

The Origin of Icelandic Script: Some Remarks

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1.

Nordic people came into contact with the Latin alphabet before it was adopted in their countries. A coin inscribed with Old Norse names was struck in York in Northern England before the middle of the tenth century (Haugen 2002:824). Furthermore, as runes had been in use there for many centuries, alphabetic script was well known at this time in Scandinavia.

Iceland accepted Christianity in the year 999 or 1000 (*ÍF*:17), at about the same time as Norway. During the following century the new religion and the Christian church took a firm footing and literacy was introduced along with the new faith. Christianity was brought to Norway and Iceland mostly from England (Seip 1954:1, Hreinn Benediktsson 1965:19), though, of course, Icelanders and Norwegians knew the new faith in other countries as well, for example Ireland, the Hebrides, Denmark, Germany and France. The first bishoprics were established in the Norse area in the latter part of the eleventh century and the first monasteries around the year 1100 (Seip 1954:3). Ísleifr Gizurarson (1006–80), the first Icelander to be consecrated a bishop in 1056, ran a school, as other bishops in the Nordic countries must have done. It is therefore almost certain that both liturgical works and educational books existed at episcopal seats as early as the 11th century. No remains of these books have been preserved, but fragments of liturgical works exist dating from the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, the oldest of which originated outside the Nordic countries (Gjerløw 1980).

2.

It seems obvious that writing in the vernacular with Latin script began in these countries in the course of the eleventh century, even though there is no reliable documentation before 1117 to prove this. *Íslendingabók*, which was written by Ari Þorgilsson fróði (1068–1148) in the 1120's, states that it was decided at the Althing in the summer of 1117 to record the laws of Iceland, and that their writing was begun in northern Iceland during the winter of 1117–18 (*ÍF*:23). This decision could scarcely have been taken without some previous experience of writing in the vernacular in Iceland using the Latin alphabet. It is probable, for example, even though this is not recorded, that the tithe laws were written down when they were introduced in 1096 (Hreinn Benediktsson 1965:17). In Norway, the writing of laws may have begun towards the end of the eleventh century (Seip 1954:2–3). The oldest manuscripts in the vernacular, in both countries, date from the middle of the twelfth century. There are fragments in Latin which are older, but since such fragments were certainly imported or written by foreigners who moved to Iceland or to Norway, it is only possible to use some of them in determining where the knowledge of writing in these countries came from.

The *First Grammatical Treatise*, which was written in Iceland and is dated to about the middle of the twelfth century (FGT:31–3), contains evidence about the types of writing that had been produced in Iceland during the author's life. He mentions:

'laws and genealogies, or interpretations of sacred writings, or also that historical lore that Ari Þorgilsson has recorded in books with such reasonable understanding'¹ (FGT:209).

What is meant by *laws* and *genealogies* is clear, but the meaning of the words *historical lore* in this context has been disputed. As for *interpretations of sacred writings*, this probably refers to interpretations of religious texts, for example in homilies. Of these literary categories mentioned by the 'First Grammarian', there have survived fragments of homilies from the mid-twelfth century in AM 237 a fol. and law texts from the second half of the twelfth century in AM 315 d fol., but no genealogies from this period exist. If the words *historical lore* meant historical writings, then the earliest manuscripts of such works that now exist are from about 1200 (*Veraldar saga* in AM 655 VII 4to and AM 655 VIII 4to).

3.

Many of the medieval Icelandic and Norwegian manuscripts that have survived are incomplete, and in many cases all that survives is a few leaves, or even a single leaf, or part of a leaf. Altogether, about 750 Icelandic manuscripts (and fragments of manuscripts) written in the vernacular are thought to date from before the mid-sixteenth century. Twelve manuscripts have survived from the twelfth century or about 1200. About 315 Icelandic manuscripts are dated to before about 1370. Sometimes it cannot be established with certainty whether individual leaves originally belonged to larger manuscripts, and partly for this reason the exact numbers of manuscripts cannot be stated. In addition it is not clear in all cases whether they are Norwegian or Icelandic. Most manuscripts dated after 1300 are copies of texts that are believed to have originated in the thirteenth century (Stefán Karlsson 2002:833).

Norway can boast of a considerable number of manuscripts written in the vernacular before 1370; more than Denmark and Sweden, though far fewer than Iceland, and practically all Norwegian manuscripts in Old Norse date from before 1400. There was a marked decline in book production in Norway about 1370, on account of great social changes in the country and linguistic changes as well (Seip 1955:224–25). There was no decline in the writing of letters and documents in Norway, however, so from the point of view of palaeography the year 1370 marks no such change; nevertheless, because of the linguistic changes and the paucity of books produced after 1370, it is convenient to use this date as a cut-off point (Haugen 2002:825). About 130 Norwegian manuscripts in Old Norse survive from before 1370, many of them in fragments only. Of this number, eight date from the twelfth century or about 1200.

To begin with, Norwegian documents were written in Latin, and Latin continued to be used side by side with the vernacular throughout the Middle Ages. The oldest extant Norwegian document in Latin is dated to the seventh decade of the

¹ 'lög ok áttvisi eða þýðingar helgar eða svá þau hin spaklegu fræði er Ari Þorgilsson hefir á bækur sett af skynsamlegu viti' (FGT:208).

twelfth century, while the oldest Norwegian document in Old Norse dates from about 1210. Most surviving documents are originals; this is hardly ever the case with other texts. About 1,650 original Norwegian documents written in Old Norse prior to 1370 are now extant, of which only about 80 are from the thirteenth century. No Icelandic documents from before 1300 have survived, and only 20–25 from the first half of the fourteenth century, after which their numbers increase rapidly. Altogether, about 1,500 documents in the vernacular exist from before 1540, including about 700 from the second half of the fifteenth century. Fewer than 50 documents pre-date 1370. Documents were written mostly in Old Norse/Icelandic in Iceland.

4.

Scholars have not been of one mind as to whether the knowledge of writing came to Iceland from mainland Europe (Northern Germany) — perhaps through Denmark or Norway — or from England (perhaps through Norway). There are very few traces of Anglo-Saxon influence in the earliest Icelandic manuscripts, apart from the letter *þ* (thorn), whereas in the earliest Norwegian manuscripts there is greater Anglo-Saxon influence, namely the Anglo-Saxon letters *ð* (eth), and *w* (*wyn* or *wen*; used as *v* in Old Norse), and the Anglo-Saxon forms of *f* and *r*. Three of these letters begin to appear in Icelandic manuscripts in the first part of the thirteenth century. As a result, it could be that the Icelanders acquired the art of writing Latin script from the continent, while the Norwegians learned it from the English.

On paleographic grounds Norwegian in the earliest period of writing in the vernacular falls into two main parts, the East and the West. Norwegian writings from the East show more characteristic Anglo-Saxon features, indicating a strong influence from Anglo-Saxon writing. In the West the same Anglo-Saxon features occur too, but not to the same extent as in the East (Hreinn Benediktsson 1965:19).

Some letters in insular or Anglo-Saxon script had undergone greater transformations than others in the course of independent development in the British Isles. In particular, *a*, *e*, *f*, *g*, *h*, *r*, and *s* differed from their counterparts in the script of the same period on the continent, and from the later Carolingian script (Brown 1990:59). There are no traces of Anglo-Saxon *a*, *e*, *g*, *h*, or *s* in Old Norse manuscripts; the other letters mentioned above are used in Old Norse manuscripts, though to differing extents. The adoption of *ð*, *w*, and the Anglo-Saxon *f* in Icelandic script was doubtless due more to Norwegian than to English influence, just as the disappearance of Anglo-Saxon *w* and *ð* around 1300 and in the fourteenth century was doubtless due to Norwegian influence (Stefán Karlsson 2002:834–35).

We must also keep in mind that Anglo-Saxon influence on Old Norse could have been more than purely paleographic. It could also have been orthographical. The basic Latin alphabet was not sufficient, without modifications and augmentations, to write texts in Old Norse. Norwegians and Icelanders had to deal with this somehow. It is, for example, likely that they learned to use *y* as a letter for the front round vowel from the Anglo-Saxons, as well as the use of *eo* for the *ø*-sound, and perhaps the letter *ø* itself. And they used *ð* in medial and final position and *þ* in initial position as the Anglo-Saxons did. They also imported an extensive set of abbreviations from England (Hreinn Benediktsson 1965:21, 29, 34, 86).

Nevertheless, some continental influence must have reached Norwegian and Icelandic script, for example through the archbishoprics of Hamburg or Bremen until 1103 and Lund in the period 1104–52, and through direct contact with people in Denmark, Germany, the Low Countries and France. The first three Icelandic bishops studied in Germany and France and Sæmundr Sigfússon fróði (1056–1133) as well.

5.

In the nineteenth century it was discovered that the spines of many of the regional administrative accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Norwegian State Archives in Oslo had been strengthened with strips of parchment that had been cut from medieval manuscripts (Pettersen and Karlsen 2003:45). About 5,000 fragments of Latin manuscripts are in the archives, most of them of a religious nature. It is estimated that they come from about 1,200 original books (Pettersen and Karlsen 2003:47, Haugen 2002:825). Recently some Norwegian scholars, with help from scholars abroad, have been looking more closely at some of these Latin fragments. The material shows that English influence was very strong in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (English missals or missals copied from English manuscripts), though North German influence also can be traced (Pettersen and Karlsen 2003:59, 70).

Although it is uncertain whether the Latin script originally came to Norway and Iceland from the continent or more likely from England, at the very least, Anglo-Saxon influence soon became strong and remained strong for some time.

6.

Didrik Arup Seip (1954) divided the history of Icelandic-Norwegian script into three periods. The first extended down to 1225, the second from 1225 to 1300 and the third ran from 1300 onwards. Lars Svensson (1974:169–70, 201–04, 1993:492, 495) gave these three periods names: he divided Icelandic script into Carolingian, Carolingian insular and Gothic script, while he divided Norwegian script into the older Carolingian insular period, younger Carolingian insular period and Gothic. The term *Carolingian insular* is not particularly apt, since even though Norwegian and Icelandic scribes adopted some letters from Anglo-Saxon script, their script never bore the other characteristics of insular script. This term should not be used.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Carolingian script was also used in England in Latin texts in the tenth and eleventh centuries, while Anglo-Saxon insular script was used in vernacular writing down to the twelfth century (Brown 1990:59, 67), and some Anglo-Saxon letters were in use in the vernacular down to the thirteenth century and even the fifteenth century (Wright 1960:xv). Thus, insular letters or letter forms appear to have been adopted in Norwegian writing from English manuscripts written in the vernacular in the period c. 950–1150.

If we use the terms used by Albert Derolez (2003) in his book on the Gothic script only a few of the earliest Icelandic manuscripts in the vernacular, maybe only three or four, are written in Carolingian script; and perhaps only one page in a

Norwegian manuscript. The others are all written in Protogothica,² which was the principal script used in Norway and Iceland until the second half of the thirteenth century. In the twelfth century Protogothica was the dominant script in England, both in Latin and in the vernacular, although Gothic script (Textualis) spread there during the latter part of that century (Brown 1990:73, 81). It is evident to me that Icelanders lagged behind Norwegians in adopting new forms of writing from the south. The Norwegians were first to use Protogothica and to import Anglo-Saxon letters, so that the Anglo-Saxon influence came to Iceland through Norway rather than from England directly. Icelandic script seems to have more continental character. The only thing that supports this is that the oldest manuscripts are written with the Carolingian script while the oldest Norwegian manuscripts are written with the 'new' Protogothic script. We do not know when the East Norwegians adopted the Anglo-Saxon letters because they are already found in the oldest manuscripts. One could speculate that it happened in the first half of the twelfth century or perhaps in the late eleventh century when it is thought that they began to use the Latin letters to write in the vernacular. The Anglo-Saxon influence then gradually moved to West Norway and then to Iceland.

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² I prefer the term 'Protogothica' (see Brown 1990:72–73) rather than 'Prægothica' which is used by Derolez (2003:56).

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