

# THE LATIN OF THE NORTH



## Arngrímur Jónsson's *Crymogæa* (1609) and the Discovery of Icelandic as a Classical Lan- guage

By Gottskálk Jensson, University of Iceland

*Icelandic purism was first articulated in Crymogæa (Hamburg 1609), the earliest modern history of Iceland. The author, Arngrímur Jónsson, argues in Latin that Icelandic is the ancient tongue of Northern-Europe, only Icelanders use it unspoiled and thus it behooves them to preserve it. By redefining the vernacular, and advocating that its pristine state be maintained by reading MSS “full of ancient puritas and elegantia”, he can be seen to transfer onto it principles from the humanist reform of Latin, locally represented e.g. by a textbook in Latin elegantia, associated with his headmastership of the cathedral school at Hólar.*

### Latin Humanism and Icelandic Language Purism

Arngrímur “the learned” (1568–1648) was Iceland’s foremost humanist. He earned his by-name partly for his headmastership of the cathedral school at Hólar, the northern diocese of Iceland, and partly for his contribution to the early history of Scandinavia and Greenland, in historical treatises and anthologies of vernacular literature translated into Latin.<sup>1</sup> Chiefly known, until recently, for his defence of Iceland and Icelanders against ‘slanderous’ publications that circulated in his time, and for providing Danish historiographers with information about Icelandic medieval sources for Scandinavian history, he was the first among his countrymen to have his Latin writings published abroad and widely read by European scholars.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The best survey of Arngrímur’s life and works is Jakob Benediktsson’s Introduction to his edition of the Latin works (Jakob Benediktsson 1957: 1-140).

<sup>2</sup> Arngrímur’s polemics, in his *Brevis Commentarius de Islandia* (Hafniæ 1593), against a poem on Iceland by Gories Peerse, a captain on the trading route between Hamburg and Iceland, should be read in the context of the fall of the Hanseatic League, and subsequent imposition by the Danish regime of trade monopoly with Iceland (see Gottskálk Jensson

Arngrímur, who has a patronym but no surname, occupies an important place in the reception of medieval saga literature, because he was the first to transform thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saga narrative into history proper as understood by early-modern historiographers. During his university years in Copenhagen and his travels to Germany later in life, Arngrímur encountered influential Danish and German historiographers and theologians, whose views regarding history and historiography he largely adopted. One of these men, David Chytraeus (1530–1600), a student of Melanchthon and a professor in Rostock, encouraged him to write a history of Iceland.<sup>3</sup> Other learned men of the time he only knew from their printed books, such as the French theorist of history, law and government Jean Bodin (1530–1596), who provided him with a philosophy of history for his *Crymogæa sive Rerum Islandicarum Libri III* (1609).<sup>4</sup>

The neologism “Crymogæa” is intended to render the name of Iceland in Greek. In this treatise Arngrímur argues in Latin that contemporary Icelandic is the ancient tongue of the North, i.e., of northern Europe, and not simply a vernacular. Only Icelanders use it unspoiled, he claims, while neighboring peoples have corrupted it, and thus it behooves Icelanders to preserve its pristine state. It was here the doctrine of Icelandic purism – perhaps the single most characteristic feature of Icelandic culture today – was first articulated in print.<sup>5</sup> With the important exception of the use of neologisms to replace foreign loan-words, *Crymogæa*’s doctrine of purism still holds today as official language policy in Iceland, i.e., after having been adopted by nationalist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Arngrímur’s rationale for advancing this fateful doctrine has not received the attention it deserves. As we shall see, it is no coincidence that Icelandic purism originates in a humanist treatise. In fact, its initial conception cannot be fully comprehended without taking into consideration the Latin discourse of the humanists. Arngrímur’s language purism is a logical result of a number of contemporary and recycled ideas about the status of the Icelandic language with respect to the ancient biblical languages on the one hand, and

---

2003, 62-3). *Brevis Commentarius* was reprinted in 1598 in Richard Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations of the English Nation*.

<sup>3</sup> Jakob Benediktsson 1957, 11. David Chytraeus had himself attempted to write a description of Iceland; see Helge Bei der Wieden 1993.

<sup>4</sup> On the uses made of Bodin by Arngrímur, see Gottskálk Jensson 2005.

<sup>5</sup> However, as Kjartan G. Ottósson has shown, Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson (1542–1627) of Hólar, who was a kinsman and close collaborator of Arngrímur, had earlier opposed ‘broken language’ in his prefaces to the first complete Icelandic Bible translation (1584) and the first complete hymn book (1589), and encouraged authors of Christian literature to cultivate the vernacular. The bishop does not, however, articulate a full-blown doctrine of purism (Kjartan G. Ottósson 1990).

the vernaculars on the other, which proved to be of paradigmatic consequence for the fledgling discipline of *Antiquitates Boreales*.

Over half a century ago, wishing to explain the origin of Arngrímur's theory and practice of language purism, Jakob Benediktsson observed that "increased interest in the vernaculars and language purification followed everywhere in the wake of humanism".<sup>6</sup> He did not, however, elaborate further or elucidate what, precisely, in humanism stimulated such increased interest. Scholars after him have accepted as more or less self-evident this notion of an influence of humanism on Arngrímur's language purism.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Historical Dialectic of Latin and the Vernaculars**

To explain how Latin humanism and Icelandic purism hang together, one must advance beyond the parochial context and look at the historical dialectic of Latin and the vernaculars in the European perspective at large. In Latin letters regular attempts to return to the origins had, already in medieval times, shaped ideas about the vernaculars and their status with respect to ancient languages such as Latin itself. In western and central Europe during the Middle Ages, and for many centuries afterwards, Latin was either the sole or the predominant language of the Christian Church and formal education. In Iceland, the vernacular did not replace Latin completely in the performance of Church functions until the early eighteenth century, while the primacy of Latin in education was upheld until the twentieth century. It was in the shadow of this overpowering "empire of a sign", to borrow François Waquet's happy phrase, that the vernaculars came to their own as written languages.<sup>8</sup> From Latin they borrowed the alphabet, ideas about correctness, form and style, and only in intense dialogue with it did they develop into the well-functioning literary media that they eventually became.

An instructive example of the dialectic between Latin and the vernaculars is the creation of the various written forms of the Romance languages and the formal separation of these languages from Latin. The written Romance languages developed relatively late (French in the ninth, Italian and Spanish in the tenth century), compared to the earliest written forms of the northern vernaculars (Old Irish and Old English in the seventh, Old High German and Old Breton in the eighth century).<sup>9</sup> Literary texts in Italian do not appear until the twelfth century, about the same time as Icelanders begin to write Old Norse.

---

<sup>6</sup> Jakob Benediktsson 1953, 117.

<sup>7</sup> Halldór Halldórsson 1979, 77; Sverrir Tómasson 1998, 299; Svavar Sigmundsson 1990–1991, 128–30; Jóhannes B. Sigtryggsson 2003, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Waquet 2001. Her phrase is, of course, an adaptation of Barthes' "Empire des signes".

<sup>9</sup> Herren 1996, 122–123.

A by-product of the reform of Latin in Carolingian times was a new distinction between Latin and Romance. Before the Carolingian reestablishment of Latin education, Latin and Romance were pronounced more or less in the same manner. As long as Latin read aloud sounded like the spoken language, according to Roger Wright, there was no need to make the distinction or to invent a specific writing system for Romance: “Carolingian scholars established the phonetic distinction around the year AD 800 as part of the educational reforms, in order initially to standardize the performance of the Church offices, and ... the Latin–Romance distinction is only clearly felt subsequent to those innovations”.<sup>10</sup> A historical dialectic with Latin, although of a slightly different character, can also be seen to contribute to the formation of a new paradigm for the Icelandic vernacular.

By means of the many new printed editions of Latin texts, which, unlike the manuscripts of previous centuries, were mechanically produced and all alike, language usage and orthography could be standardized as never before. The printing of vernacular texts which had the authority to set a standard, primarily law codices and Bible translations, offered a similar opportunity. The prerequisite of this revolution was, of course, the spread of two inventions, paper and printing. In Iceland, the age of paper and printing began before the middle of the sixteenth century, with the first printing press at Hólar in 1530. Not much later Icelanders began to have access for the first time to printing presses abroad. The New Testament translation of Oddur Gottskálksson is printed in Roskilde in 1540.

A large-scale production of printed books did not, however, begin until Bishop Guðbrandur and his associate Arngrímur took over as leaders of the Melanchthonian school-reform in the northern diocese of Iceland, and implemented this long-overdue reform, the legal framework of which had been in place soon after the Reformation. To be operative, both the reformed church and the school of Hólar urgently needed books. Arngrímur, who was rector of the cathedral school of Hólar from 1589 to 1595, and associated with the school in one capacity or another for the rest of his life, thus became a key figure in the production of printed books at Hólar.

In Iceland around 1600, the printing of books in the vernacular seems to have required not only a degree of standardization of usage and orthography, but also, more importantly, a valorisation of the language itself. At the time, the latter could apparently best be achieved through elevation of the status of the vernacular according to the ubiquitous paradigm of Latin, and accommodation to the tastes and attitudes associated with the humanist

---

<sup>10</sup> Wright 1991, 109, who thus summarizes his argument in the relevant chapter of *Late Latin and Early Romance in Spain and Carolingian France* (1982).

Latin of the new schools. We find that Arngrímur, beside his involvement with book production in the vernacular, also had a hand in the compilation and printing of three basic schoolbooks in Latin for the cathedral school at Hólar, which were issued there from 1616: *Grammatica Latina, Nomenclator Latino–Islandicus* and *Elegantiarum Latini Sermonis Præceptiones Aliqvot*.<sup>11</sup> The last work is especially interesting with regard to the ideal of purified Latin, which Arngrímur and other Icelandic schoolmasters held up for their pupils. It is a reprint of a publication that Georg Vogelmann, rector of the Latin school of Dortmund, had issued in 1559 and that had been reprinted frequently.<sup>12</sup> It consists of 67 *regulæ* (rules) for writing “incorrupta propriissimaque Latinitas” (incorrupt and most proper Latinity) with examples from “boni authores” (good authors), i.e. ancient authors, primarily Cicero, although a notable exception from that rule is the inclusion of a few examples from the pen of Erasmus of Rotterdam.<sup>13</sup> A few Icelandic sentences for translation into Latin, such as “Alla þá oss hafa vel tilgiört, eigum vier ad elska, & einkum vora Skóla-meistara” (34r), show that the text has to some extent been adapted and supplemented at Hólar.<sup>14</sup> This work could be termed a textbook in Latin language purification. Many of its kind were compiled for use in Latin schools, ultimately modelled on the magisterial treatise of the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457), *Elegantiarum Linguae Latinae Libri Sex*, finished in 1444, and printed in numerous editions in subsequent decades.

---

<sup>11</sup> Copies of these works were “used up” in the literal sense of the words. *Grammatica Latina* is now found in only one copy at the Royal Library in Copenhagen; see Sigurður Pétursson 1996, 274–276. *Nomenclator Latino–Islandicus* has completely vanished, but is referred to in letters by Arngrímur Jónsson (15 August 1626) and Þorlákur Skúlason (29 August 1643) to the Danish polymath Ole Worm, cf. Worm’s letters (Jakob Benediktsson (ed.) 1948, 308–309). *Elegantiarum Latini Sermonis Præceptiones Aliqvot* only exists in the handwritten copy of Halldór Hjálmarsson from about 1800, preserved in the manuscript collection of the National Library of Iceland (ÍB 390 4to): *ELEGANTiarUM Latini sermonis Præceptiones aliqvot in Gratiam studiosæ Juventutis collectæ, cum Ciceronianis tum aliorum bonorum authorum Exemplis illustratæ, omnibus incorruptæ propriissimæque Latinitatis cupidis utiles & necessariae | Auctore | M. Georgio Vogelmanno. | Legisse juverit | Qvintilian. | Curandum est, ut qvam optime dicamus. | In usum Scholæ Holanæ | Anno | M.DC.XVI*. Apart from the final sentence, the text of the title page is identical to at least one later edition of this work, published in Nuremberg in 1669.

<sup>12</sup> The only edition I have inspected, old enough to have been the model of the Hólar edition, is the Hildesheim edition from 1600, at the Royal Library in Copenhagen. On Vogelmann, cf. Jöcher’s *Allgemeines Gelehrten-Lexicon*.

<sup>13</sup> Other examples come from the works of Suetonius, Quintilian, Tertullian, Valerius Maximus, Catullus, Ovid, Pliny the Younger, Sallust and Livy.

<sup>14</sup> According to the textbook, “one should thus render charmingly in Latin” (*ita venuste Latinitate donaveris*) this sentence: *Cum omnes bene de nobis meritos amare debemus, tum maxime præceptores nostros*.

Despite being widely disseminated, Valla's treatise was considered too long and difficult to be appropriate for use in schools, and was often epitomized, abbreviated and revised. One such abbreviated edition, *In Laurentii Vallæ Elegantiarum Libros Epitome*, was made by Erasmus himself, which may explain why Vogelmann bestows upon Erasmus the singular honour of citing him alone of all medieval and Neo-Latin authors. Erasmus' *Epitome* was, in turn, often revised and published with additions, and in one case at least (Cologne 1546) printed together with an "assortment of sordid words" (*farrago sordidorum uerborum*), i.e. a list of words that should not occur in the new purified Latin discourse of the humanists.

Not only did Valla's ideal of Latin reject the possibility that any author after Boethius (480?–524) had written incorrupt and proper Latin, it also viewed as suspect the whole grammatical tradition from Isidore of Seville (560–636). There was clearly felt to be something new and exciting in this approach to acquiring Latin, though the ancient method of stylistic emulation had always advocated preparation through immersion by much reading of the works of the masters. That the method now seemed to promise something new may have had more to do with the availability of texts, printed and in manuscript, than with any new technique or pedagogical improvement. In the Hólar edition of *Elegantia Latini Sermonis*, the idea has been simplified and is now based on a set of rules about Latin usage, deduced from a large collection of phrases found in the works of "good" authors. The Vallan method seems to have developed into an attempt to reduce stylistic emulation or imitation to a formal system.

Vogelmann's *Elegantia Latini Sermonis* represent an urgent message in the study of Latin in Arngrímur's day, as is indicated by the upbeat tone of the work. The rules of the Hólar edition are presented in a pedagogic and exhortatory style. By following these rules, the *studiosus* (student) will learn to write *incorrupta* (incorrupt), *elegans* (elegant), *venusta* (charming), *polita* (polished), *gravis* (weighty), *ornate* (ornate) and *recta* (correct) Latin, in accordance with the usage of the masters of Latin style, and thus avoid *obscuritas* (obscurity) of language and the *reprehensiones* (reproaches) of erudite men. Although this was standard fare in the Latin schools of the time, Arngrímur's application of this Latin stylistics to the vernacular must count as innovation, especially since it resulted in his formulation of a doctrine of Icelandic purism. This was not, however, the first time Latin grammatical theory had been applied to the Icelandic vernacular.

### **Latin and the Icelandic Vernacular in the Middle Ages**

We have fairly reliable testimony about at least eight original works written in Latin by Icelanders between the twelfth and the fourteenth century,

though apart from a few Latin fragments this literature is only preserved in vernacular paraphrases. Only one text does not remain in some vernacular form. The relationship between Latin and the vernacular in Iceland was in no way remarkable, compared to other areas in western and central Europe, and Latin was certainly not unimportant or little used during this period.<sup>15</sup> Rather, it seems remarkable how much literature was composed in the vernacular. Writing in the vernacular began slowly; at first, texts were written using the Latin alphabet unmodified. But such texts made extraordinary demands on the reader, and ambiguities arose that in some cases could not be resolved. The anonymous so-called *First Grammatical Treatise* from the twelfth century, which deals with the adaptation and modification of the Latin alphabet to writing in the Icelandic vernacular, provides a fascinating insight into these difficulties, and proposes intelligent solutions to the problems. Further, already in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, pagan Latin poetry may have been replaced to some degree with skaldic verses in connection with teaching grammar and rhetoric in some Icelandic schools.<sup>16</sup> The consequence was a complex system of mixed poetics in the vernacular with rules from Latin versification applied to vernacular poetry. A prerequisite for the authoritative use of vernacular, both prose and poetry, seems to have been a deliberate accommodation to Latin literary culture.

The idea of some sort of parity between Latin and Old Icelandic had been articulated as early as the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, compiled by Óláfr Þórðarson (d. 1259). The first half of this treatise is largely a reworking of Priscian's *Institutiones Grammaticæ*, and the latter half has as its main source the last part of Donatus' *Ars major (de barbarismo)*. Óláfr reads Donatus as saying that there is only one *málslist* (art of discourse), which the Romans had learned in Greece and transferred into Latin. This Greco-Roman art of discourse, Óláfr Þórðarsson conjectures, is the same as that of Icelandic poetry, which, according to vernacular sources, had originally been acquired in Asia and then brought to the North by the god/hero Odin and his men and applied to the language of the North:

Í þessi bók [Dónati] má gjörla skilja, at öll er ein málslistin, sú er rómverskir spekíngar námu í Athenisborg á Griklandi, ok sneru síðan í latínúmál, ok sá ljóðaháttur ok skáldskapar, er Óðinn ok aðrir Asíemenn fluttu norðr hingat, þá er þeir bygðu norðrhálfu heimsins, ok kendu mönnum þesskonar list á sína tungu, svâ sem þeir höfðu skipat

---

<sup>15</sup> See Gottskálk Jensson 2004, 150-170.

<sup>16</sup> Guðrún Nordal 2001.

ok numit í sjálfu Asíalandi, þar sem mestr var fegrð ok ríkdómr ok fróðleikr veraldarennar.<sup>17</sup>

(From this book [of Donatus] it may be clearly understood that there is only one art of discourse, that which the Roman sages learned in Athens in Greece and then transferred to the Latin language, which is the same as the system of meters and poetry which Odin and other men of Asia brought here to the North, when they settled in the northern half of the world, and taught to men in their own tongue this manner of art, such as they had devised it and studied it in the country of Asia itself, where there was the greatest beauty, wealth and knowledge in the world).

This interpretive transfer is recognized by Óláfr himself as a case of *translatio studii*, a knowledge or a method transferred from Latin and applied to the vernacular with the justification that the Romans had done the same, originally, when they took it over from the Greeks. Additional support for the identification of the two discourse arts is derived from a widespread medieval construct, which in this particular variety postulates common origin for Scandinavians and Romans. The immediate purpose of the identification of the two discourse arts is to enable Óláfr to apply Donatus' teachings about barbarisms to poetry in the vernacular. As defined by the Latin grammatical tradition, barbarism is a corruption of the language, a lexical impurity of foreign origin. The *Third Grammatical Treatise* also gives its own peculiar version of how the linguistic term barbarism arose:

Barbarismus fèkk af því nafn, at þá er rómverskir höfðingjar höfðu unnið nálíga alla veröld undir sína tign, tóku þeir únga menn af öllum þjóðum, ok fluttu þá í Róm, ok kenndu þeim mæla rómverska tungu, þá drógu margir únæmir menn latínu eptir sínu eiginligu máli, ok spilltu svâ túngunni, kölluðu Rómverjar þann málslost Barbarismum, þvíat þeir nefndu allar þjóðir Barbaros, utan Girki og Latínnumenn. Barbari voru kallaðir fyrst af löngu skeggi ok saurgum búnaði þær þjóðir, er bygðu á háfum fjöllum ok þykkum skógum; þvíat svâ sem ásjóna þeirra ok búnaðr var úfagrígur hjá hæversku ok hirðbúnaði Rómverja, slíkt sama var ok orðtak þeirra ótogið hjá málsgreinum latínuspekinga. En því vildu Rómverjar at allar þjóðir næmi þeirra túngu, at þá væri kunnari þeirra tign, ok þó at ríkin skiptist, er stundir liði, mætti allt fólk vita, at þeirra forellri hefði Rómverjum þjónat.<sup>18</sup>

(Barbarism got its name from the fact that, when the Roman lords had subjected nearly the whole world under their authority, they took young men of all nations and brought them to Rome to teach them to

---

<sup>17</sup> *Edda* 1848-1887, 2: 94. Translations from Icelandic and Latin are my own.

<sup>18</sup> *Edda* 1848-1887, 2: 96

speak the Roman language. Many unperceptive men then spoke Latin in the manner of their own language and thus corrupted the tongue. This vice of language the Romans called barbarism, because they labelled all nations barbarians except the Greeks and the Latins. The original barbarians, tribes who lived on high mountains and in dense woods, were named after their long beards and filthy attire, because, just as their appearance and dress were unappealing beside the good manners and courtly dress of the Romans, so their utterances were unrefined compared with the discourse of the masters of Latin. But the Romans wished that all peoples might learn their tongue, so that their glory might be better known, and so that, should the kingdoms in time divide, all people would know that their forefathers had served Romans).

As is evident from this passage, medieval ideas in Iceland about what was incorrect, impure, or even “filthy” in the vernacular, paradoxically, had their origin in Latin attitudes vis-à-vis the vernaculars.<sup>19</sup> Transferring the ideal of linguistic purity from Latin to the Icelandic vernacular would thus implicitly seem to remove Icelanders from the disreputable category of Barbarians and classify them with Athenians and Romans. With this elevation comes, as an ideological baggage, the imperialistic ethos built into the ideal, as is clearly expressed in the passage: Linguistic purity equals high culture, which equals the ability to subjugate others and mark them as one’s subjects for generations to come. Already in thirteenth-century Iceland there was thus associated a promise of high culture and political dominance with the vernacular application of Latin grammar and rules to avoid barbarism.

That such an ideology should have appealed to Icelanders flies in the face of reality, considering the small size and poverty of the population. But we should not take Óláfr’s words to imply a specifically Icelandic ambition. At the time, Icelanders were busy writing the sagas of Norwegian kings, whose native language was virtually the same Old Norse dialect as that used by Icelanders. The Roman imperial ideology must have appealed to this Icelandic scholar only because he wrote as a representative of the people and culture of the North. At one point he mentions King Waldemar II of Denmark (d. 1241), whom he calls “his lord” (*minn herra*), saying that the king had compiled a runic inscription for him. The author’s wider Nordic identity may also be gathered from the unspecific geographical reference to the arrival of Odin and his men *norðr hín gat* (here to the North) in the first passage cited above. No vernacular source claims that Odin, the language maker and

---

<sup>19</sup> As far as I know, scholars have yet to identify a Latin source for this text about the origin of the term *barbarismus*, although the facile etymology that associates the term with Latin *barba* (beard) suggests itself easily.

mythical founder of Northern culture, ever visited Iceland, but the prose *Edda* and other texts state that he visited Saxony, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Such is the background, in Icelandic medieval grammatical scholarship, of Arngrímur's renaissance doctrine of language purism from around 1600.

The direct connection is easy to establish, since Arngrímur was in possession of the fourteenth-century vellum manuscript *Codex Wormianus* (AM 242 fol), containing the prose *Edda* with the *Grammatical Treatises*, which he later, in 1628, sent to the Danish professor Ole Worm (hence its name). The texts of this manuscript he used as sources to formulate his redefinition of the status and importance of contemporary Icelandic. Another primary source of ideas was Jean Bodin's *Methodus ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitionem*, an influential study first published in Paris 1566 and reprinted in thirteen editions between then and 1650. Arngrímur acknowledges extensive use of Bodin's *Methodus* throughout the *Crymogæa*. From Bodin Arngrímur took both definitions and basic paradigms, which he used to rewrite saga narrative into history in the humanist sense.

### **Gothicism, Runes and the Ancient Tongue of the North**

We find *Crymogæa*'s discussion of the Icelandic language in Book One, chapter three, which bears the title *De lingua gentis*. At the very start of the chapter, the author makes a daring statement: The language spoken in contemporary Iceland is not just Old Norse, but also a descendant of Old Gothic and has its own ancient alphabet, the runes, which Icelanders can still read, since the language of the runes is plain Icelandic:

De lingua Islandorum res ipsa loquitur esse Norvegicam; veterem inquam illam et genuinam, ex veteri Gothica, qua integrà soli nunc utuntur Islandi; eamque propterea Islandicam nuncupamus. ... Et literas quidem ea lingua duplices habuisse videtur: veteres scilicet et novas. Novæ sunt, quibus hodiè vulgo utimur, toti ferè Europæ nobiscum communes. Quæ quando primum in usu esse cæperint, non satis constat. Certe adhuc Cippi veteribus literis inscripti apud nostrates aliquot visuntur, quas literas etiam plurimi adhuc norunt leguntque et scribunt. Continenturque iisdem hæc ipsa lingua vernacula, nihil immutata.<sup>20</sup>

(Regarding the language of Icelanders, it is self-evident that it is Norwegian; I am referring to the old and original language, from Old Gothic, which Icelanders alone now use unchanged, and for this reason we call it Icelandic ... And this language seems indeed to have had

---

<sup>20</sup> Arngrímur Jónsson 1950-52, 2: 25.

two alphabets, i.e., an ancient one and a new one. The new one is the one used by everyone today, and shared by us with almost all of Europe. It is not known when the ancient one was first taken into use. One can certainly still see a few stones in our country inscribed with the old letters, and most men also know these letters and read and write them. Contained in these very letters is the vernacular language itself, wholly intact).

Arngrímur's assertion in this passage is implicated in the context of the sixteenth-century movement sometimes referred to as Gothicism. The seminal work of Gothicism is Johannes Magnus' massive *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sveonumque Regibus* (Rome 1554), written in Italy and published posthumously by his brother Olaus Magnus. In an attempt to link the history of the Nordic people with Holy Writ, Magnus made use of the hypothesis reported by Isidore in the *Etymologiae* 9. 2. 26–27 that the progenitor of the Goths was one of Japheth's sons, Magog.<sup>21</sup> Assuming that the Goths were the forefathers of the Swedes, with this direct genealogical link between them and Noah, Magnus constructed a fantastic hypothesis in emulation of Mediterranean antiquity – he was addressing his words primarily to a learned Italian readership – about a Gothic Golden Age with runic book-culture antedating the Greeks and Romans and possibly even the biblical Flood. Magnus got the idea of using runes as a measure of northern antiquity from Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, the vast and stylistically ambitious history of the Danes composed around 1200, and printed in Magnus' time.<sup>22</sup>

The runic argument was then appropriated by the Flemish Johannes Goropius Becanus in his *Origines Antwerpianæ* (1569). Becanus considered Dutch a Scytho–Cimbrian language, and believed that Dutch, and especially the dialect spoken by the people of Antwerp, very likely was the paradisiacal tongue and mother of all languages. According to Becanus, the *Cimbri*, who were the descendants of Japhet, had not been present at Babel and thus, escaping divine punishment, alone had retained the original language of mankind. This is, in any case, how the succession of ideas from Magnus to Becanus appeared to Giambattista Vico in his *Scienza nuova seconda* (2. 2. 4. 430) from 1744.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Isidore, *Etymologiae* 14. 3. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Paris 1514. I wish to thank Karen Skovgaard-Petersen for drawing my attention to the importance of Gothicism and Johannes Magnus' *History* for Arngrímur's argument. See her contribution to this publication.

<sup>23</sup> Umberto Eco 1997, 98. Becanus also argued that the originality of Dutch was proven by the fact that it had the highest number of monosyllabic words. In the next century, the Icelandic scholar Jón Rúgmán (1636–1679), based in Sweden, compiled a list of monosyllabic words in Icelandic, *Mono-Syllaba Islandica* (Uppsala, 1676), in an attempt to prove

The early Danish response to Swedish Gothicism, as represented by the published and unpublished writings of Anders Sørensen Vedel from 1570–1580, involved, amongst other things, the contrary claim that the true ancient Gothic tongue was not Old Swedish but Icelandic/Old Norse. The two kingdoms, Denmark and Sweden, had become political rivals and at times enemies at war, and Norway and Iceland were both under the Danish crown. Interestingly, Vedel makes his claim about the identity of contemporary Icelandic with Old Gothic (and Cimbrian) in the context of praising the Danish king for establishing a printing press in Iceland.<sup>24</sup>

The printing press referred to is the old Hólar press from Catholic times, which was re-established there in 1575 by Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson (from around 1535 it was located at and operated on the farm where the Swedish printer, Jón Matthíasson, resided). This was the year before Arngrímur came to Hólar as a schoolboy to study at the cathedral school. In 1580, when Vedel gave his eulogy of the king, only one book in the vernacular had been printed at Hólar, the Icelandic law codex *Jónsbók* (1578). By connecting the printing of *Jónsbók* to the identification of Icelandic with Old Gothic, Vedel was granting cultural authority to this and future publications from Hólar. He was fully aware of the implications of printing texts in the vernacular, as opposed to Latin, for it was Vedel himself who first translated Saxo Grammaticus into Danish, a translation printed three years before *Jónsbók*, in 1575, and an important milestone in establishing Danish as a literary language. On a portrait from three years later, painted by Tobias Gemperle, the Danish historiographer Vedel is surrounded with inscriptions in four ancient alphabets, the three biblical alphabets, Hebrew, Greek and Latin – and runes. Vedel and his painter seem to have wished to suggest, amongst other things, that runes were on par with the sacred languages.<sup>25</sup> As Marita Akhøj Nielsen has shown, the runes lying on the table in front of Vedel are a transcription of notes he made when reading medieval Icelandic kings' sagas, although he probably thought these were of Norwegian origin.<sup>26</sup> Vedel's ideas are likely to have reached the learned men of Hólar in some form or other.<sup>27</sup>

The importance of unique alphabets and their relation to ancient languages was of general interest to humanists in Arngrímur's time. No doubt

---

the antiquity and primacy of Icelandic in the same manner. For Becanus, see also Luc de Grauwe's contribution to this publication.

<sup>24</sup> This information has been brought to light by Marita Akhøj Nielsen; see her discussion of Vedel's Norse philology in this publication.

<sup>25</sup> See discussion and plate in Minna Skafte Jensen ed. 1995, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Akhøj Nielsen, "Norse Philology."

<sup>27</sup> Jakob Benediktsson 1957, 39–41 and 47–49.

the basic idea was based on the simple fact that the sacred languages each had their own alphabet. Arngrímur also had a vernacular source from the period of the twelfth-century renaissance that supported the essential significance of unique alphabets, for example the following introductory paragraph from the *First Grammatical Treatise*:

En af því at túngurnar eru úlíkar hver annarri, þær þegar er or einni ok hinni sömu túngu hafa gengizt eða greint: þá þarf úlíka í at hafa, en eigi ena sömu alla í öllum, sem eigi rita Grikkir latínustöfum girzkuna, ok eigi Latínumenn girzkum stöfum latínu, nè enn heldr ebreskir menn ebreskuna hvârki girzkum stöfum nè latínu, heldr ritar sínum stöfum hver þjóð sína túngu.<sup>28</sup>

(But because languages differ from one another, ever since they parted and branched off from one and the same tongue, it is now necessary to use different letters in writing them, and not the same for all, as Greeks do not write Greek with Latin letters, and Latins do not write Latin with Greek letters, while Hebrews do not write Hebrew with either Greek or Latin letters, but each people writes its own language with its own letters).

Although this passage does not seem to agree with the theological consensus, dating back to St. Augustine and St. Jerome, according to which Hebrew had been the original language before Babel, that fundamental premise is nevertheless found in the prologue of the *Edda* in *Codex Wormianus*, where it is stated that after Babel all people forgot the truth about their Creator, except those who spoke Hebrew.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, scholars attempted to make sense of what had happened after Babel, and how the various ancient languages and especially the vernaculars emerge from a divinely imposed linguistic division. In humanist studies of the origin of the *lingua patria* the purpose was usually to trace the roots of the vernacular as far back and as close to Hebrew and the language of Eden as possible. Language and people were considered closely interlinked because of the contradictory biblical notion that the tribes of mankind originated from the sons of Noah (Genesis 10) and from the spreading of mankind after Babel (Genesis 11). Moreover, respected medieval authors had stressed that *lingua* had primacy over *gens* (e.g., Isidore *Etym.* 9. 1. 14), and the tongue could therefore serve as a key to the origin of a people. Thus, taking one's own language far back into remote biblical antiquity was not just patriotic ambition, as it might seem to us, but rather a pious necessity in an age of Christian literalism. The alternative, to claim autochthony or a non-biblical origin, was viewed as

---

<sup>28</sup> *Edda* 1848-1887, 2: 10, 12.

heresy: *ab homine Christiano, librorum Mosis de originibus conscio, alienissimum est.*<sup>29</sup>

In *Crymogæa*, Arngrímur made an effort to show that Icelandic stands close to the biblical *Ursprache*, and still bears a feature of Hebrew in the sound of one of its letters (“þ” corresponding to Hebrew “tau”) and occasionally in its vocabulary. He also used vernacular as well as learned contemporary sources to argue that the language either went back to the language of the Giants, first inhabitants of Scandinavia, or, and this he finds more probable, arose as a mixture of this and the language brought to the North from Asia, when Odin and his men had fled from the Roman general Pompey the Great, as is stated in the prologue of *Edda* in *Codex Wormianus*. Through facile etymology he finds that the language of the Giants, *Jøtica*, is the same as Gothic. These Giants, he then claims, were the biblical Canaanites (whose progenitor was Canaan son of Cam son of Noah), who had yielded to the strong attraction of the Scandinavian mountains! Thus he forges the necessary link with Old Testament history, openingly indicating revision of an older consensus (i.e. Magnus and Becanus), which traced the same peoples from Japhet, another son of Noah.<sup>30</sup>

In his chapter, *De lingva gentis*, Arngrímur specifies that the runic alphabet is related to the ancient Gothic alphabet found in the Bible translation of Ulfila (311?–383). He refers to a recent publication on alphabets by the brothers Johannes Theodorus and Johannes Israel de Bry entitled *Alphabeta et Characteres* (Frankfurt 1596), according to which Ulfila invented his script. He claims that Ulfila’s alphabet accords with ancient Icelandic runes with minor exceptions. In order to establish the kinship of the runic characters and those of Ulfila, he printed a table with Icelandic runes which he had collected from the pages of *Codex Wormianus*, more precisely from the *First* and *Third Grammatical Treatise*, and added some corresponding Gothic characters after the runic letters.<sup>31</sup> Having established the likeness of the two scripts to his satisfaction, Arngrímur now attempts to place the language of the runes in the family of historical Nordic languages at large.

Has autem literas non ad Norvegiam astringo, aut Islandiam: sed ad lingvam, quæ nunc Norvegica, nunc Danica dicta est, seu ipsa antiqua Gothica, qua etiam id temporis usum credo totum orbem magis Arc-toum et populos vicinos, itemque Angliam, Scotiam, Irlandiam. <sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Arngrímur Jónsson 1950-52, 2: 34.

<sup>30</sup> Arngrímur Jónsson 1950-52, 2: 43-5.

<sup>31</sup> On the sources and nature of Arngrímur’s knowledge of runes, see Wills 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Arngrímur Jónsson 1950-52, 2: 28.

(But these letters I do not merely tie to Norway, or Iceland, but to the language, which at times is called Norwegian, at times Danish, or ancient Gothic itself, which I believe the whole Nordic world and the neighbouring peoples, as well as England, Scotland and Ireland, to have used at the time).

If we look for the roots of this classification in Icelandic vernacular literature, we note that a specific term, *íslenska* (*Icelandic*), applied to the Icelandic vernacular, is not found in medieval texts, and occurs for the first time in the preface of a collection of psalms from 1558.<sup>33</sup> The language of Icelandic medieval manuscripts is variously referred to as *norræna* (Old Norse/Norwegian) or *dönsk tunga* (Danish) in those codices. As Arngrímur points out in the following discussion, it is stated in one of the legendary sagas, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, that men in England could speak *norrænu* (Old Norse/Norwegian) until the days of William the Bastard (1027?–1087). The author of the *First Grammatical Treatise* had furthermore observed about Englishmen, when explaining that he followed their example in devising an alphabet for his native language, that “vèr erum einnar túngu, þó at greinzt hafi mjök önnur tveggja eða nakkvat báðar” (we are of the same tongue, although one of them has branched off considerably or both changed somewhat).<sup>34</sup> The image is that of a tree of languages with a common root in the paradisiacal language. Finally, the prologue to Snorra Edda ends with the statement that with the descendants of Odin, the language of the Asians had spread and become the native language of Saxony, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and, formerly, of England. Continental theory about the German language does not seem to have influenced Arngrímur here (see below), since there are no discernible traces of such an influence and Arngrímur never mentions German, except as a modern language and a possible threat to the purity of Icelandic.

The hypothesis that Icelandic was the original language of the North, of which *Crymogæa* may not be the first expression but is certainly the best articulated and most influential one, also proved to be the most successful of the humanists' grandiose claims for their *lingua patria*. Indeed, *Crymogæa*'s postulation that Icelandic was the great foremother of the other Nordic languages came to be viewed as scientific knowledge for centuries (and is still a widespread belief among non-specialists), primarily because two centuries later the idea was picked up by one of the principal founders of modern comparative linguistics, the Danish scholar Rasmus Christian Rask (1787–1832), in his *Undersøgelse om Det gamle Nordiske eller Islandske Sprogs*

---

<sup>33</sup> Svavar Sigmundsson 2003, 65.

<sup>34</sup> *Edda* 1848-1887, 2:12.

*Oprindelse* (Investigation of the Origin of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language), which he wrote in Iceland and sent to Denmark in 1814.

The existence of a unique alphabet for this ancient language, the runes – although they were used almost only for inscribing short texts, was no doubt fundamental to the success of the hypothesis, especially in the seventeenth century. As we have seen, the history and meaning of runes was especially topical in the context of humanist attempts to construct narratives about and assess the antiquity of northern vernaculars. Although the runes of preserved inscriptions in stone (mainly in Denmark and Sweden) had not been deciphered at this time, they had, long before the publication of *Crymogæa*, acquired the status of being considered the original alphabet of Scandinavia. Arngrímur was surely well aware of the fact that whoever professed to possess knowledge about the runes, let alone to speak their language, laid claim to extreme originality and antiquity. While Johannes Magnus' idea of a Gothic Golden Age with a full-blown runic book culture gradually lost its currency, as the numbers of new publications of Icelandic sagas and poetry grew (depending on who was writing, the texts were frequently classified as Old Swedish/Ancient Gothic or Old Norse/Old Danish), the age and richness of the Icelandic vernacular corpus seemed to corroborate the idea that the language Arngrímur called Icelandic was the classical language of the North, in which the classical literature of the North had been written.<sup>35</sup>

For lack of evidence, the earliest phase in the development of these linguistic notions about the importance of Icelandic are difficult to trace. Arngrímur's hypothesis is very likely based on ideas held by Danish historians such as Vedel, and perhaps by some learned Icelanders of a generation before him, who seem to be referred to in an earlier Icelandic treatise written in Latin. The anonymous *Qualiscunque Descriptio Islandiæ*, likely written in Copenhagen around 1590 but not printed until 1928, mentions the kinship of Icelandic with the other Nordic languages, and then adds: “unde etiam nonnullis persuasum est linguam unam esse ex principalibus linguis totius orbis, attributam uidelicet quibusdam certis hominibus admirando Dei beneficio statim in uniuersali linguarum confusione” (because of this some believe that this language is one of the principal languages of the entire world, granted to some chosen group of men, on account of the wonderful benefi-

---

<sup>35</sup> The English reception of *Crymogæa*'s teachings about Icelandic begins with Samuel Purchas' English translation of excerpts from *Crymogæa* in *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his pilgrimes: contayning a history of the world in sea voyages and lande travells by Englishmen and others*, vol. 13 (1625; repr. New York: AMS Press, 1965).

cence of God, already in the universal confusion of languages).<sup>36</sup> Later in the same treatise it is argued that Icelandic is likely to be one of the principal languages, and Danish and Swedish are derived from it: “propter incorruptam antiquitatem ... verisimile esse illam linguam unam esse ex omnibus linguis principalibus et reliqua idiomata, Danorum et Suecorum, ex hac esse deducta” (because of its incorrupt antiquity ... it is probable that this language is one among all primary languages, and that the other dialects, those of the Danes and the Swedes, are derived from it).<sup>37</sup> The hypothesis that Icelandic is a primary language possessing “incorrupt antiquity”, while Danish and Swedish are *idiomata* (dialects) derived from it, constitutes evidence that Arngrímur’s belief in the “purity” and “antiquity” of the Icelandic language was inherited from an earlier generation of humanists.

The initial success of Arngrímur’s doctrine in the *Crymogæa* lay partly in the promise that Everyman in Iceland spoke “Old Gothic”, and could read the runes. This was proven not to be the case already in the seventeenth century, but the association of Icelandic with runes survived long into the nineteenth century. Although medieval Icelandic literature was written in the Latin alphabet, largely by clerics educated in Latin cathedral schools, it became widespread practice to print this literature, especially poetry, in runic script, following the publication of Ole Worm’s *Literatura Runica* (1636).

This literature was not thought of as specifically Icelandic at the time, but was rather identified as Old Norse, Old Danish, Old Swedish, Old English or Old German. It should be remembered, however, that a major part of the original works (i.e. not translations from Latin or other languages, of which there is a great deal also) in the Icelandic medieaval corpus, including the Eddas, scaldic poetry, kings’ sagas, legendary and knight sagas, has a much wider scope than just matters Icelandic. Gradually, though, it was recognized that these texts had almost exclusively been written in Iceland. By the eighteenth century, virtually all extant manuscripts had been collected and exported, mostly to Denmark and Sweden, where they ended up in royal and other collections. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, they were edited and translated into Latin or, in some cases, modern languages. Although only some of the earliest editions use runic script, the bond between runes and Icelandic literature had become a fixed idea in Europe, so that the two were not easily separated for posterity.

---

<sup>36</sup> *Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiae* 1928, 97. The editor, Fritz Burg, ascribed the work to Sigurður Stefánsson (d. 1595), but Jakob Benediktsson 1956, 97–109, argued that the author was Bishop Oddur Einarsson (d. 1630).

<sup>37</sup> *Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiae* 1928, 219.

### The Subtle Authority of the Roman Paradigm

The thesis that in antiquity people had spoken a single language in the North seemed self-evident for many reasons. Runes had been found widely in northern Europe, and on the analogy of the unique alphabets of the biblical languages the idea that what was written in runes had to be a single language seems to have been accepted by the humanists from early on. Arngrímur did not have to take into account the possibility that each of the many countries that in his own day had a separate language had had its own ancient tongue as well. Hypothetically, he could of course have argued for the extreme antiquity of Icelandic without making it the universal language of the North. But he clearly had to deal with the problem of the many names of this language. With what arguments could he back his assertion that the original language of the North was simply the Icelandic of his time, when medieval Icelanders had themselves called their language both “Danish” and “Norwegian,” while the idea that it was Gothic had already become current among learned men in Scandinavia?

He solved this problem like the schoolmaster he was, by assigning blame to those Scandinavian peoples, who had allowed the original language to become corrupted in their countries, or even lost it entirely. This essentially pedagogical part of his idea is based on analogy with Jean Bodin’s general theory of the corruption of Latin and Ancient Greek in the *Methodus ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitionem* (Paris 1566). It is because Icelanders alone have dutifully preserved the ancient tongue of the North, according to Arngrímur, that they now have a claim to the right of naming it as their own:

In Dania autem et vicinis terris tanto citius mutationi obnoxia facta est, quantò quæque gens exterorum commercia frequentiora admisit. Norvegica verò eadem idcirco dicta, quod in Norvegia diutissime incorrupta manserit, cum jam in vicinis terris cæpisset mutari; ut et hodiè eadem meritò Islandica vocatur, quod eâ integrâ soli utantur Islandi. Norvegis enim modernis (reliqui de se viderint) peregrinorum commercia lingvam non adulterârunt solum, sed ademerunt. Quemadmodum de Italia et Græcia magni nominis authores statuunt, quæ Latini Græcique sermonis puritatem tenuerint totoque terrarum orbe disseminaverint. Postea verò quam Scythæ et Gothi utranque invaserint, tanta mutatio sit consecuta, ut nec Latium nec Athenæ, ubi nunc sunt, unquam extitisse videantur.<sup>38</sup>

(In Denmark and the neighbouring countries, however, this language suffered a damaging mutation as much faster as each nation allowed

---

<sup>38</sup> Arngrímur Jónsson 1950-52, 2: 28.

more frequent intercourse with foreigners. But it was called Norwegian because it remained for the longest time incorrupt in Norway, when it had already begun to change in the neighbouring countries; and thus this same language merits to be called Icelandic today, because Icelanders alone use it unbroken. Commerce with foreigners has not only spoiled the tongue of modern Norwegians (others should worry about themselves), it has deprived them of it. Authors of great name state something similar about Italy and Greece; these countries preserved the purity of Latin and Greek and spread them throughout the entire world. But after Scythians and Goths invaded each of these places, such mutation followed, that neither Latium nor Athens appear to have existed where they are now).

The chief explanatory paradigm for the vernacular is here sought in the history of the Latin language, as told by continental humanists. Indeed, Arngrímur has taken the last lines almost verbatim from Jean Bodin's *Methodus*.<sup>39</sup> It is true that Greek, the language of Greece and Athens, is also important when the discussion turns to pure and incorrupt languages, which spread, or are disseminated, throughout the world and conquer it. But the relative importance of Latin and Greek for western and central European scholars was similar to their proportion in the typical humanist treatise, such as *Crymogæa* itself: The title is Grecian, but virtually everything else is in Latin. Most of these scholars never did more than drop Greek in their Latin discourse. They looked to Greece as the cradle of their literary culture, because the Romans had done so before them. The tales of the invading barbarians who spoil the ancient languages of these glorious cities is an essential element in this master narrative of Latin scholars. The memory of the corruption of the ancient tongue is inseparable from the project of its preservation. Arngrímur was well acquainted with another of Bodin's ideas, viz. that it is natural for languages to change, like everything else in the course of history.<sup>40</sup> But he preferred the Latin paradigm of the ancient language endangered by corrupting influence from the outside, but salvaged and kept pure by scholarly erudition. The spoiling of the ancient tongue by

---

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Bodin 1650, 9: 369: "Altera causa est in coloniarum ac populorum inter ipsos confusione. argumento sit Italia & Græcia, quæ tot seculis puritatem Græci ac Latini sermonis tenuerunt, totoque terrarum orbe disseminarunt: postea quam Scythæ & Gothi utranque invaserunt, tanta mutatio consecuta est, ut nec Latium, nec Attica ubi nunc sunt unquam extitisse videantur."

<sup>40</sup> Bodin considers three main reasons for change in languages: i) time, ii) the mixing of nations when they migrate or when countries are occupied, and iii) climate and geography; in that context he makes the amusing observation that because of the cold, northern languages have more consonants and aspirants than southern languages (Bodin 1560, 9: 369).

foreign impurity inevitably also calls to mind the definition of barbarism from the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, cited above.

Arngrímur warns against commerce with foreigners, which is clearly an indirect statement of support for attempts by the Danish government to prevent German merchants from Hamburg from trading in Iceland.<sup>41</sup> This warning registers, ideologically, as a sort of parallel with the barbarian invasions of antiquity. Danish trade monopoly will isolate Iceland and thus preserve the Latin of the North unspoiled.

What Arngrímur implies is that the history of Icelandic, the ancient language of the North, is similar to the history of Latin. As the Latin scholars of the Renaissance preserved and purified the ancient language of the South with their cultivation of ancient authors, while the Italians themselves first allowed their language to be spoiled by foreigners and then lost it completely, so Icelanders have preserved the ancient language of the North in its pristine purity with their cultivation of ancient Icelandic, while the Norwegians themselves have allowed Old Norse to be spoiled through intercourse with foreigners.

Arngrímur does not seem to have had another model for language purism than the Latin humanist one. In his time, such ideas had not been applied to the other vernaculars of Scandinavia. Also in Germany they were in their infancy. The *opus classicum* of German language purism is the *Programrede* of Martin Opitz, *Aristarchus sive De Contemptu Linguae Teutonicae*, from 1617, i.e., eight or nine years later than Arngrímur's *Crymogæa*.<sup>42</sup> Like our Icelandic patriot, Opitz structures his argument about German purity on analogy with Latin (and Greek) by describing the corruption of the classical languages through foreign influence, and stressing the worth and relative purity of German, as well as the danger that it will be similarly neglected, dirtied and corrupted.<sup>43</sup> Italian and French language purisms certainly predate those of Arngrímur and the Germans. We should remember, however, that it is notoriously difficult to date the origins of ideas. The transferral or application of humanist Latin stylistic principles to the ver-

---

<sup>41</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>42</sup> Jones ed. 1995, 37–45. *Crymogæa* was actually completed in 1602; it took six years for Arngrímur to get it published.

<sup>43</sup> Jones ed. 1995, 39–45. Opitz' description of the corruption and debilitation of Greek by barbarian influence recalls Bodin's formulation, reused by Arngrímur Jónsson: "Suavis-simus certè Græcorum & delicatissimus sermo barbarie aliorum populorum ita corruptus est ac debilitatus, ut se hodie in se vix agnoscat" (40). This similarity supports the important notion that we are dealing with a central paradigm of the humanist discourse on languages. Brundstad 2001, 41–44, in general sees all modern movements towards linguistic purism as ultimately derived from the Roman stylistic ideal of *Latinitas* (translated from the Greek *Hellenismos*).

naulars is not the idea of anyone specific, but simply suggests itself as soon as attempts are made to elevate the vernacular to the status of a literary language with authority comparable to that of Latin.<sup>44</sup>

Just as Arngrímur's explanatory paradigm for the history of the Icelandic language is Bodin's account of the history of Latin, the language of Rome purified and virtuously restored, his model for telling the history of the Icelandic *civitas* (state) in *Crymogæa* is the rise and fall of the Roman republic as laid out by Bodin. *Crymogæa*'s account of the *res publica Islandorum*, an entity previously unheard of, follows in details the method of Jean Bodin, in his *Methodus*, which essentially explains the history of all states in conformity with, or as a variation from, a simplified schema of Roman constitutional history extracted primarily from Livy.

In sum, this new Icelandic history according to the Roman model runs like this: The Norwegian King Harald Fairhair is the unjust *tyrannus* (tyrant) who rules with violence and acts as if he is above the law, as did the Tarquins of pre-republican Rome. The original settlers of Iceland, Ingólfr and Hjörleifr, play the virtuous *virii* (citizens), who escape the tyranny and found *aristocratia* (aristocracy) in Iceland, as did Brutus and his associates when they dethroned the last *rex* (king) of Rome and founded the republic. With the establishment in 928 of an annual general assembly, *Alþingi*, a *res publica* (republic) was likewise founded in Iceland. *Aristonomia*, or aristocracy, flourishes in Iceland for almost four centuries (A. makes it 387 years,

---

<sup>44</sup> Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir takes me to task for stating, in an earlier version of this article in Icelandic (Gottskálk Jensson 2003, 59-60), that in Arngrímur Jónsson's time ideas about the originality and cultivation of the vernaculars had not yet appeared in Germany. The earliest example I mentioned was Martin Opitz's *Aristarchus*, which is surely the classic example of early German language purism, but, as she rightly points out, not the earliest such document (Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir 2004, 8 n. 1). The earliest German text to betray a "puristic reaction to lexical influences" (Jones 1999, 32), is Niklas von Wyle's preface to his German translation of Latin texts by Italian humanists (1478). While he rejects the language mixture of German chancery usage, his idea of a purified German is modelled on the style of the Latin texts he is translating. Aventin's German purism, likewise, appears in the preface to his German translation from Latin (1533). So does that of Valentin Boltz in a preface to his often republished German translation of the Roman playwright Terence (1539). Johannes Reuchlin, in a manuscript note to his German translation of Cicero (1501), and Aegidius Tschudi (1538), in a discussion in Latin about the German chanceries, complain about the excessive use of Latinisms in German official language. Interesting as these documents are, none of the material that antedates *Crymogæa* contains a discussion of the history of the language and presents a justification of language purism comparable to what we find in Arngrímur's discussion of Icelandic and Opitz's later discussion of German. Whereas I find no direct German influence upon Arngrímur's doctrine of purism, the German writer Martin Zeiller, in his much read *Bildungsbriefen* (1643), takes Arngrímur's discussion of language purism in the *Crymogæa* as his model for German language purism; see Jones ed. 1995, 346, 351.

to be exact), or from the beginning of the settlement in 874 until the end of the “republic” in 1261. Towards the end, the republic has changed into an unjust *oligarchia* (oligarchy), *bella civilia* (civil wars) are being fought, so that at last the noble families willingly surrender to the royal authority of King Hakon of Norway, a just king, who agrees to let the laws tie his hands, in much the same fashion as the Roman leading families accepted the end of the Roman republic and surrendered to Augustus, the new monarch, to regain peace and lawful order.<sup>45</sup>

It seems that the *res publica Islandorum* is Arngrímur’s original idea.<sup>46</sup> In any case, the anonymous author of the *Qualiscunque Descriptio Islandiæ* did not describe the thirteenth-century incorporation of the island of Iceland as a province in the Norwegian monarchy in conformity with the Bodinian model:

Quantum tamen ad politicam gubernationem et administrationem attinet, manet adhuc in Islandia uetusta illa politiæ forma, quæ initio constituta est, cum insula nostra in formam prouinciæ primum redigebatur. Nam eo pacto Noruagicis regibus Islandi sese dediderunt, ut liceret antiquis moribus, legibus et consuetudine uiuere.<sup>47</sup>

(As far as political governing and administration is concerned, there still remains in Iceland the ancient form of government, which was initially established, when our island was first made into a province. Indeed, the Icelanders subjected themselves to the kings of Norway on condition that they would be allowed to live by their ancient customs, laws and habits).

There is no ancient “republic” here, on the contrary, it is stated that the original form of government still remains in Iceland (*manet adhuc in Islandia uetusta illa politiæ forma*), although this form is not traced further back than to when Iceland became a province of Norway. It is clearly emphasized that the Icelanders did not compromise their ancient customs. In terms of political theory, the main difference is the complete absence here of the application of Bodin’s concept of “sovereignty” (*summum imperium*). Without that concept there is no critical moment, no transferral of “sovereignty” to the king of Norway, as in the *Crymogæa*.

---

<sup>45</sup> This narrative of the rise and fall of the Icelandic republic has been assembled from *Crymogæa* book 1, ch. 2, and book 3, ch. 1.

<sup>46</sup> For a more detailed discussion, in Danish, of Arngrímur’s use of Bodin, and invention of the Icelandic “republic”, see Gottskálk Jensson 2005.

<sup>47</sup> *Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiæ* 1928, 206.

### The *Elegantia* of Icelandic

Arngrímur continues his chapter, *De lingua gentis*, by advancing an explanation of why Icelanders have managed to preserve the ancient tongue of the North intact, and with an advice as to how they should guarantee that it will not be spoiled in the future. He continues to build his argument by citing Bodin and repeats historical examples from the *Methodus* of how languages have changed with time (even in a period of fifty years):

Sic videmus paulatim omnium populorum linguas aliter atque aliter mutari, ait Bodinus. Id quod etiam nostræ lingvæ ex parte aliqua accidere posse non imus inficias: sed nequaquam tanto discrimine aut tam paucorum annorum intervallo. Ad cuius puritatem retinendam potissimum duo sunt subsidia. Unum in libris manuscriptis, veteris puritatis ac **elegantia**e refertissimis. Alterum in commerciorum extraneorum paucitate. Vellem his tertium à modernis nostratibus adjungi: Ne scilicet scribentes aut loquentes vernaculè Danizarent aut Germanizarent, sed ad lingvæ patriæ, per se satis copiosæ et **elegantis**, copiam et **elegantiam** anniterentur, eamque sapienter et doctè affectarent; minus profectò in posterum mutationis periculum metuendum foret. Alioqui ad corrumpendam linguam non opus erit exterorum commerciiis.<sup>48</sup>

(“Thus we see how the languages of all peoples gradually change in various ways,” says Bodin. We shall not deny that this could happen to some extent also to our language, but definitely not so radically or in a period of so few years. Two aids are most important for retaining its purity: One lies in the manuscripts, which are crammed with ancient purity and elegance, the other in having little to do with foreigners. I would like my countrymen to add to these a third buttress of the language, viz., that in writing and speaking in the vernacular they avoid Danicizing or Germanizing, but instead rely on the copiousness and elegance of the language of the fatherland (which of itself is copious and elegant enough), and use it wisely and with erudition. There would then certainly be fewer grounds to fear its mutation in the future. Otherwise, it will not take intercourse with foreigners for the language to become corrupt).

Note the triple repetition of the terms *elegantia* and *elegans* in this short passage, used about the vernacular. In his introduction to the *Crymogæa* Arngrímur uses the very same terms to describe the humanist ideal of Latin style, although employing a well-worn prefatory topos he also apologizes for not living up to this ideal. Neither the language nor the emphasis is surprising in a text coming from the pen of the former schoolmaster of the

---

<sup>48</sup> Arngrímur Jónsson 1950-52, 2: 28-9.

Latin cathedral school at Hólar. The humanist buzzword *elegantia* reveals how germane the idea of Icelandic purity and elegance in Arngrímur's doctrine is to Georg Vogelmann's textbook in unspoiled Latin, *Elegantiae Latini Sermonis*, which, as was mentioned above, Arngrímur had a hand in reprinting at Hólar for use in the cathedral school. The parallels between Latin and Icelandic philology as here described are obvious: In Latin language purism *a là Valla*, it is the *usus* of ancient Roman authors that defines what is correct and beautiful; here it is the reading of "ancient" Icelandic manuscripts which provides the ultimate model for what is pure and elegant in matters of style and, when used as a model, the language of the manuscripts prevents the language of future generations from being corrupted.

The third advice to his compatriots, to avoid Danicizing or Germanizing the language, i.e., to incorporate Danish and German words and grammatical constructions into Icelandic discourse, is barely understandable outside the parameters of Latin humanism. This argument for maintaining the purity of Icelandic relies on a curious inversion of the classical definition of barbarism, an inversion that is apparent already in the definition of the subject in the thirteenth-century *Third Grammatical Treatise*. While this thirteenth-century adaptation of Donatus treats barbarism in a thoroughly codified form and, apart from the definition, does not use the idea to construct an ideal of linguistic purism for the vernacular, Arngrímur applies the new and more stringent ideals of the humanists about Latin stylistic *elegantia* to the newly named Icelandic language and produces a full blown doctrine of language purism, which is non the less founded on the medieval application of the classical theory of barbarism to the vernacular.

The Greco–Latin verbs coined by Arngrímur for the purpose of denigrating the hypothetical pollution of the Icelandic language with Danish and German, *Danizare* and *Germanizare*, derive their disparaging force from an analogy with the late-Latin grecism *barbarizare*. Implicitly, Icelandic has been granted the status of a classical language with respect to the "barbaric" Danish and German vernaculars! Arngrímur's invention is a good example of the co-option and inversion of the polemics of Lorenzo Valla and other Italian humanists against German and Northern European scholarship.

### A Fateful Hypothesis

The history of the reception of Arngrímur's construct is easily documented. It was kept alive through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Danes and Icelanders mostly in Latin treatises until, as was mentioned above, the Danish polyglot Rasmus Christian Rask rediscovered it through his study of Icelandic and made it the basis of his system of comparative linguistics. Rask equated the status of Icelandic with respect to the major Nordic lan-

guages, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, with the status of Latin with respect to the Romance languages, and Rask's contemporary, the Danish literary historian Niels Matthias Petersen (1791–1862), dreamed of reuniting these languages into a single Scandinavian language. In their student years, Petersen and Rask toyed with the idea of founding an Icelandic-speaking colony in New Zealand. Petersen later proposed that Icelandic be taught in Danish Latin schools. Rask himself authored the first practical Icelandic grammar, wherein he did not differentiate between Old and Modern Icelandic, thus contributing to the establishment of Old Icelandic as the ideal of Modern Icelandic. As a result, Icelandic purism does not just reject borrowings from other languages, but occasionally resurrects medieval morphology and reactivates extinct words and idiomatic usage, so that the aim would seem to be a radical return to the written language of the twelfth and thirteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

While the archaizing aspect of Icelandic purism became an essential element in Icelandic nationalism, the scientific foundation of Arngrímur's redefinition of Icelandic as a classical language was gradually eroded by new work in the field of historical linguistic and runology. A fatal blow to this Icelandic branch of Latin humanism was dealt by a series of lectures held in Christiania in the spring of 1846 by the Norwegian scholar Peter Andreas Munch (1810–1863) and published in *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* for the year 1846.<sup>50</sup> Munch argued that Old Danish and, especially, Old Swedish displayed linguistic features that are demonstrably earlier than corresponding elements in Old Norse and Old Icelandic. Thus it became necessary to assume an original Nordic language, from which both East Nordic (Danish and Swedish) and West Nordic (Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroese) had developed. Munch not only postulated the existence of such a language, he was able to discover its remains in runic inscriptions from the fifth century, contemporary with Ulfila's Bible translation. This also showed that the original Nordic language was not Ulfila's Gothic. As for the origins of the runes and their relation to Ulfila's script, the general consensus among scholars today is that, while the Gothic script is mostly based on the Greek alphabet, runes are a Germanic adaptation of the Latin alphabet made in the first centuries of the Christian era, a period of flourishing commercial interactions with the Roman Empire.

---

<sup>49</sup> Kjartan G. Ottósson 1987.

<sup>50</sup> Munch 1846.

**Bibliography:**

- Arngrímur Jónsson 1609, *Crymogæa sive Rerum Islandicarum Libri III*, Hamburg.
- Arngrímur Jónsson 1950-1952, *Arngrimi Jonæ opera Latine conscripta*. Edited by Jakob Benediktsson. 3 vols., Copenhagen (*Bibliotheca Arnsmagnæana* 9–11).
- Bodin, Jean (1650) 1967, *Methodus ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitionem*. Amsterdam. A facsimile reprint, Darmstadt. (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1566).
- Bodin, Jean 1966, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History*. Translated by Beatrice Reynolds, New York (*Records of Civilization* 37).
- Brundstad, Eindre 2001, *Det reine språket. Om purisme i dansk, svensk, færøysk og norsk*. PhD diss., Bergen.
- Eco, Umberto 1997, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, Malden, MA.
- Edda 1848-1887, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar. Edda Snorronis Sturlæi* 1-3, ed. Jón Sigurðsson and F. Jónsson, trans. Sveinbjörn Egilsson, Copenhagen.
- Gottskálk Jensson 2005, “Jean Bodin på Island: Arngrímur Jónssons brug af *Methodus ad Facilem Historiarum Cognitionem* (Paris 1566)”, *Renæssanceforum* 1 < <http://www.renaessanceforum.dk/>>.
- Gottskálk Jensson 2004, “The Lost Latin Literature of Medieval Iceland: The Fragments of the *Vita sancti Thorlaci* and Other Evidence”, *Symbolae Osloenses* 79, 150-170.
- Gottskálk Jensson 2003, “Söguleysa þjóðlegrar sagnfræði: Íslensk þjóðmenning og evrópsk latínumenning,” *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?* edited by Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, Kolbeinn Óttarsson Proppé and Sverrir Jakobsson, Reykjavík, 57–71.
- Guðrún Nordal 2001, *Tools of Literacy. The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*. Toronto.
- Halldór Halldórsson 1979, “Icelandic Purism and Its History”, *Word* 30: 76–86.
- Herren, Michael W. 1996, “Latin and the Vernacular Languages”, *Medieval Latin. An Introduction and Bibliographical Guide*, edited by F.A.C. Mantello et al., Washington, DC.
- Jakob Benediktsson 1957, *Introduction and Notes to Arngrímur Jónsson 1950-52. Arngrimi Jonæ opera Latine conscripta*, Copenhagen (*Bibliotheca Arnsmagnæana* 12).
- Jakob Benediktsson 1956, “Hver samdi Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiae?” *Nordæla. Afmælistkveðja til Sigurðar Nordals sjötugs 14. september 1956*, Reykjavík.

- Jakob Benediktsson 1953, "Arngrímur lærði og íslensk málhreinsun", *Afmæliskveðja til Próf. dr. phil. Alexanders Jóhannessonar háskólarektors 15. júlí 1953*, edited by Árni Böðvarsson et al., Reykjavík, 117–138.
- Jakob Benediktsson ed. 1948, *Ole Worm's Correspondence with Icelanders*, Copenhagen (*Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana* 7).
- Jensen, Minna Skafted ed. 1995, *A History of Nordic Neo-Latin Literature*, Odense (*Odense University Studies in Scandinavian Languages and Literature* 32).
- Jöcher, Christian Gottlieb 1750–1751, 1960–1961, *Allgemeines Gelehrten-Lexicon*. 4 vols. Leipzig. Reprint, Hildesheim.
- Jóhannes B. Sigtryggsson 2003, "Hrein tunga", *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?* edited by Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson et al., Reykjavík, 91–103.
- Jones, William Jervis 1999, *Images of Language. German Attitudes to European Languages from 1500 to 1800*, Amsterdam (*Studies in the History of the Language Sciences* 89).
- Jones, William Jervis 1995, *Sprachhelden und Sprachverderber. Dokumente zur Erforschung des Fremdwortpurismus im Deutschen (1478–1750)*, Berlin (*Studia Linguistica Germanica* 38).
- Kjartan G. Ottósson 1990, *Íslensk málhreinsun: Sögulegt yfirlit*, Reykjavík (Rit Íslenskrar málnefndar 6).
- Kjartan G. Ottósson 1987, "An archaising aspect of Icelandic purism: The revival of extinct morphological patterns," *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of Nordic and General Linguistics in Helsinki, August 18–22, 1986*, edited by P. Lilius and M. Saari, 311–324, Helsinki. (*The Nordic Languages and Modern Linguistics* 6).
- Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir 2004, *Die Flateyjarbók als Quelle zur Geschichte des Isländischen – annähernd auf halbem Wege zwischen erster Besiedlung und Gegenwart*, Greifswald (*Greifswalder Universitätsreden, Neue Folge* 111).
- Magnus, Johannes 1554, *Historia . . . de omnibus Gothorum Sveonumque regibus qui unquam ab initio nationis extitere, eorumque memorabilibus bellis late varieque per orbem gestis*. Rome.
- Munch, P.A. 1846, "Sproghistorisk Undersøgelse om det ældste fælles-nordiske Sprogs Udseende, og Forsøg til at bestemme den olddanske og oldsvenske Mundarts normale Orthographi, Grammatik og rette Forhold til Norrøna-Mundarten", *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, 219–283.
- Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiae. Nach der Handschrift der Hamburger Staats- und Universitäts-Bibliothek*, ed. Fritz Burg 1928, Hamburg (*Neue Folge der Veröffentlichungen aus der Hamburger Stadtbibliothek* 1).

- Rask, Rasmus Christian 1818, *Undersøgelse om Det gamle Nordiske eller Islandske Sprogs Oprindelse*, Copenhagen.
- Sigurður Pétursson 1996, “Studiet af Latinsk Grammatik i Island”, *Studies in the development of linguistics in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden*, edited by Carol Henriksen et al., Oslo, 274–276.
- Svavar Sigmundsson 1990–1991, “Hreinsun íslenskunnar”, *Íslenskt mál og almenn málfræði* 12–13, 127–142.
- Svavar Sigmundsson 2003, “Purisme og nation på Island”, *Purt og reint. Om purisme i dei nordiske språka*, edited by Helge Sandøy et al., Volda, 65–83.
- Sverrir Tómasson 1998, “Málvöndun á miðöldum,” *Greinar af sama meiði helgaðar Indriða Gíslasyni sjötugum*, ed. Baldur Sigurðsson et al., Reykjavík.
- Waquet, François 2001, *Latin or the Empire of a Sign*, Translated by John Howe, London.
- Wieden, Helge Bei der 1993 “Die Darstellung Islands in der ‘Saxonia’ des David Chytraeus”, *David und Nathan Chytraeus: Humanismus im konfessionellen Zeitalter*, edited by Karl-Heinz Glaser et al., Ubstadt-Weiher, 88–90.
- Wills, Tarrin 2004, “The *Third Grammatical Treatise* and Ole Worm’s *Litteratura Runica*”, *Scandinavian Studies* 4: 439–58.
- Wright, Roger 1982, *Late Latin and Early Romance in Spain and Carolingian France*, Liverpool.
- Wright, Roger 1991, “The Conceptual Distinction between Latin and Romance: Invention or Evolution”, *Latin and the Romance Languages in Early Middle Ages*, edited by Roger Wright, University Park, 103–113.