

The Role of Material Culture in the Literary Presentation of Greenland

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By means of introduction to the role of material culture in the medieval literary portrayal of Greenland, it is useful to consider the experience of the eighteenth-century Norwegian missionary Hans Egede. At the request of King Frederik IV, the Moravian Egede arrived in Greenland in 1721 to effect a re-colonisation of the land. He found no trace of the Scandinavian settlers known to have lived in the land. 'Instead, he was greeted by groups of Inuit in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and curiosity' (Arneborg and Seaver, 2000, 282). He wrote about his experiences in his 1741 monograph the *Natural History of Greenland*, excerpts of which were published in English. Along with his descriptions of the natural environment, plants and animals, Egede also outlines his knowledge of the human history of the land:

Greenland was first discovered by the Norwegians and Icelanders; and the brave Raude, who first discovered it in 982, praised it, and persuaded several of his Countrymen to inhabit it, and at the Instance of Oluf Tyrgeson, first Christian king in Norway, carried a Priest with him, who taught and baptized all the Inhabitants; and from time to time Greenland multiplied into new Colonies, many Churches and Abbeys were built, Bishops and other Teachers provided for: But the Norwegians were not the first Inhabitants; for they found wild People on the West side, who without doubt were originally Americans. The present Inhabitants probably are a Race of the Schrellingers (Egedius, 1742-3, 608-09).

This passage well summarises eighteenth-century knowledge concerning the foundation of the medieval Greenland colony, a knowledge largely informed by earlier texts which are perhaps privileged as sources of information here and elsewhere. Egede was brought by the natives or *Kallalit* to several ruin sites which he assumed correctly were of medieval European origin. His interest in the material remains scattered throughout the landscape was in line with contemporary European antiquarianism. Antiquarians sought on the one hand to rediscover their own people's primitive roots in the linguistic and material past, while on the other hand tried to account for the apparent degeneration of 'wild' peoples encountered in the Americas, Africa and Australia. The systematic study and classification of languages into families directly informed studies of material culture, and archaeologists likewise classified stone tools, house types and other remains into those of cultures, peoples and races (Jakob Benediktsson, 1948; Klindt-Jensen, 1975, 15; Pelts and Myrone, 1999; Sweet, 2004; Thomas, 2004, 21).

The notion that material culture from the past can both inform the past and shape the present is a commonplace in contemporary research. As Ian Hodder states, 'Material culture does not just exist. It is made by someone. It is produced to do something. Therefore it does not passively reflect society—rather it creates society through the actions of individuals' (Hodder, 1991, 6). This statement is easily applied when one considers ancestral objects in the context of the culture of their descendants.

But what of the material culture of Others from the past? How does that shape an/Other society in the present? Returning to Egede and his potential *Kallalit* converts, their relationship was doubtlessly affected by the presence of the ruins from medieval Greenland culture. These ruins made both parties, Scandinavian and Inuit, question their relationship as negotiated through this perceived past and made them seek explanations for what had occurred in the past. Both cultures drew upon their collective memories of the past which were formed from knowledge of material culture as well as other types of evidence. The Inuit drew upon their oral traditions concerning the *Kavdlunait*, or Norse (e.g. Rink, 1875, 308-24), and Egede drew upon what medieval Scandinavian writers commemorated in their texts.¹

Richard Perkins identifies six main 'kernels' which shape Old Norse oral traditions and which are ultimately commemorated in prose: 1) skaldic verse and other poetry; 2) oral genealogies; 3) place-names; 4) places and other natural objects; 5) man-made objects; and 6) miscellaneous phenomena (1989, 242). These phenomena are used to commemorate the perceived past by both Egede and the *Kallalit* in the eighteenth-century and are likewise employed 600 years earlier by another Scandinavian scholar trying to make sense of the past. When Ari Þorgilsson inn fróði wrote *Íslendingabók* c. 1122-33, he made use of several 'inspirers or kernels or perpetuators of oral tradition' and his careful interdisciplinary approach has been well noted (e.g. Perkins, 1989; Lindow, 1997; Meulengracht Sørensen, 2000; Whaley, 2000; Hermann, 2005; Würth, 2005).

Ari has this to say about the settlement of Greenland:

Land þat, es kallat es Grœnland, fannsk ok byggðisk af Íslandi. Eiríkr enn rauði hét maðr breiðfirzkr, es fór út heðan þangat ok nam þar land, es síðan es kallaðr Eiríksfjörðr. Hann gaf nafn landinu ok kallaði Grœnland ok kvað menn þat myndu fýsa þangat farar, at landit ætti nafn gótt. Þeir fundu þar manna vistir bæði austr ok vestr á landi ok keiplabrot ok steinsmíði þat es af því má skilja, at þar hafði þess konar þjóð farit, es Vínland hefir byggt ok Grœnlendingar kalla Skrælinga. En þat vas, es hann tók byggva landit, fjórtán vetrum eða fimmtán fyrir en kristni kværni hér á Ísland, at því es sá talði fyrir Þorkeli Gellissyni á Grœnlandi, es sjalfr fylgði Eiríki enum rauða út (*Ís.* 6, 13-14).

Ari is careful to establish the credibility of Þorkell Gellison, explicitly stating he gained his information about Greenland in Greenland and from the Greenlanders themselves. The Icelandic commemoration of Greenland, then, is based on oral accounts based upon the material evidence of *manna vistir, keiplabrot ok steinsmíði*

¹ I follow Sarah Foot, who distinguishes between memory, which is a personal and individual process, and commemoration of a common past, denoting 'a pool of shared remembrance to which the members of a specific social, political or, for example, religious community, have access by virtue of their individual and collective ownership of the elements of which it is constructed' (1999, 187-88). Foot states that 'what is nominally recollected by commemorative activity is, in fact, more likely to be recent fictive construction than long-acknowledged and collectively remembered 'truth'. Commemoration (collaborative remembrance) transmogrifies separate memories by embodying them in a common narrative' (1999, 188). This is what is achieved in Ari's *Íslendingabók*, and in other prose accounts of Greenland.

(‘signs of habitation’, ‘fragments of skin boats’ and ‘worked stone’) found *in situ*. The archaeologist Hans Christian Gulløv is of the opinion that it cannot be determined whether this description was based on a direct observation or was ‘a later addition’ but ‘one must assume that at a fairly early stage the Norse were aware of the fact that the new land had previously been inhabited’ (Gulløv, 2000, 320). Certainly, Ari’s account agrees with the situation in Greenland in 985 as can be supported by extant archaeological evidence. Our knowledge of early Norse-native contact remains incomplete, and is the focus of a major research project at SILA, the Greenland Research Centre at the National Museum of Denmark, but can be summarised thus: a Palaeo-Eskimo stone-age culture known archaeologically as the Saqqaq inhabited Greenland from 1400–500 BCE (Gulløv, 1997, 16). The Dorset culture is thought to have inhabited the areas of Greenland later settled by the Norse from 100 BCE to CE 100 (Gulløv, 1997, 17; Gad, 1970). The Neo-Eskimo Thule culture colonised Greenland from North America in the twelfth century, the ancestors of whom inhabited Greenland in Egede’s time and continue to live there today (Appelt and Gulløv; Gulløv, 2000; Arneborg, 2003; Schledermann and McCullough, 2003; H.C. Gulløv, personal communication).

It is highly probable that the medieval Greenlandic settlers encountered evidence of the long-departed Dorset and Saqqaq cultures while cutting into the turf to build their own homes, and some artefacts may have been recovered on the surface. For Ari to write about *steinsmiði* in Iceland in c. 1125 someone in Greenland had to have kept these artefacts from the past, remarked upon them, and remembered them. One reason for the commemoration of *steinsmiði* is self-evident but bears thinking about. Some of these ancient stone artefacts retain practical functions which would have been important to a materially-poor culture as was the initial Greenland settlement (see Orri Vésteinsson, 2005, 11). In the early centuries of settlement in Greenland and Iceland, the number and types of imports are fewer than similarly-sized contemporary farms in the Norwegian homeland. Any material object which could potentially be used was more than likely retained, and indeed Dorset, Saqqaq and Thule tools are found with some frequency at Norse farmsteads. To cite but one example, a quartzite scraper used by the Saqqaq or Dorset centuries earlier to process meat and hides was found in the *eldhús* of a farmstead where it may have functioned as a utensil of similar purpose (Ø71 Russip Kuua, Ruin 12, North Farm, Room I: Vebæk, 1992, no 282). Saqqaq or Dorset worked-stone objects of unclear function were found at other medieval farms and where there is no clear practical use, one must look elsewhere for significance in these finds. ‘Things are not inherently meaningful and meaning is created in the mind’ (Thomas, 2004, 23). That early Viking-Age farms were initially materially impoverished suggests that a deeper cultural or spiritual importance was placed upon *any* material object, whether it had an immediate practical function or not.

Richard Perkins notes that it is not unusual for material objects to be commemorated in prose accounts (1989). Ari’s use of Greenlandic material objects as *aides-mémoire* is not in itself unusual, but his interpretation of the evidence is unique. Not only does Ari address and describe the archaeological evidence from Greenland as told to him by Porkell, he also *practices* archaeology in the sense that he generates ‘new knowledge about people who are no longer present’ through the creation of ‘an

appropriate inferential framework'(Thomas, 2004, 18). Ari concludes that these tools and fragments of boats are linked to a specific people who now live in Vinland and whom the Greenlanders—but not the Icelanders—call *skrælingar*. This connection that he draws between the stone tools and the humans who worked them is significant and unparalleled for his time, predating similar explanations of stone tools elsewhere in Europe by over four centuries. Not until the Renaissance was systematic thought applied to the physical remains of past cultures (Trigger 1990, 52-5). Ari is unique in his inference and in linking material remains to a past Other. Although other accounts such as the *Historia Norvegie* do reference the *skrælingar* and their material culture north of Greenland (probably the Thule as they migrated southwards in the twelfth century: e.g. Ekrem and Mortensen 2003, 54), these accounts do not refer to the material culture of the past found by the first settlers to Greenland.

Ari not only describes Greenland's material past, but also Iceland's: Ísland byggðisk fyrst ýr Norvegi á dögum Haralds ens hárfagri [...]. Í þan tíð vas Íslands víði vaxit á miðli fjalls ok fjöru. Þá váru hér menn kristnir, þeir es Norðmenn kalla papa, en þeir fóru síðan á braut, af því at þeir vildu eigi vesa hér við heiðna menn, ok létu eptir bækr írskar ok bjöllur ok bagla; af því mátti skilja, at þeir váru menn írskr (*Ís.* 1, 5).

So, why does Ari place so much emphasis on the cultural remains from the past, describing and interpreting evidence in the context of past peoples? Why should he think it important to commemorate these in his twelfth-century Icelandic account? We might be aided in our understanding of Ari's use of material evidence by considering some general medieval beliefs about the past.

1. It was believed the world was only a few thousand years old, following biblical chronology, and time was linear (Thomas, 2004, 18).
2. Human degeneration is natural: the further away a culture was geographically from the Near East the more it was to slip into 'polytheism, idolatry and immorality' (Trigger 1990, 34). This degenerative theory was used by medieval Europeans 'to account for the primitive technologies of hunter-gatherers and tribal agriculturalists' encountered.
3. Teleology dominated medieval thought: an omnipotent God has preordained what was, is, or will be. 'There was therefore no sense that change or progress was intrinsic to human history or that human beings, unaided by God, were capable of achieving anything of historical significance'(Trigger 1990, 34; Thomas, 2004, 19).

Ari was a product of his time, and was very much a part of the literate, Latinate, Christian world. As an author he sought ways of explaining the history of Iceland in terms which this world could readily comprehend, as evidenced by his chronology in chapter 1. The notion of degeneration likewise influenced Ari's ordering of space and time in *Íslendingabók* and neatly accounts for the stone tools and skin boats in Greenland. Greenland is on the periphery of the known world—the known, *Christian* world. It follows that degenerate material culture like stone tools and houses would be found in the place which is farthest from the Holy Land. Ari interprets the evidence consistent with medieval Christian understanding. In so doing he gives the impression that Greenland is a degenerate place predetermined by God to be pagan.

In contrast, Iceland was preordained by God to be *christiana terrena*, a Christian land, consecrated ground, and the Icelandic conversion was inevitable, following God's divine will (Hermann 2005). This divine preordination is emphasised by the use of the verb *vera* to describe the Irish monks, that is, the Irish monks 'were here' (Clunies Ross 1997, 12). The verb *byggja* implies an agency which is not applied to the Irish: they did not find nor settle the land as the Norwegian settlers did in Iceland, nor how the Icelanders did in Greenland, nor indeed how the *skrælingar* are described to have done in Vinland. The Irish *papar* formed the Christian landscape as much as the trees and the volcanoes and were hence part of God's plan. As Margaret Clunies Ross suggests, the *bækr írskar ok bjóllur ok bagla* left behind by the *papar* 'were probably thought of as imbued with spiritual force, so that although Iceland did not become Christian again for over one hundred years, the land remained subject to their powers and [...] Iceland itself remained Christian, even though its human inhabitants for the most part did not' (1997, 21). It is equally possible that the stone tools from the past were also considered imbued with spiritual force, so that whatever the actions of mankind Greenland would eventually revert back to its natural, pagan state.

Greenland *fannsk ok byggðisk af Íslandi*. Ari emphasises that Iceland was settled from Norway, while Greenland was founded and settled from Iceland. Iceland in a colonial sense is described on equal terms with Norway the homeland. It does not appear Ari was worried about Iceland as homeland being associated with this degenerate, pagan place. In this sense it is puzzling that Ari disregards the conversion of Greenland and makes no reference to Greenland's Christian present in his narrative. Instead he chooses to emphasise Greenland's pagan past through the commemoration of material culture of an Other long departed. In *Eiríks saga rauða* (hereafter ESR), and as subsequently mentioned in Hans Egede's account, Greenland was converted to Christianity when Leifr Eiríksson was asked by the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason to take a priest with him back to Greenland (ESR 5). The saga tradition of the conversion is supported by the only skaldic reference to Greenland in an anonymous *drápa* for Óláfr (Finnur Jónsson 1908-15, B, 570, v. 12). The verse refers to the conversion of Greenland along with the conversion of Shetland, Norway and the Orkneys. Although the verse was probably composed to emphasise the extent of Óláfr's power and influence over the known Old Norse-speaking world, the meaning of this particular verse is clear enough: it was Óláfr Tryggvason who converted Greenland. This verse almost certainly predates Ari's account. Even Adam of Bremen, who writes in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* (c. 1075) that Greenland received its name because it was surrounded by salt water and all the inhabitants were constantly seasick, and that the Greenlanders themselves were ferocious pirates, managed to state *Ad eos etiam sermo est nuper christianitatem pervolasse* ('To them it is said that Christianity winged its way not too long ago': Bk 10, ch. 36).

A simple explanation for Ari's omission of the Greenlandic conversion could stem from the fact that, in Diana Whaley's description, the work is decidedly 'Icelando-centric' (2000, 171). Greenland is of interest only as a point of spiritual comparison with Iceland. Another possibility is that Ari may not have mentioned the conversion of Greenland because he did not care to, or that the Icelandic bishops

Þorlákr Runolfsson of Skálholt (1118-33) and Ketill Þorsteinsson of Hólar (1122-45) and the priest Sæmundr for whom he wrote the account did not care for him to write of it.

Anthony D. Smith suggests that 'no persisting national identity can emerge without a bedrock of shared meanings and ideals which guide action and determine the direction of social change' (1999, 57). It has long been noted that there are definite elements of identity-making and indeed mythmaking within the Icelandic literary culture (e.g. Clunies Ross, 1993; 1997; 1998; Lindow, 1997; Meulengracht Sørensen, 2001). Although Ari portrays Iceland as the political and cultural homeland to Greenland in *Íslendingabók* in the same way as Norway is Iceland's homeland, he does not claim Icelandic victory for Christ in Greenland. One may wonder whether Ari does not defend Greenland's spirituality or claim the conversion for Iceland since he thought it a lost cause to do so because of the presence of pagan material culture.

Ari's use of material culture and his portrayal of Greenland as a pagan land influences later accounts such as *Eiríks saga rauða*. The cultural importance of objects to commemorate the past and to portray a heathen present in Greenland is apparent in *Eiríks saga rauða*.² In the saga narrative, material culture is used to contrast the cultural and spiritual formations of Greenlandic and Icelandic societies. The *landnámskona* Auðr djúpúðga arrives in Iceland, and *lét hon reisa krossa, því at hon var skirð ok vel trúuð* ('she had crosses raised, because she was baptised and very devout': ESR 1: 196). As in *Íslendingabók*, Iceland is established as a Christian land where good Christians live and who alter their cultural landscape accordingly through the use of appropriate material culture.

The cultural landscape of the founding Greenlandic community is depicted as decidedly pagan. In chapter 4 of ESR we are told that the founding settlement was initially as impoverished as the archaeological record suggests (ESR 4: 206). Instead of turning to the one true faith in this bleak time, the Greenlanders turn to their *litil-völvu*, the seeress Þorbjörg. The high seat (*hásvæti*) raised for the völvu by the pre-eminent settler Þorkell begs a direct contrast with the crosses raised by Auðr in Iceland. What follows is a very detailed and oft-cited description of Þorbjörg's dress and her possessions (ESR 4: 206-07). Consider the detailed description of her knife: it had a handle of walrus tusk (*knif tannskeptan*) which was double-bound with copper-alloy, and *var brottin af oddrinn* ('the point was broken off': ESR: 4, 207). This attention to detail and general importance placed on 'things' give the saga an air of credibility, which has been amply discussed elsewhere (e.g. Gisli Sigurðsson, 2004; 2005). It is important to note that material objects are assigned great narrative importance within ESR, and material objects of the recent past are used by the compiler to deliberately contrast Christian Iceland with pagan Greenland. Ari does the same in *Íslendingabók* with material objects from the distant past. The boundaries of Christianity are thus firmly established in both texts.

We might question, then, how material culture assisted in the commemoration of a 'useful past' of Greenland (Whaley, 2000). It can be said that material culture of

² I do not wish to refer to the *húsanotra* of *Grænlandinga saga* as it works as an *aide-mémoire* for Vinland and not specifically Greenland. Perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on studying Vinland's portrayal in ESR and *Grænlandinga sögur* to the detriment of dedicated studies concerning Greenland.

the past and present in Greenland was imbued with meaning, was retained and used if possible, was commemorated and discussed within and outside of Greenland. For the Greenlanders, a great importance was placed on 'things'. For Ari, material culture was employed to commemorate a useful pagan past of Greenland which acts as counterpoint to his focus of a Christian Iceland. Most importantly, Greenland is excluded from the Christian present in Ari's account. This exclusion contributes to how Greenland and its inhabitants are commemorated in later prose works: as redoubtable and unrepentant pagans on the fringes of the *úbygd*.

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