seems, then, that while the storyteller and the lawgiver were being phased out of Icelandic culture, authors, historians, and a more modern form of the lawyer (drawing their information from books rather than from memory) took their place. Sigurdsson explains that secular chieftains of 12th century Iceland also maintained their historical identity by compiling the *Book of Settlements*, an account of Icelandic settlement. Sigurdsson (2000) also states that Icelandic poets became sought-after commodities and traveled to the noble courts of Scandinavia and the British Isles to spin their tales or write new ones for their patrons. These works were then compiled by Icelandic politician Snorri Sturluson in the 13th century into a singular *Prose Edda* (a.k.a. *Snorra* or *Younger Edda*). The *Poetic Edda* of 1270 then preserved other myths of both Scandinavia and Germany (p. 186–187). In “Literary Backgrounds of the Scandinavian Ballad,” Vesteyinn Olason (1991) recalls another way these Icelandic people held on to their identity:

Literacy seems to have been more widespread there in the Middle Ages and in the following centuries than in the rest of Scandinavia. From the fourteenth century on many sagas—narrative prose genres composed or written down chiefly beginning in the thirteenth century—were retold in the uniquely Icelandic rhymed metrical form known as *rimur*. *Rimur*, which are clearly to be distinguished from ballads of the international type, were no doubt composed and

preserved with the aid of writing, but they have also been memorized, and in previous centuries they were probably often sung or chanted by illiterate people. (p. 119)

This evidence suggests, then, that the Icelandic people not only retained their heritage by retaining their native language, but that they also continued to perform their narratives in a traditional manner as well as committing them to parchment.

“Of the Vikings’ own literature, we have a rich inheritance of saga narratives, but most date from the later Middle Ages, when the distant descendants of the original Vikings huddled around a fireplace in an Icelandic winter, and told and retold tales of the glory days,” proclaims Jonathan Clements (2005) in *A Brief History of the Vikings* (p. 15). Clements (2005) also agrees that Sturluson was responsible for transcribing many of these ancient stories (p. 15–16). While it is true that the sagas can be viewed as a potential game of “Telephone” (in which the original message or form may be lost as it travels from person to person), it is undeniable that they hold the key to all we know of pre-literate Viking society. Not only do these sagas recount the histories of the Icelandic peoples, as Sigurdsson (2000) adds, but also, “around 1200 the earls in Orkney also got their saga as did the people of the Faeroes and Greenland, about whom the Icelanders wrote sagas along the same literary lines as about themselves” (p. 187). Sigurdsson (2000) continues that the accessibility to the sagas appeals to not only historians and anthropologists, but the laymen as well:

These fascinating sagas are not only exceptionally well-composed pieces of literature, but more easily accessible to the modern reader than the medieval literature known from most other countries. The world that the sagas describe is so coherent and often so realistic that many readers are tempted to regard them as descriptions of real life even though they were supposed to have taken place two or three hundred years before they were written. Genealogies in one saga match those in another, and the same chieftains appear in various sagas; the same laws and customs appear in unrelated sagas, which reinforces the impression that they are describing a real society that can be reconstructed by using the sagas as field reports. Characters from the sagas are also not only literary prototypes, as is often the case in heroic literature, but more like people of flesh and blood who seem as familiar as our old schoolmates. (p. 187)

In short, the sagas provide both a semi-reliable (often entertaining) and accessible view of the Viking world. Theodore Andersson adds in *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins* (1964):

The sagas cannot have been written as scholarly exercises for a limited group of literati, and they cannot have contained matter which was foreign to the audience. The numerous parchments of *Njals saga* attest the reception accorded even this genealogical colossus. To account for such a popularity we must assume that there was some kind of rapport between saga and listener (or reader). (p. 89)

Not only are these sagas accessible now, but they were also quite popular in the time of their first production.

So where did these sagas come from? There are several theories in scholarly circles that both conflict and meld. Lacy (1998) observes:

The question of how much extant versions of the eddaic poems and sagas owe to oral tradition and how much they were the work of very able authors remains unresolved. Icelandic oral tradition certainly preserved a considerable core of knowledge of past events. Building on this core, the authors of the sagas composed tales as dramatic as any to be found. (p. 38)

Goody (2000) adds, “It is often assumed that classical ritual texts, like recitations such as Homer’s epics or the Vedas, went through a previous existence as utterances handed down from the immemorial past in largely the same form, and that these were simply transferred to the new channel when writing became available” (p. 47). There is no doubt then that oral traditions could have at least inspired the authors of the sagas. However, these oral narratives were, perhaps, not the only inspiration for the writers. Andersson (1964) explains that the *Landnamabok* (another term describing the text of settlement in Iceland) can be seen as inspiration as well. He says, “the de-emphasis of oral tradition in modern saga research has been accompanied by increased attention to the possibility that the thirteenth-century saga writers leaned heavily on written sources. Among the documents available to them *Landnamabok* occupies a prominent position” (p. 83). The loophole in this argument is that it has been previously stated that these records of settlement were themselves the product of oral traditions. This would lead then to the idea of the sagas still being based on oral traditions, only once removed. Andersson (1964) continues to develop his theory to allow a combination of both oral and written traditions:

This combination of written and oral sources is slippery ground for bookprose. One wonders whether there is more than a difference of phrasing between the hypothesis that a saga and *Landnama* drew on separate oral traditions and the hypothesis that a saga changed *Landnama* on the basis of oral traditions. In either case the deviation is ultimately oral. The latter hypothesis supposes that the author of *Laxdaela saga*, for example, had oral traditions which were so secure that his confidence in them enabled him to disregard his written *Landnama*. In the first place this speaks for a firm, not necessarily reliable, oral tradition. The written legacy stemming from the revered father of Icelandic historiography was with some probability a strictly controlled tradition, which was not tampered with lightly. In the second place it is questionable to what extent a saga writer was really dependant on *Landnama* when he had alternate sources which he felt to be more trustworthy. In calculating the relationship between *Landnama* and the sagas the divergencies should weigh at least as heavily as the congruencies, which may, after all, have a basis in fact. (p. 87)

It seems, then, that Andersson acknowledges the possibility of both oral and written influences on the sagas. Though to what degree either of them played appears to be case specific to each author. He does, however, conclude:

The writer undoubtedly could and did use written sources, supplementary oral sources, his own imagination, and above all his own

words, but his art and presumably the framework of his story were given him by tradition. The inspiration of the sagas is ultimately oral. (1964, p. 119)

Now, with the modes of inspiration observed, it is important to inspect the methods or theories of saga inspiration. Lacy (1998) states, "Based on oral tradition but masterfully expanded, these sagas recount events as they were believed to have taken place" (p. 40). This statement suggests that the sagas were at least rooted in actual historical events or people. Andersson (1964) agrees, "The allusions to saga telling in the sagas have always been regarded as genuine in so far as they indicate some kind of oral tradition" (p. 110). He continues, "Let us imagine how much belief a saga of George Washington, ostensibly fashioned from what 'some men say' would enlist. In order to have any power to convince, such allusions must have a basis in reality" (p. 111). In *Principles for Oral Narrative Research*, Axel Olrik (1992) observes:

Just to declare that a legend has historical basis can cause difficulties. Within the actual 'folk legends' one will, however, find support for such a claim in the features of the legend that approach verisimilitude, in its intimate knowledge of places and circumstances that are unimportant to the plot, and finally, in the fact that people consider themselves to be descendants of the character in question (preferably with a knowledge of the intermediary links). (p. 114)

If what has been observed about the ultimately oral narrative being the inspiration for the sagas, Olrik's statement adds proof to those of Andersson and Lacy. However, Andersson (1964) believes there is more than one slant (other than the author's or patron's) in perspective of the messages and undertones of the sagas, "The new school, consistent with its tenets, places much emphasis on the Christian ground from which the sagas sprang" (p. 113), adding, "how well does the miracle of Njall's saintly glow and unsung state jibe with the rest of the saga? Phrased another way, is *Njals saga* the work of an Icelander steeped in hagiography?" (p. 114). What he is suggesting is that there may be a subtle (or not-so-subtle) undertone of the justification of Christianity. This is entirely possible as Christianity has often found a way to wedge itself into local (read: pagan) cultures in order to more easily and efficiently convert them.

The sagas portray what could possibly be viewed as a culture's natural progression from oral to written traditions. Whether it was the people of Iceland, the Native Americans, or some other group, it is apparent that any "modern" culture eventually moves into the literate sphere of the world. Yes, there are some cultures on this planet that have yet to develop their own written language, but it is apparent that these cultures could be classified as "primitive" in comparison to others. In the aftermath of attaining their written culture, Icelandic and Norse sagas have become the basis for Scandinavian ballads according to Bengt Jonsson's (1991) "Oral Literature, Written Literature: The Ballad and Old Norse Genres." While not necessarily a regression, this shows that there is a strong tie among the people to their traditional oral culture. It is a tie very similar to those Native American tribes that continue to hold powwows and pass their stories to younger generations even after their assimilation into the written world. Lacy also states that Sturluson's, "*Prose Edda* is required reading in Icelandic schools to this day" (p. 35). Again, a strong link to the rich literary

history of the island nation. As for why the Icelandic people made their transition when they did, Niles (1999) states:

A poem of both the length and the exceptional verbal artistry of *Beowulf*, I have argued, could not have come into being as a material text without the converging of three things: a well-developed tradition of oral narrative poetry, an individual person with great verbal skills and literary imagination, and an efficient technology of book-making. (p. 196)

Iceland in the 12th and 13th centuries certainly met those criteria. It is clear that it had an oral history stretching back for hundreds of years. The authors of the sagas, court poets, and Sturluson have proven themselves to be exceptionally skilled in literature; and the introduction of Christianity, bringing the written word (and the people to write them) allowed for the ability to produce the works. The final piece of the puzzle was put into place with the adoption of Christianity. Why did the Icelandic people make the transition from oral to written culture when they did? They were simply ready.

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