



Between Primitiveness and Civilisation
Nationalism, Archaeology and the Materiality of Iceland's
Past

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*Between Primitiveness and Civilisation: Nationalism, Archaeology and the Materiality of
Iceland's Past.*

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Abstract

Archaeology has been fundamentally entangled in colonial power dynamics and nationalist schemes. This entanglement is clearly evident in Iceland, as our discipline has been, and continues to be, a vital tool in shaping and reshaping the Icelandic national identity. Despite the increased interest in the politics of the past by Icelandic anthropologists, sociologists and folklorists, the subject has nonetheless remained somewhat elusive to archaeologists and has received little to no interest. By presenting four cases studies on archaeological remains, historical and literary sources and ethnological material, the present work aspires to fill this void.

An archaeological approach to nations and nationhood begins by acknowledging the intricate relationship between materials, cultural artefacts, places and people as well as the nationalist discourses that surround them. Based on an archaeological sensitivity towards material culture and materiality, each case study is attentive to the relationality of discourses and objects, and aims to demonstrate that what enables the entanglement of archaeology with nationalism is a set of intermeshed, mutually embedded and at times overlapping histories, discourses and materialities. Within this framework, the thesis demonstrates that the materials with which archaeologists work in Iceland have always been implicated in a colonial-cum-nationalist rhetoric of civilisation and argues that the effects of this entanglement are still felt in a wide array of disciplines including archaeology. By paying an increased attention to the materials that constitute the nation together with the discourses and practices about such materials we can provide a more accurate and comprehensive interpretation of nations and nationalisms.

The present thesis aims to grow an awareness of the relationship between archaeology and nationalism and inform archaeological practitioners, academics as well as the public about the inherent and complicated nature of this relationship. It also aspires to show how archaeology can be used to deconstruct a number of established national narratives and ideas. The exposure of this understudied relationship will challenge some of our stereotypical and ethnocentric interpretations of the past, encourage the introduction of other themes for investigation, as well as put Icelandic archaeology in tune with some of the major theoretical advances noted elsewhere.

Ágrip

Fornleifafræði sem fræðigrein hefur frá upphafi verið samofin nýlendustefnu og orðræðu þjóðernishyggjunnar. Þetta samband er einnig greinilegt á Íslandi þar sem fornleifafræðin hefur haft, og hefur enn, mikilvægu hlutverki að gegna við að móta og endurmóta þjóðernisvitund Íslendinga. Þrátt fyrir aukinn áhuga íslenskra mannfræðinga, félagsfræðinga og þjóðfræðinga á pólitísku gild fortíðarinnar hafa fornleifafræðingar ekki haft skýra sýn á viðfangsefnið og það hefur ekki vakið mikinn áhuga þeirra, ef einhvern. Hér er markmiðið að fylla þetta tómarúm með því að leggja fram fjórar tilviksrannsóknir á fornleifum, ritheimildum, bókmenntum og þjóðfræðilegu efni.

Hugmyndir fornleifafræðinnar um þjóðir og þjóðerni byggja á flóknu samspili efniviðs, menningarminja, staða og fólks sem allt blandast saman í orðræðu þjóðernishyggjunnar. Allar tilviksrannsóknirnar miða að því að greina í sundur tengsl orðræðu og hluta. Markmiðið er að sýna fram á að samband fornleifafræði og þjóðernishyggju byggir á samofnum frásögnum, orðræðum og hinu efnislega.

Í þessari ritgerð er sýnt fram á að viðfangsefni fornleifafræðinga á Íslandi hafa markast af nýlenduhugsun og þjóðernissinnaðri orðræðu um siðmenningu. Færð eru rök fyrir því að þessa sambands gæti innan fjölmargra fræðigreina, þar á meðal fornleifafræði. Því er einnig haldið fram að hægt sé að skilja betur hugtök á borð við þjóð og þjóðernishyggju með því að beina sjónum að hinu efnislega og þeirri orðræðu og þeim athöfnum sem því tengjast.

Í víðara samhengi þá miðar þessi ritgerð að því að auka meðvitund um samband fornleifafræði og þjóðernishyggju og upplýsa fornleifafræðilega iðkendur, fræðimenn jafnt sem almenning, um hið samgróna og margþætta eðli þessa sambands. Leitast er við að sýna fram á hvernig fornleifafræðileg nálgun nýtist til að afbyggja fjölda rótgróinna frásagna og hugmynda um þjóðina. Með því að afhjúpa þetta órannsakaða samband er staðalímyndum og þjóðhverfum túlkunum okkar á fortíðinni ögrað. Afhjúpuninni er ætlað að skapa svigrúm fyrir önnur rannsóknarefni og stuðla að því að íslensk fornleifafræði gangi í takt við helstu kennilegu framfarir sem orðið hafa.

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Notes on Pronunciation

The present work has opted to use the Icelandic alphabet and pronunciation of words. Even though the Icelandic alphabet is very similar to the English one, there are a few but notable differences. These are noted below.

Pronunciation of individual letters:

Á á - said as “ow” as in cow or loud. Icelandic Example: *mál* (speech, saying).

Ð ð - said as “th” in brother. Icelandic Example: *maður* (man, person).

Í í - said as “ee” in we. Icelandic Example: *Íslenska* (Icelandic).

Ó ó - said as “oh” in low. Icelandic Example: *blóm* (flower).

Ú ú - said as the “oo” sound in moon. Icelandic Example: *þú* (you).

Þ þ - said as the “th” sound in thing. Icelandic Example: *þing* (parliament).

Æ æ - said as “eye”. Icelandic Example: *fornleifafræði* (archaeology).

Ö ö - said as “u” as in murder. Icelandic Example: *köttur* (cat).

Pronunciation of double consonant

LL – said as “tl”. Icelandic Example: *sæll* (hello, m.) sounds as *sætl*.

* Icelandic to English translations are by Sólrún Inga Traustadóttir.

1. Introduction

Archaeology has long been entangled in colonial power dynamics and nationalist schemes (Díaz-Andreu & Champion 1996; Díaz-Andreu 2007; Gullapalli 2008; Hamilakis 2007, 2008; Kohl & Fawcett 1995; Meskell 1998). Over the last thirty years, archaeologists have become increasingly aware of the effects of nationalism and colonialism on the discipline and the way in which they interpret the past. For Díaz-Andreu (2014: 5144), this increased interest in the so-called politics of the past is directly associated with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent emergence of new nation states and the rise of nationalist movements—a set of political changes that many archaeologists have experienced first-hand. At the same time, the emergence of post-processual archaeology during the 1980s led to broader discussions about the relationship of archaeology to politics and spurred various debates on the role of archaeology and its practitioners in political processes (Shanks & Tilley 1987). This discourse on the relationship between the discipline and its socio-political contexts (Trigger & Glover 1981; Trigger 1984; Ucko 1987) has enriched the understanding of the ways in which archaeology interacts with authority (Díaz-Andreu & Champion 1996; Gathercole & Lowenthal 1990; Kohl & Fawcett 1995; Meskell 1998).

Much of the ensuing debate has concentrated on the uses and abuses of the past for political purposes and has variously produced an array of case studies that discuss the exploitation of the archaeological record in Nazi Germany (Arnold 1990, 1992; Bouchard 2011; Hale 2003; Härke 2002), in communist states and the former Soviet Union (Shnirelman 1995), during the dictatorial regimes of Spain and Portugal (Díaz-Andreu 1995; Lillios 1995), as well as in the Middle East and the Mediterranean (Goode 2007; Hamilakis 2007; Meskell et al. 1998; Silberman 1989, 1990). Other scholars have explored the political involvement of the discipline in such issues as the rightful ownership of archaeological materials and the restitution of cultural treasures (Greenfield 1996), as well as in matters of authenticity, ethnicity, and cultural resource management (Kohl & Fawcett 1995; McGuire, Donovan & Wurst et al. 2005; Trigger 1989), while others still have paid attention to topics such as the commodification of the past and the marketing of cultural heritage on a national level (Pomeroy-Kellinger & Scott et al. 2007; Rowan & Baram et al. 2004). In more recent years, many have spoken of the decolonisation of archaeology from hegemonic narratives and attempted to “account for the involvement, participation, and coproduction in archaeological research projects of actors and historically marginalized sectors” (Curtoni

2014: 396-397; see also Gnecco & Ayala 2010; McNiven & Russell 2005; Smith & Wobst et al. 2005).

There is no doubt that the entanglement of archaeology and nationalism is clearly evident in Iceland, as the discipline has been, and continues to be, a vital tool for shaping and reshaping the Icelandic national identity. Despite the increased interest in the politics of the past by a number of Icelandic anthropologists, sociologists, and folklorists, the subject has nonetheless remained elusive to archaeologists and has received little or no interest (see Byock 1992; Friðriksson 1994; Lucas & Parigoris 2013). This thesis aims to begin to fill this void. More specifically, it aims to develop an awareness of the relationship between archaeology and nationalism in Iceland and to inform archaeological practitioners, academics and the public about the inherent and complex nature of this relationship. It also aspires to show how archaeology can be used to deconstruct a number of established national narratives and ideas. The exposure of this understudied relationship will challenge some of the stereotyped and ethnocentric interpretations of the past, encourage the introduction of other themes for investigation, as well as put Icelandic archaeology in line with some of the major theoretical advances noted elsewhere. By presenting four cases studies on archaeological remains, historical and literary sources, and the ethnological material archaeologists use in their efforts to interpret the past, the present work is one of the first attempts to discuss in detail the entanglement of archaeology and nationalism in Iceland. It thus contributes both to the debates on the use of the past for political purposes within the country and the wider discourse on nationalism and archaeology.

1.1 Nationalism and the Politics of the Past in Iceland

The politics of the past (Gathercole & Lowenthal 1990) has not been fully explored in Icelandic archaeology for a number of reasons. One of the main reasons is the belief that the discipline has played only a marginal role in the Icelandic nationalist discourse. This is mainly due to the fact that Icelandic archaeological remains have long been considered poor and uninspiring and historically played a rather insignificant role in the struggle of independence from Denmark as well as the formation of the Icelandic national identity.

As nationalist sentiments grew in the nineteenth century, the lack of monumental architecture or any other notable antiquities from the archaeological record was perceived as

indicative of the “uncivilised” state of the Icelandic people. Early Icelandic nationalists circumvented the issue by constructing a narrative that promoted the civilised state of the population through their literary heritage, namely the Icelandic sagas (see chapter 2). Archaeology was therefore conscripted to the nationalist cause mostly by subordinating the often non-descript and “unimpressive” archaeological remains to the more potent literary heritage (Friðriksson 1994; Lucas & Parigoris 2013).

Early antiquarians, such as the Danish scholars Kristian Kålund (1844–1919) and Daniel Bruun (1856–1931), began to record ancient monuments, legends, folklore, and historic landscapes, while making literary analogies to the medieval sagas. Similarly, the systematic surveys by the Danish Royal Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities and the Icelandic Literary Society had, by the early nineteenth century, attempted to locate ancient ruins that were associated to saga events and historic figures. At the same time, the early surveyors of the Icelandic Archaeological Society (established 1879) focused on sites that could be connected to well-known characters of the Icelandic sagas, while the first state antiquarian sought to register monuments of historic importance based on earlier documentation and written descriptions. Beyond this main preoccupation of both local and foreign antiquarians to search for archaeological sites that were associated with the Icelandic sagas was also the desire to connect sites with the perceived civilised world. This impulse is one of the main reasons that, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the number of sites regarded as potential temples or law courts increased considerably and a set of rather “humble and unimpressive” archaeological sites were turned into monuments (Friðriksson 1994).

The desire to associate Iceland with the “civilised” world was also reflected in the way in which antiquities were presented within the frames of museums. As was the case elsewhere, early Icelandic museums had an important role in forging the Icelandic national identity. They were to foster the cultural advances of the nation, conserve heritage objects and art (Hafsteinsson et al. 2015; Hallgrímsdóttir 2016a), and present the physical and historical evidence for the nation’s right to independence (Whitehead & Hafsteinsson 2018: 105). Within this framework, the first Antiquarian Collection, *Forngripasafnið*, was founded in Reykjavík in 1863 where it aimed to build its own historical collection and to register Icelandic antiquities kept in Danish museums (Amundsen 2012). Influenced by the brothers Grimm and their collection of folkloric narratives and myths, the director of the National Library and first curator of the museum, Jón Árnason, had already collected and published

several volumes of folklore material. The general interest at the time was directed towards the collection of this oral material, but the second curator of *Forngripasafnið*, Sigurður Guðmundsson, also argued for the necessity of an antiquarian collection that included ancient artefacts, books, documents, and natural objects.

According to Guðmundsson, such a national antiquarian collection could help “grasp the nationality and history of the country, both presently and in antiquity, and [to] gain a better understanding of the sagas” (quoted in Hafsteinsson 2019: 57). At the same time, the collection aimed to change the perspective of foreigners towards Icelanders. As Guðmundsson wrote in the journal *Þjóðólfur*, “it is imperative that we liberate ourselves from the foreign perception which holds that we have always remained defenceless weaklings, lacking the means to survive, and we had nothing but mud-huts to crawl into like barbarians; this view of the foreigner will stick to us, if we are unwilling to uncover, in black-and-white, this lie, and this is best achieved with the museum, and not solely with books” (quoted in Hafsteinsson 2019: 59).

From these humble beginnings, *Forngripasafnið* later became *Þjóðminjasafn Íslands* (The National Museum of Iceland), which held the responsibility for the preservation and exhibition of all Icelandic antiquities and cultural history (Hafsteinsson & Björnsdóttir, 2017). Alongside *Landsskjalasafnið* (The National Archives of Iceland), *Náttúrugripasafnið* (The Natural History Museum), and *Landsbókasafnið* (The National Library), *Forngripasafnið* was housed in the newly built *Safnahús* (Museum House) in 1908 and acted as a testament to the country’s unique history, demonstrating the capacity of the nation to build an independent state without Danish interference (Hálfðanarson 2009).

This socio-political context has influenced the whole nature of archaeological investigation in Iceland (Lucas 2004). It has led to a persistent and over-riding emphasis on the archaeological remains of the “Golden Age” of the Settlement—the era that is the subject of the Icelandic family sagas—crystallising a strong connection of the discipline with the Icelandic literary tradition. This romantic notion is also present in the ethnological and folkloristic collections, where the everyday aspects of early Icelandic history are expressed as those of a pure and authentic agrarian society, encapsulating the characteristics of the true Icelandic *Volk*.

While the emphasis on the Settlement remains quite strong in Icelandic archaeology, as well as in the eyes of the wider international community and the Icelandic population itself, recent changes have begun to shift away from this ethnocentric focus. The establishment of the *National Archaeological Heritage Agency* in 2001¹, the introduction of archaeology as a major subject at the University of Iceland in 2002 and the associated rise of qualified archaeologists, as well as an increase in private sector and self-employed archaeologists, have diversified the archaeological research agenda. But even as Iceland slowly moves towards “post-nationalistic” archaeological narratives, the association of archaeology with nationalism, as well as the entanglement of archaeological sites and artefacts, historical sources, and ethnographic material in the politics of the past have been underestimated and have remained outside the scope of any scholarly enquiry.

Part of this stance towards the politics of the past is largely owed to the pervasive assumption that Iceland, like the Scandinavian countries, has never engaged in the ills of chauvinistic nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism. For many, the modern Nordic states represent ideal societies, with a reputation for equality of means, gender, race, and general welfare. Rooted in the first half of the twentieth century, terms such as “consensual democracies,” “regimes of benevolence” (Hilson 2008) and the “western middle powers” (Stokke 1989) still reverberate worldwide, expressing the manner in which the Nordic nations have been able to minimise social tensions through political compromises and reforms.² Within the context of what is known as the Nordic *Sonderweg* (Hilson 2008)—the “third way” of doing politics—Iceland is likewise presented as a historically democratic nation. Alongside the traditional assumption that Iceland’s geographic isolation has resulted in more of an insular and culturally homogenous society, the adoption of a moderate legalist nationalist discourse and a non-violent struggle of independence has over the years come to allude to a dispassionate, level-headed, and critical political discourse void of exaggeration,

1 The previous National Archaeological Heritage Agency and the Architectural Heritage Board merged to form the Icelandic Cultural Heritage Agency (*Minjastofnun*) in 2013.

2 Even though the image of Scandinavia as especially democratic remains popular in the public mind, much academic work over the last fifteen years has discussed the participation of the Nordic countries in colonial projects and the social inequalities that pervade Scandinavian societies. For Nordic colonialism, see Bojsen (2007), Mensah (2008), Blaagaard (2010), Fello (2010), Rodrigues (2011), Keskinen, Tuori, Irni and Mulinari et al. (2009), Naum & Nordin et al. (2013). For social inequalities, see Bengtsson (2019) and for archaeology see Hanson, Nilsson and Svensson (2020).

extremity, and exclusion, and it is often perceived as an ideal model of political behavior (Hálfðanarson 2001).

Contributing to the uncritical approach toward politics in Icelandic archaeology is also the fact that the overall academic treatment of nationalism and archaeology has, up until recently, concentrated on the abuses of the past under authoritarian and dictatorial regimes (Hamilakis 2007) or politically problematic and heavily contested national contexts. The Balkan Peninsula, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the post-colonial contexts in Asia, South America, and Africa are among some of the favourite areas of investigation, while the “politically stable” democratic states of Western Europe have often escaped scrutiny (cf. Brooks & Mehler et al. 2017). Through this lens, the political abuses of the past have largely been seen as the consequence of top-down interventions whose aim was to foment nationalist sentiments of populations in response to the drastic transformation of national boundaries, political tensions, authoritarian regimes, and nationalist struggles against colonial oppression.

All of that considered, the study of nationalism and archaeology has taken a crucial turn in recent years. Within the general discourse on nations and nationalism, the idea that nationalism is solely a cynical top-down political project has been fiercely challenged and it has been explored more as a “cultural system, ideology and ontology [that defines] people’s being-in-the world” (Hamilakis 2007: 15). Nationalism has come to be considered an ontological apparatus and an organizing frame of reference (cf. Anderson 1983; Herzfeld 1992; Kapferer 1988, 1989) whereby state institutions, politicians, academics, intellectuals, and the public are enmeshed in heterogeneous networks that construct the discourses that produce the realities of nations. The fact that these discourses belong to conceptually different arenas and domains, and are directed to different audiences ultimately means that nationalism is a dynamic and emergent process that can involve all members of a national community (Hamilakis 2007: 29). The dynamic and potentially contested involvement of these diverse social actors in turn generates reworked and reinvented visions and understandings of the nation which are manifested in myriad and often contradictory ways (cf. Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Foster 2002).

This understanding of nationalism as a dynamic and complex political and cultural system maintained and regenerated by diverse social actors has had a profound effect on the study of nationalism and archaeology. The production of a national past has come to be seen as an endeavour that is not exclusively a state affair but rather a complex, emergent process

mediated by a broad array of participants. For many archaeologists, this view of nationalism may have made its relationship to archaeology an elusive one. However, it has also created a framework for expanding the field's attention from the blatantly obvious abuses of the past, driven by the nationalist passion of dictatorial regimes and the nationalist fervour of ethnic conflicts, to those more moderate and even banal manifestations of the relationship in contexts that appear to be more democratic and politically unproblematic. It has thus opened up numerous opportunities for studying the phenomenon in previously understudied contexts and prompted the examination of equally under-investigated manifestations (cf. Edwards et al. 2006; Silverman 2002; Urry 2002).

This theoretical turn in the general discourse of nations and nationalism has been noted in various Icelandic academic circles. The earlier attempts of historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (2001, 2003, 2005) to explore the roots of the nationalist movement in a causal-historical and macro-analytical fashion stand out, along with the work of anthropologists Gísli Pálsson (1995) and Paul Durrenberger (1995) on past and present-day manifestations of nationalism in the country have been followed more recently by an increasing corpus of academic work by Icelandic historians, folklorists, and anthropologists who re-evaluate the participation of Iceland in both the nationalist and colonial discourses (Ísleifsson et al. 2011; Jakobsson et al. 2009). Largely prompted by the 2008 financial crisis, this latter work has begun to challenge the stereotypical views of Iceland as an egalitarian society (Oddsson 2012), to re-examine the position of Iceland within the Danish empire (Ellenberger 2009; Loftsdóttir 2010, 2011), and to discuss the pervasiveness of the nationalist and colonialist rhetoric in the country (Loftsdóttir 2008, 2019) as well as the historical roots and effects of popular images and perceptions of Iceland in both the past and present (Glad 2011; Huijbens 2011; Ísleifsson 2011; Kjørtansdóttir 2011). In that same spirit, this thesis aspires to contribute both to the Icelandic and the general discourse on nationalism and archaeology, and intends to raise a much needed awareness of the politics of the past in Iceland while examining all the discourses that have shaped the character of archaeological investigation in the country and the ways in which we interpret Iceland's past.

1.2 Theoretical and Methodological Framework

A study of nationalism and the politics of the past in Iceland needs to approach the topic by first examining the array of different practices and actors. Moreover, it needs to acknowledge that archaeology cannot be treated in isolation but must rather be seen in relation to a number

of different disciplines and discourses. The entanglement of archaeology and nationalism in Iceland cannot be understood without reference to the intersections of archaeology with history and literature and their own liaisons with nationalist politics. As has been the case elsewhere, archaeology in Iceland has always had a strong philological and historical element, to the extent that archaeological research and practice have been inadvertently influenced by the discourses produced in these other disciplines (Einarsson 1994; Friðriksson 1994). While these influences would play a part in any similar studies around the world, the idea that archaeology had only an oblique role in the creation of the Icelandic nationalist discourse obliges us even more so to see the entanglement of archaeology with nationalism in light of other fields of study.

Taking into consideration the above, Icelandic folklore, mythology, ancient texts, and archaeological artefacts and remains no matter how “poor” or “rich,” “uninspiring” or “impressive” they were considered, were all entangled in a nineteenth century discourse that sought to create a narrative about the ancientness and historical continuity of the Icelandic nation as well as the cultural homogeneity of its people. Icelandic and foreign antiquarians used the sagas to locate archaeological sites, place names were gathered and assessed according to their historical depth and origins, and vernacular architectural remains were appraised according to their potential monumental significance, while building techniques, livestock farming, and other practices were seen vis-à-vis ancient practices that verified the unbroken link between past and present. Above all, the Icelandic sagas were used to substantiate the ancientness of the Icelandic people and demonstrate a degree of cultural sophistication comparable to the rest of the so-called civilised world. These discourses from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played a significant role in forging a narrative of historical continuity and cultural identity, which in turn furnished the claims for independence with a much-needed powerful rhetoric capable of transforming the once poor, distant, and neglected Danish province into a sovereign Icelandic nation.

Nowadays few archaeologists, or for that matter any other scholar and academic, would share the methods, ideas, and concerns of the early antiquarians. This early discourse has nonetheless left behind a set of powerful metanarratives that still influence both the scholarly and public domains. Even though modern research agendas have drastically altered their scope, it is not uncommon to see scholarly works, museum displays, and public expressions that take the narrative of cultural continuity for granted. Even though these

manifestations may not be blatantly political, they are nonetheless associated with the nationalist agenda of years past and illustrate the persistence and resilience of nationalist metanarratives.

The objectives of the present study, then, are two-fold. First, it looks at the intersection of archaeology with other disciplines and specialisations in order to shed light on the relationship between archaeology and nationalism in Iceland. Second, it explores the ways in which the early nationalist discourses and their metanarratives still resonate in contemporary scholarship and the public domain. In doing so, the shortcomings of such discourses are investigated, and in certain cases, alternative interpretations of the discussed materials are presented. In service of these objectives, this thesis adopts a case study approach. Each of the four case studies and the six primary chapters presented here deals with the production of knowledge of the past that has a direct relevance to archaeology and our own contemporary production of knowledge. These include the matter of vernacular architecture and the associated archaeological remains, the use of historical sources, and the ethnographic record in the form of place names and photographs. Each study composes a linear, chronological narrative and addresses the ways in which these materials have been entwined with the politics of the past and discusses the socio-political capital they carry.

Accordingly, this thesis does not take the obvious route by focusing on archaeological texts and institutions but rather looks at the *intersections* between archaeology and other fields. Each case study delves into a number of disciplines and fields of study in which an archaeologist may not claim direct expertise, but it does so with an archaeological sensitivity towards material culture and the “materiality of the nation.” Given the fact that material culture is densely woven with nationalist ideas and institutions, alongside practices and performances, a starting point for each of the inquiries is the idea that nations are not simply political constructs but also material realities. This is simply due to the fact that nations need objects to hold on to, monumental places to gather, and therefore a topography of national landmarks, images, and artefacts that materialises them (see chapters 2 and 3). The physicality, visibility, embodied presence, and tangible nature of ancient ruins, buildings, and artefacts create a spatiality that transforms the timeless, homogeneous, and empty space of a nation into a concrete material place (Appadurai 1995: 213). It is upon this national geography that antiquities acquire the capacity to “stand in a homological and metonymic relationship” to the nation (Hamilakis 2007: 296), and it is through these material

embodiments of the nation that individuals can experience historical narratives and national myths in a tactile as well as affective and sensuous manner. Consequently, the stance taken here is that the meaning attributed to the nation is not only traceable in political statements, nationalist literature, legal, and other official documents. The meaning of the nation is also deeply embedded in the material world and it would not be an exaggeration to state that it is *matter* itself that has the ability to bring together often disparate and abstract national discourses to make an otherwise imagined community appear as a concrete, reified entity.

The present study explores this dialectic between discourse and materiality, proceeding with the aforementioned archaeological sensitivity towards material culture and materiality. This discursive relationship between nationhood and cultural artefacts including architectural ruins, monuments, and artworks may have been analysed by a number of scholars who deal with nationalism (Abu El-Haj 1998; Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Leoussi 1998, 2001; Smith 1986, 1999), but this thesis does only draw inspiration from these works, but also from the general studies on the notion of materiality. Most of the latter studies on materiality have been concerned with understanding objects, specifically with the ways in which individuals or groups interact with objects and how they are constituted through their material world (see Appadurai 1986; Auslander 2009; Fehérváry 2009, 2013; Keane 2003, 2005; Miller 2005; Tilley et al. 2006; Woodward 2007). To varying degrees, such studies do not simply see the material world as an embodiment of values and ideological beliefs, or one that simply mirrors social relationships, but as one that provides “shape and meaning, affordances and constraints to social relationships” (Zubrzycki 2017: 5). An archaeological approach to materials, materiality, and nationhood should likewise begin by acknowledging the intricate relationship between materials, cultural artefacts, places, and people, as well as the discourses that surround them. By paying increased attention to the materials that constitute the nation, together with the discourses and practices that involve those materials, we can produce a more accurate and comprehensive interpretation of nations and nationalisms.

Adopting the theory that nationalism is a cultural system and a “work in progress” (Hamilakis 2007) on the other hand, the study uses an array of equally diverse materials in order to capture how these seemingly independent discourses about “things from the past” work. Scholarly works, literary creations, newspaper articles, as well as autobiographical snippets are mobilized to capture a more comprehensive view of the politics of the past. Using

this diversity of materials, the study finds instances where discourses converge and become mutually dependent and collaborative and others when they contradict one another and clash. The choice of material is also informed by a strong wish to shed some light, even partially, on the ways in which nationalist metanarratives persist today and are experienced in everyday life. At the same time, the need to include such varied material illustrates the fact that nationalism and the politics of the past most often evade any simplistic academic treatment (Hamilakis 2007).

Given the selection of such diverse material, the present study cannot pretend to offer an exhaustive presentation of the phenomenon it has set out to discuss. Discourses as well as associated data have been selected according to their consistency with the study's purpose, but without privileging or disproving any other data, discourses, or interpretations. Critical works, both past and present, that clash, dismiss and/or offer different views and interpretations are after all omnipresent throughout the study. The study follows thus a number of discourses and engages critically with the *situatedness* of each discourse while analyzing data for elements that privilege certain ways of knowing and knowledge production in accordance to the main interpretative concerns of each case study.

In terms of the *situatedness* of each discourse, even though the case studies presented here follow a chronological linearity, they do not try to capture a temporal continuity of discourses but rather their contiguity on a spatial, conceptual plane (Winnicot 1971). To follow a temporal linearity insinuates a rigid directionality and orderly succession of narratives on archaeological ruins, documents, or artefacts, which in turn tends to see them as complete cultural objects with a stable meaning. By contrast, using a spatial, conceptual dimension is critical for developing an understanding that archaeological objects and the discourses associated with them compose a complex, changing, and uneven topography that can only be fully understood when we “take into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices—inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, [and] prohibitions” (Said 1994: 318). Understanding this spatial dimension also relies on the fact that as with any object, things from the past have intricate and dynamic social biographies and corporeal natures. As such, antiquities can elicit identification, evoke memories, and produce responses and sensations that transcend time and allow a set of multiple temporalities to coexist and be enacted.

Each case study is attentive to this relationship between discourses and objects, as they aim to demonstrate that the entanglement of archaeology with nationalism is dependent on a set of intermeshed, mutually embedded, and at times overlapping histories, discourses and materialities. The way in which the relationality of discourses and objects is employed here is akin to the work of Edward Said. In his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Said set out to identify the subtle, opaque, yet almost ubiquitous interrelationship between European culture and the imperial enterprise by illustrating the complicity of certain kinds of cultural artefacts and knowledge production with imperialist and colonialist endeavours. To do so, he brought together the social worlds and perspectives of both the former coloniser and the formerly colonised as well as those of the post-colonial critic, in order to scrutinise the beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices that permeate Western novellas and musical compositions. By juxtaposing this set of seemingly different ideological and cultural perspectives and interpretive voices, Said was able to investigate their possible “complementarity and interdependence” and their role in the creation and maintenance of hegemonic imperialist and colonialist discourses (Said 1994: 32-33, 96).

Said insisted on the importance of reading texts in a retrospective and “heterophonic” manner, known as “contrapuntal reading,” in order to achieve a plurality of vision, as well as to bring different discourses into the various contexts in which they operate (Said 1994: 66, 161). In doing so, he demonstrated the ways in which cultural products, artefacts, and discourses are affiliated in an “implicit network of peculiarly cultural associations between forms, statements and other aesthetic elaborations on the one hand and, on the other, institutions, agencies, classes, and amorphous social forces” (Said 1983:174). In the present case, reading contrapuntally is valuable for the idea that “different perceptions, interests and agendas affect critically the archaeological process” which obliges archaeologists “to identify and engage with those different interests in ways that transcend the disciplinary boundaries of archaeological authority” (Hamilakis & Anagnostopoulos 2009: 70). Such a contrapuntal analysis is evident in the more recent “ethnographic turn” in archaeology and the associated development of “archaeological ethnography.” Defined “as a highly contested and thus fertile cross-disciplinary as well as transcultural, politically loaded *space*,” archaeological ethnography attempts to bring together “multiple conversations, engagements, interventions, and critiques” stemming from “diverse publics and researchers of equally diverse backgrounds” (Hamilakis & Anagnostopoulos 2009: 67).

Applied to the main concerns of any archaeological enquiry—namely, materiality and temporality—such tools enable the past to be read without foregrounding and privileging the dominant views and official discourses and gives both a focus and a locus to the experiences, past or present, of underrepresented individuals and groups. Prompted by the understanding that archaeology is a social practice of the present and the associated emergence of reflexivity as a key epistemological feature of archaeology, the present work attempts to undertake an archaeological ethnography in order “to explore the contemporary relevance and meaning of the material past for diverse publics, the politics of archaeological practice, and the claims and contestations involving past material traces and landscapes” (Hamilakis & Anagnostopoulos 2009: 67; also Castañeda & Matthews 2008a; Hamilakis 2007; Mortensen & Hollowell 2009).

Specifically, this thesis employs a “multi-sited, historical and archaeological ethnography” (Hamilakis 2007: 24) in much the same way as Hamilakis has done in his own treatment of nationalism and archaeology in Greece. By drawing on a wide variety of sources, including newspaper articles and other literary and historical sources, academic and autobiographical writing, the thesis brings together the aforementioned “multiple conversations, engagements, interventions, and critiques” (Hamilakis & Anagnostopoulos 2009: 67) in order to explore the intersections of archaeology with an array of different disciplines and practices and to illustrate that the relationship of nationalist politics and the presentation of the past are dependent on multivocal, dialogic processes. Without giving epistemic primacy to any of the data presented, this archaeological ethnography is both a historical venture, as it tries to “to understand the historical depth and the social and power dynamics in each context” (Hamilakis 2007: 24), and an archaeological one since it deals with the notion of materiality.

This thesis then invites the reader to a contrapuntal reading of the material presented. Each case study views the entanglement of archaeology with politics: 1) vis-à-vis the involvement of other disciplines and specialisations; 2) in conjunction with the considerations of state institutions, academic works, and public discourses; 3) in comparison to other national contexts; 4) in conversation with wider theoretical considerations and theories. What ties all of the above considerations together is a focus on the materiality of the nation, specifically some of the most crucial components of any archaeological inquiry in Iceland; that is, vernacular architecture, literary sources, and ethnographic evidence.

In this regard, the study neither looks to simplify and categorise the entanglement of archaeology with nationalism nor does it make implicit assumptions that nationalism in Iceland is a pervasive top-down ideology and that an oppressive nationalist agenda is forced upon the Icelandic population; rather, it aims to add new perspectives and dimensions that enable us to explore the richness and complexity of the Icelandic nationalist discourse and shed light on the ways in which we understand, imagine, and reinvent the past, as well as encourage a more critical view of them. In sum, the current study may be taken as one of the first attempts to present the entanglement of archaeology and nationalism in the Icelandic context through the materiality of the nation and a contrapuntal archaeological ethnography.

1.3 Outline of Thesis

The present study consists of four case studies and six primary chapters. *Chapter two* explores the ways in which the sagas and the Icelandic language have been employed to produce a narrative of historical permanence and continuity of the Icelandic nation. The first part of the chapter reviews the historical roots of this narrative and its importance in the construction of a nationalist identity in the struggle for independence, while the latter part concentrates on the influence it continues to exert on contemporary Icelandic society. The chapter aims to capture some of the most important aspects of Icelandic nationalism and the ways in which nationalist ideology has formed, and may be considered as a theoretical prelude to the case studies that follow.

Chapters three and four concentrate on the archaeological structure that we are most often confronted with during archaeological excavations, the turf house.³ Such earthen structures monopolise the archaeological record because they have been the primary Icelandic construction for over a millennium, with the last occupants moving into more “modern” types of housing well after the surge of modernity and urbanization. Even though the development of turf architecture is primarily attributed to harsh climatic and environmental conditions and the absence of alternative building materials, these humble structures have once been

³ The term “turf house” is quite broad, referring to a wide variety of buildings, from crude and makeshift structures to more architecturally elaborate buildings sometimes referred to as “turf chateaux.” The all-encompassing term may not do justice to an otherwise rich vernacular architectural style, but in the context of the present work, “turf house” is used in order to distinguish structures according to the main building material.

considered emblematic of the poverty of the Icelandic archaeological record and have been taken as indicative of the primitiveness of the Icelandic population and their inability to progress as a nation. *Chapter three* concentrates on the foreign descriptions and accounts of the living conditions of Icelanders and their dwellings from the eleventh century through to the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century. It examines the way in which the structure became synonymous with the poverty, laziness, and alleged barbaric nature of Icelanders and became embroiled in the grand narratives of civilisation.

Chapter four examines the ramifications of that discourse on the national struggle of independence. It discusses the fate of the turf house vis-à-vis the rhetoric of Icelandic modernity and the efforts to remodel the country according to the accepted standards of the civilised nations of the world. It also discusses the ways in which the perceptions of primitiveness that surrounded the turf house have changed dramatically over the last two decades. It examines the ways in which the turf house has recently become part of the contemporary environmental discourses on eco-friendliness and sustainability, transforming the structure from a sign of primitiveness into a symbol of future innovation. Overall, the chapter examines the intersections of a changing civilisation-rhetoric on Iceland's principal archaeological remains and the ways in which these remains have or have not been conscripted into the service of nationalist agendas.

Chapter five deals with the historical sources often used in archaeological enquiries. Historical sources, and especially the famed Icelandic sagas, have been variously employed by early foreign and local antiquarians to locate archaeological sites and monuments. Even though archaeologists today do not follow the same approach as the early antiquarians, various descriptions of buildings, artefacts, settlement patterns, religious practices, political systems, and traditions makes the historical record invaluable. The chapter attempts to move away from the often repetitive scholarship on the popular dissemination of the sagas as well as the historical accounts concerning manuscript collection and eventual restitution. Instead it looks at the alternative uses of vellum manuscripts as sieves, shoe soles, and sewing patterns. Usually interpreted as minor glitches in the social biography of certain manuscripts, such uses are often seen as acts of ignorance as they manifest a deprecation of the manuscripts' conventional or original use as reading material. The chapter argues that such transformative events have either been ignored or interpreted in such a manner because they contradict the popular view of Iceland as a literate nation. Here, these events in the life of manuscripts enter

into the contemporary discourse on civilisation and nationalism, with a discussion of the ways in which prevailing interpretations may still be informed by colonial and nationalist rhetorics on literacy and civilisation. While looking at these “ignorant acts” through historical and ethnographic examples, the chapter also presents a set of different interpretations on the alternative use of manuscripts.

The last two chapters focus on some of the ethnographic evidence employed by archaeologists. *Chapter six* discusses the role of place names in forging the Icelandic national landscape and identity. In the nineteenth century place names in Iceland were generally thought of as trustworthy evidence capable of revealing the location of structures and settlements that dated back to the settlement period. Central to this perception was the long-standing view that Icelandic place names possess a historical stability and depth and have, like the literature and language, often stood as proof of the historical continuity of the nation. Even though much has changed in the Icelandic toponymic research, not many works have paid attention to the potential effects of nationalism on place naming practices. To that extent, the chapter discusses the persistence of the view that place names are cultural relics in need of preservation, the ways in which state laws, institutions, and committees try to preserve and maintain traditional naming practices, as well as the way in which scholarly and public discourses regarding naming and renaming processes are often intertwined. This chapter does not only question the premise of place name continuity and traditional naming practices, but compares the Icelandic toponymic research agenda to the general toponymic discourse in Europe and elsewhere, arguing that the lack of works concerning the entanglement of place names and nationalism relates to the wider patterns of the scholarly discourse on nations and nationalism.

Chapter seven deals with the ethnographic evidence in the form of historical photographs, diaries, and other documents, and examines the ways in which this mnemonic record is employed to legitimise certain political ideologies and beliefs. The chapter’s subject was prompted by a chance encounter with a publication that attempts to recount the transition of Iceland to modernity via the photographic record of three German scholars. In doing so, the publication invites the readers to gaze and experience the old ways of life in Iceland without paying much attention to the fact that the scholars it refers to were directly or indirectly involved with the Nazi regime. Taking into consideration that such ethnographic records are socially charged objects and do not passively reflect the realities of the past, this chapter treats

the publication as a cultural artefact that attempts to reproduce a number of popular Icelandic perceptions of the interwar period and World War II.

2. Iceland and the Word: Language, Sagas, and Icelandic Nationalism

It is commonly held that archaeology played a minimal role in the creation of the Icelandic nationalist discourse. This derives from the perception that Iceland's archaeological remains have always been poor, modest, and uninspiring (Lucas & Parigoris 2013: 99). At a time when any political claim for national sovereignty was contingent on the premise of cultural continuity and the presence of the so-called "repositories of national genius," such as monuments and monumental architecture (Gran-Aymerich 1998), the fact that the Icelandic landscape revealed only humble structures of poor design and architectural scale and no types of notable ancient monuments was taken as a clear sign by the outside world of Iceland's backwardness and barbarity.

Led by the idea that archaeology could not play a significant role in the nationalist discourse, the common belief is that Iceland's poor archaeological remains and lack of monuments were compensated for by its literature—the famous Icelandic sagas. Written primarily between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries on Icelandic soil and, more importantly, in the Old Icelandic language, these medieval tales demonstrated that Icelanders had, once upon a time, excelled in the literary arts. The Icelandic sagas did not simply speak of the adventures of a handful of Norse settlers who landed on a remote North Atlantic island but of a people who carried with them a peculiar need to document their travels, myths, and legends in a literary style that had little resemblance to the European medieval literary genres and narrative traditions of the folktale, the epic, the romance, and the chronicle (Byock 1992). In the absence of other cultural "accomplishments," this unique type of prose narrative was repackaged in the nineteenth century as a showcase of the ingenuity and creativity of an isolated and decentralised pastoral community which, in the face of adversity and with limited resources, proved capable of an exceptional cultural achievement.

The popularity and continued influence that the sagas had on the Icelandic population would be used by the early nationalists to prove that the use and tradition of letters was not just a historical coincidence but the mark of a national character. In the early nineteenth century, the endurance of the sagas in both oral and written form coincided with the Romantic idea that "reading about antiquity improved one's morals, guided individuals towards civilization, and fostered in them a sense of good taste" (Díaz-Andreu 2007: 68). Ancient

monuments and works of art could grant a nation a certain prestige, but it was manuscripts, old books, inscriptions, and even gems and coins that were considered to have more educational value.

The invention of a literary genre and the literate practices of the Icelandic population illustrated at the time that Icelanders were far above the state of barbarity once imagined. Icelandic saga literature demonstrated a degree of intellectuality and historical consciousness that fitted neatly into the Western grand narratives and discourses of civilization, modernity, and progress. More importantly, it was powerful evidence of the cultural continuity and ancientness of the Icelandic nation. The “commitment” of Icelanders to the sagas and the concomitant image of them as intellectual readers and storytellers could therefore become an important tool in a nationalist narrative which aimed to overcome the ambivalent status of Icelanders as primitive and legitimise the claims for national independence to a European audience.

Through the course of the twentieth century, this image of saga literature exercised immense cultural influence and became the primary marker of Icelandic identity. It paved the way for the creation of a modern Icelandic literary identity that is strongly based on the sagas and the concept of a Golden Age of literature, and reinforced the perception that the Icelandic language itself is an ancient and invaluable cultural artefact. To that extent, the Icelandic language and the sagas have come to be seen as the key elements that have bound Icelanders together making the formation of the Icelandic nation-state possible. The linguistic and literary aptitude of Icelanders has also been popularly perceived as a defining trait that is deeply engraved in the character of the population. To this day, this is one of the most powerful metanarratives underpinning the history of the Icelandic state and is frequently invoked in official and public discourses.

This chapter gives a brief account of the ways in which the Icelandic language and the ancient saga literature have been mobilised to produce a narrative of historical continuity as well as an image of Iceland as a modern nation. This is certainly a far-reaching discussion that touches upon philology and history, and an exploration of this landscape in all its richness and complexity cannot be contained in the confines of the present work. Instead, the chapter summarises the most influential and popular discourses that have shaped the scholarship. The first part of the chapter deals with a number of scholars who left an indelible mark on the discourse. They include some of the most celebrated figures in the Icelandic nationalist

narrative and those who have preoccupied the work of numerous academics. The second part discusses the ways in which the nationalist discourse on language and the sagas is often substantiated in historical and linguistics scholarship, as well as in official government attitudes towards language and the public sphere.

2.1 Language, Sagas, and Modernity

Scholars and academics generally agree that medieval Icelandic literature and the Icelandic language played a pivotal role in the construction of Icelandic national identity and the struggle for national autonomy (Hálfðanarson 2000b, 2003, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Karlsson 1995, 2000). The fact that language assumes such a central position in the Icelandic metanarratives of nationalism is not accidental. The belief that a national polity can only materialise when language and nation coincide determined the fate of nineteenth-century nationalist movements (Greenberg 2008: 10). It is thus of no coincidence that the majority of the nationalist movements of the time based their demands for emancipation on the grounds that their respective ethnic communities spoke a common, ancient, and unique language. With this historical precedent in mind, scholars and academics who have attempted to interpret the relationship between nation and language have largely concluded that language is *the* defining characteristic of all ethnic communities and subsequent national communities, making nationalism itself primarily a linguistic movement (Schmid 2001).

The preoccupation with language in the majority of the Romantic nationalist movements of the time was largely based on the ages-old concept that language stands at the core of humanity and thus reflected the natural condition of *Man* and was capable of conveying the universal and absolute truths of humanity (Bleich 2013). Language was envisaged as a faculty and a conduit that transmits and translates the inner, abstract, and timeless realities of humanity into the ephemeral, explicit, and material actualities of everyday life (Bleich 2013). In this role as the ultimate mediator of the spiritual and material worlds, the more pristine, uncontaminated, and distant a language was from the temporal, material world, the better it reflected the ethereal, immortal, and fundamental truths of humanity.

Based on these philosophical premises, Romantic nationalists believed that language was not simply a characteristic that reflected the innate realities of a nation, but a faculty that constantly created, legitimised, and thus *determined* all other cultural aspects of the nation. Since they regarded the nation as the most archaic and pristine state of world civilisation

(Smith 1991, 1998, 2009), an equally pristine and ancient language was thought to be capable of conveying some of the fundamental traits of the nation's primeval character and spirit. This alleged ability of language to reflect the realities of the nation while simultaneously creating them came to be regarded as the very embodiment of the nation.⁴ Language was taken to be an expression of a speaker's "authentic" self, and in turn it spoke of one's national identity and belonging (Gal 2011). To that extent, the so-called "genuine expression" by a community of common language speakers alone could justify a demand for political unity (Gal 2011: 33).

An authentic, pure, and uncorrupted language was also seen as the proper mediator for the greater economic development and political cooperation and coordination of a nation. Linguistic diversity in a national community, whether manifested in multilingualism or the use of a so-called *corrupted* language was taken as a sign of a chaotic and backwards political economy, hindering progress (Wolff 1994: 36, 38). The use of an authentic and pure language instead provided both a moral and a political advantage to certain national communities, making it the singlemost important prerogative in the creation of a modern polity (Bauman & Briggs 2002: 195).

This elevation of language went hand in hand with the elevation of ancient literature and narrative forms. Poetic traditions, and other literary genres as the epic, were used as diagnostic tools for measuring the modernity or modern capacity of a nation. Regarded as the highest of poetic forms, the epic was especially privileged because it stood at the crossroads between orality and literacy. Though these two typological categories of orality and literacy were often used to discriminate between types of societies and stages of cultural development, they were seen neither as exclusively negative nor positive. Despite the fact that orality was considered to be a primitive quality, it was also associated with the natural condition of humanity. The products of oral societies spoke of inner truths, passions, and feelings, while the clarity and formal simplicity of oral traditions reflected an innate creative genius. Literacy,

⁴ While the idea that language embodied the nation was prevalent in the 19th century, it was by no means the only one. Ernest Renan, for example, saw languages as "historical formations" (1990 [1882]: 17) that do not imply anything about those who speak them; he argued against the connection between language and nations. Giving examples of multilingual nation-states such as France and Switzerland, Renan (1990 [1882]: 16) claimed that "language invites people to unite, but it does not force them to do so." Renan's ideas on language and nation never gained any currency in Iceland.

on the other hand, was linked to rationality, knowledge, philosophy, sciences, progress, and modernity, making it a product of the privileged strata of society and the civilised. The tension for the Romantic nationalists was that even though nation-building was a *modern* project, progress and modernity also alienated humanity from its natural state, depriving it of some of the most basic characteristics of human existence.

Such literary genres could then be considered products of societies that had escaped the state of primitiveness and barbarity and attained a higher stage of cultural development. Even though these societies had not fully reached the status of order, peace, and reason, they were also seen as uncorrupted by progress and within the frames of nineteenth-century discourse, modernity. Neither primitive nor modern, they have recounted the passions and feelings of a primitive and barbaric era in a poetic form that was also rational, literate and rather modern. Within this continuum of orality and literacy, ancient literature and especially the epic were conceived as a hybrid form and came to represent a stage of language development which appeared to incorporate and combine harmoniously the better aspects of two highly contrastive worlds.

Even more importantly, ancient literary genres were considered to encourage the development of abstract thought. Even though literate works embraced more complex and complete lexical and grammatical forms and thus placed certain limitations on the language of oral societies, creativity, spontaneity and freedom of thought appeared to fare better via writing (Grimm 1984 [1851]). This latter point is of particular importance since “the position of each nation could be specified in terms of the qualities of abstraction and rationality possessed by its language” (Bauman & Briggs 2002: 202). It was quite precisely this language of creativity and spontaneity evident in ancient literature that was considered as a crucial element in the development of entrepreneurship and thus the overall economic growth of a nation. In this manner, ancient literature could be conceived as the historical antecedent of modernity as well as one that could inspire modern developments.

In this context, the fact that the common Icelander spoke a language that closely resembled the one of the medieval saga literature seemed to be the only conceivable means through which a historical depth and continuity of the Icelandic culture could be established, legitimising the claims for national emancipation. After seven hundred years of foreign rule, Iceland was impoverished, isolated, and largely dependent on the Danish monarchy. The early Icelandic chieftains had accepted the rule of the Norwegian Crown in 1262-64, signalling the

end of the proto-democratic commonwealth period. From the mid-thirteenth century onwards, Iceland fell into historical obscurity and was commonly recognised as a distant province of Norway and later Denmark. At the end of the fourteenth century, Iceland became part of the Kalmar Union between the kingdoms of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Trade restrictions two centuries later and the introduction of Danish absolutism in the 1660s cemented Iceland as a dependency of the Danish monarchy. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Iceland had been reduced to an image of a poor, desolate place, prone to natural disasters.

Icelanders were also perceived as backwards, uncivilised, and childish (Ísleifsson 2011), and thus incapable of governing their own national, independent state. Even though they have not been subjected to the same racial rhetoric that characterised the colonial mindset, their looks, and way of life did not coincide with the stature and noble characteristics allegedly possessed by their Viking ancestors.⁵ Even domestically, though Icelanders were well aware of their so-called Viking heritage and the literary accomplishments of their forebears, there was little sense of continuity with the Golden Age laid out in saga literature.

Jón Sigurðsson, Tómas Sæmundsson (1807–1841), Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845), Konráð Gíslason (1808–1891), and Brynjólfur Pétursson (1810–1851) to name but a few early Icelandic nationalists, were certainly familiar with both the literary achievements of their forebears and the historical continuity of the Icelandic language. Since the early modern period the medieval saga literature and the idea of a pure and ancient Icelandic language began to resonate with Europeans in such a way that they could be taken as signs of the civilised status of Icelanders, and they were mobilised through a rhetoric aimed at counteracting the perception of Iceland as a backwater. The ensuing discourse has transcended both time and the geographical boundaries of Iceland as well as the Nordic world, and has determined the ways in which Icelandic intellectuals became actively involved in the nineteenth-century discourse that sought to portray Iceland as a civilised nation.

⁵ The term “Viking” has been used since the mid-nineteenth century. It is nowadays employed by academics to describe the people of Scandinavia in the period from the late eighth century until the mid-eleventh century and can alternate with the terms “Norse” or “Scandinavian.” The term is applied here in its original nineteenth-century use to describe the “fearless” Scandinavian seafaring “pirates” or “raiders.”

2.1.2 Early Discourse

In the early seventeenth century, Iceland's most prominent humanist Arngrímur Jónsson (1568–1648) composed *Crymogæa*, a treatise that traced the origins of the Icelandic language in an attempt to prove the cultural continuity of Icelanders and repudiate the common medieval prejudice and misrepresentation of Icelanders as a barbaric people. With the aid of texts like the twelfth-century *First Grammatical Treatise* and the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saga chronicles, Jónsson arrived at the conclusion that his compatriots were the only ones amongst the Nordic people who still spoke the original language of the Middle Ages and proposed that the Icelandic language was a descendant of Old Gothic with its own unique alphabet. This latter assumption was significant, since it echoed the humanist idea that sacred languages possessed their own alphabets and were therefore closely related to the biblical languages (Jensson 2008: 13). Beyond this, the Icelandic language was important not simply for “its incorrupt antiquity,” but the idea “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”⁶ (Jensson 2008: 17).

Humanist scholars also viewed the diversity of languages as a punishment for arrogance as described in Genesis, as well as a deficit or a burden on humanity (Bleich 2013: 50). Jónsson's attempt to present the Icelandic language as a “primary” one and elevate it to a superior status thus reflects an attempt to redeem the language in the frame of humanism's rhetoric (Jensson 2008). By appropriating the ideal of linguistic purity from Latin to the Icelandic vernacular, Jónsson also formulated what would become an influential doctrine of Icelandic purism, urging his contemporaries to protect and preserve the pristine condition of the Icelandic language. In doing so, he warned about the detrimental effects that commerce and excessive contact with foreigners could have on the language and encouraged the use of the linguistic style of the sagas and other medieval literature in everyday speech (Árnason 2003a, 2003b; Jensson 2008; Ottósson 1990; Sigmundsson 1990-1991). *Crymogæa* proved to

⁶ The idea that the Danish and Swedish languages derive from Icelandic is expressed in the anonymous *Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiae*, written in the first half of the 17th century and most often attributed to Bishop Oddur Einarsson (d. 1630). Another popular hypothesis was that the Danish, Swedish, and Icelandic languages were all rooted in a common Scandinavian language often referred to as *dönsk tunga*, but that Icelandic preserved this ancient *Ursprache* in its most pristine form.

be crucial to the ways in which the Icelandic language was conceptualised in the coming centuries, and for many it is seen as the historical moment when Icelandic linguistic purism was born (see Halldórsson 1979; Kristjánsson 1986; Ottósson 1990).

While the need to preserve the Icelandic language had been discussed beyond *Crymogæa* during the seventeenth century (Árnason 2003b), concerns over the disintegration and a need to restore the Icelandic language intensified in the following century (Ottósson 1990). By the mid-eighteenth century, the traveller and naturalist Eggert Ólafsson (1726–1768) was commissioned by the Danish Academy of Science to report on the current state of the country and its people. In his assessment of the Icelandic language, Ólafsson noted that the language used in coastal areas and trading posts had been “contaminated” by Danish and German words and observed that the inhabitants of the inland still spoke “pure” Icelandic (1805: 25-26, 53). He spoke admirably about the stability of the Icelandic language (Böðvarsson 1964) in these places and wondered at the fact that the common Icelandic folk were able to comprehend the hundreds-of-years-old medieval literature verbatim. Inspired by the educational ideology of the Enlightenment (Geers 2005: 102), Ólafsson advocated the use of the vernacular for the education of Icelanders, with the goal of reinvigorating the Icelandic language as part of the broader agenda to improve the living conditions of the population (Ottósson 1990).⁷

The fact that Danish was gaining currency in the language of administration and commerce of Iceland also prompted the creation of *Hið íslenska Lærdómslistafélag* (Icelandic Society for the Learned Arts). Applying Enlightenment ideals and inspired by the emergence of a purist philosophy of the Danish language (see Geers 2005; Sigmundsson 2003), the society published a charter in 1780 that sought to “[...] to protect and preserve the Nordic language as a beautiful principal language which for a long time has been spoken in the

⁷ Eggert Ólafsson’s aim to revive the Icelandic language did not always find support. One notable example of a different approach to the matter of language is the eighteenth-century rector of the Latin School of Skálholt, Bjarni Jónsson. Deeming it too impractical, archaic, and different from the other Scandinavian languages, Jónsson argued that the Icelandic language hindered communication with other nations, which in turn had a negative effect on trade and jeopardised Iceland’s future development. In his list of proposals concerning Iceland’s future, Jónsson stated that “I deem it not only to be useless, but also very harmful, to preserve the Icelandic language” (quoted in Hálfðanarson 2006: 239), and he recommended that it would serve the common good if the Danish language supplanted the Icelandic one in the same manner as it did in the case of Norway and the Faroe Islands.

Nordic countries, and to try to purify it from foreign words and idioms, which now have begun to corrupt it” (Halldórsson 1979: 78). In accord with the general desire of Enlightenment thinkers to “translate” the world of science from Latin, making it comprehensible to the masses (Geers 2005: 101), the society also advocated for the creation of native neologisms. According to the charter:

[...] one is allowed, instead of such foreign words, to form new words, compounded from Norse stems. These new words should explain the nature of the things, the names of which are to be translated; in this connection one should pay attention to the principles of this language which have been used with regard to the formation of good old words; a clear explanation and translation of such words should be given in order to make them easily understandable for ordinary people (Halldórsson 1979: 79).

The use of foreign words was only permitted by the Society in cases when these borrowings were already evident in the writings of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Halldórsson 1979: 79; Ottósson 1990: 42). In 1794, The Icelandic Society for National Enlightenment, *Hið íslenska landsuppfræðingarfélag*, advocated the same linguistic purism and encouraged the use of native words and neologisms in a similar manner (Sigmundsson 2003: 71).

This profound interest in the matters of language within the frames of humanism and the Enlightenment carried a strong interest in antiquity. In the Icelandic context, the discourse on the purity of the language was evidently preoccupied with the Saga Age, which in turn prompted an increased interest in the ancient manuscripts themselves. The antiquarianism of the seventeenth century was unprecedented in the Nordic world (Díaz-Andreu 2007: 35), and though it might have been inspired by the ideals of humanism, it was also fuelled by a very specific set of ideological concerns and political agendas. By the latter half of the century, Icelandic manuscripts had become contested objects between the monarchies of Denmark and Sweden. They held cultural capital not just for Icelanders, but as sources of historical cultural legitimacy for all of Scandinavia. According to Jensson (2019), the increase in manuscript scholarship in Denmark was motivated by ideological necessity. Following the breach with Rome during the Reformation, one of the main goals of the early Danish antiquarians was to construct an autochthonous, pre-Catholic antiquity for the Danish empire. This is due to the fact that Catholic history was Rome-centric often at the expense of the northern realms. While the ancient Mediterranean empires were generally favoured, the northern populations of

Germany and Scandinavia were portrayed as savage, warlike and uncivilised tribes whose pacification was succeeded through military expeditions and Christian missions. A new post-Reformation history would counteract this portrayal of Scandinavians and refashion “the Hyperborean Other into a respectable subject with an illustrious pedigree” (Jensson 2019: 15). In this manner, the Danish monarch could assert his sovereignty over the affairs of the national Church, and provide additional ideological legitimacy for his political ambitions to control the Nordic countries (Jensson 2019: 15).

The vigorous manuscript scholarship in Sweden was motivated by an equal desire to counteract this Danish hegemony over Scandinavia. Swedish antiquarians were most interested in the manuscripts that recounted a favourable version of the early history of Scandinavia with the aim of restoring the territorial possessions of the early Swedish kings and renewing their claims over those districts that now belonged to the Danish monarchy (Jensson 2019: 47; Verri & Tarsi 2018: 71-72). The two competing kingdoms offered generous royal subsidies to fund both the early hunt and systematic collection of manuscripts, along with their subsequent translation, preservation, and study. In this new political economy of antiquities, Icelanders were variously employed as scribes and professors and sent as royal emissaries and intermediaries to Iceland to acquire manuscripts, as they were the only ones who could still read and write in the Old Norse language (Hálfðanarson 2005: 58; Jensson 2019: 14; Jónsson 2012: 40-45; Verri & Tarsi 2018: 75, 76).

2.1.3 The Nineteenth Century

By the early nineteenth century, the Danes had established a deep scholarly affinity with the Icelandic past and had adopted some of the same origin myths as the early Icelandic nationalists. The Icelandic language and the sagas had become the preeminent source for tracing the ways in which Nordic identities had formed and played an important role within the Danish nationalist movement in addition to the Icelandic one. Following the defeat of Denmark in the Napoleonic Wars, intellectuals, such as Lutheran clergyman Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783–1872) began to translate parts of the Icelandic medieval literature into modern Danish in an effort to rediscover and rekindle, not the true essence of Icelanders, but of “Danishness” (Hálfðanarson 2001).

One piece of scholarship that had the most profound effect on the way in which the Icelandic language was conceived of in the nationalist rhetoric of the time is the 1811 work of

Danish linguist Rasmus Rask (1787–1832), *Vejledning til det Islandske eller gamle Nordiske Sprog* (*A Grammar of the Icelandic or Old Nordic Tongue*). In this grammatical treatise, Rask arrived at the conclusion that Icelanders spoke the original language of the Scandinavian peoples “to a truly astonishing degree of purity and elegance” (quoted in Gregersen 2013: xvii). For Rask, the preservation of the Icelandic language was largely owed to the geographical isolation of the country and the people’s minimal contact with foreigners. He also argued that the ease with which contemporary speakers could read Old Icelandic was because of the conservative orthography of the Icelandic manuscripts, which had allowed for the standard pronunciation of words. To that extent, Rask sustained that “the Grammar [...] was never materially altered since the language received a settled form in the Sagas” (1976 [1811]: 241). Interestingly, Rask was also amongst the first during the era of Romantic nationalism to warn that the adoption of foreign linguistic elements, such as Danish words and expressions, and the general conformity of the language to foreign standards (Rask 1976 [1811]: 21), would deteriorate the Icelandic language and give the impression to the rest of the civilised world that Iceland was a barbaric nation (Hálfðanarson 2005; Pálsson 1995). In doing so, he extolled the desire of Icelandic authors to purge foreign influence from the language and return it “to the purity, simplicity and taste of the old writers, both in style and orthography” (Rask 1976 [1811]: 241).⁸

Against this growing scholarly background on language and ancient manuscripts, the early Icelandic nationalists began to refine the link between their language and their nation. Crucial to this process was a group of Icelandic intellectuals, known collectively as *Fjölnismenn*. Named after the journal *Fjölnir*, the group published various articles on culture, nature, science, and literature, including translations and adaptations from Goethe, Schiller, Heine, and others. In general terms, the journal represented an affordable form of education, as it aspired to “widen the cultural and literary horizons of their fellow Icelanders” (Ringler 2002: 28) and “buil[d] a bridge between foreign culture and the life of [the] nation”

⁸ Rask was also the driving force behind the establishment of The Icelandic Literary Society, *Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag*, which sought to protect and strengthen the Icelandic language and literature. Following the merger of the Society with the aforementioned *Icelandic Society for National Enlightenment*, the associated literary magazine *Skírnir* appeared and has, since 1827, made numerous contributions that aim “to consolidate the standard for modern written Icelandic” (Hilmarrson-Dunn & Kristinsson 2010: 217).

(Benediktsson in Ringler 2002: 30). Implicit in this effort was the notion that Icelandic society and culture lagged behind other European nations.

The editors of *Fjölnir* aspired to draw Iceland out of this cultural decline and place it on the road to progress. By advocating for a set of shared national values of the population, they hoped to renew what they saw as a stagnant and lethargic society. These included a deeper knowledge of the saga literature and language, a greater appreciation and observation of Icelandic nature, and the reestablishment of the national assembly, Alþingi, at its original location in Þingvellir (Óskarsson 2006: 266-267). The role of saga literature was central to individuals like Tómas Sæmundsson, founding member of the group and a fervent nationalist, who strongly believed that poetry and the arts could contribute more to the national cause than politics alone (Óskarsson 2006: 265).

Fjölnir also became “the main outlet for innovative literature” (Óskarsson 2006: 257), exemplified by the poetry of Jónas Hallgrímsson. While remaining faithful to the traditional themes of the Icelandic sagas, folklore, and history, Hallgrímsson introduced new foreign verse forms, attempting to communicate the political and cultural agenda of the *Fjölnismenn* through poetry. His poem *Iceland* (1835) stands out as a lyrical political manifesto through which he argued that the cultural and economic revival of the Icelandic nation was dependent on increased political freedom. Posthumously known as “the poet of our reborn language” (Ringler 2002: 30) and the “poet of Icelandic consciousness” (Eysteinnsson & Dagsdóttir 2006: 406), Hallgrímsson’s innovative style and adherence to the national cause are generally seen as having “transformed the literary sensibility of his countrymen, reshaped the language of their poetry and prose, opened their eyes to the beauty of their land and its natural features, and accelerated their determination to achieve political independence” (Ringler 2002: 3).

The *Fjölnir* group was also amongst the first to claim that the existence of the Icelandic nation depended on its language (Friðriksson 2009: 64). As early as 1835, the group had taken a strong stance on the relationship between language and nation. As Tómas Sæmundsson (1807–1841) wrote, “languages are the chief characteristics of nations,” and Icelanders should be proud, for they “speak one of the oldest languages in all the western part of Europe, which is, with the Icelandic literature and history, the basis for their national glory” (quoted in Hálfðanarson 2003: 195; 2005: 57). In this, the group was following in the footsteps of Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, as well as those of Arngrímur Jónsson, Eggert Ólafsson, and Rasmus Rask, who had all adopted strong linguistic

purist philosophies. Echoing the observations of Eggert Ólafsson, the *Fjölnismenn* regarded the use of the vernacular by the rural population as pure and uncorrupted and sought to use it alongside the medieval literature as a model upon which to base the revival of the Icelandic language (Ottósson 1990). Applying this philosophy, one of the founding members of *Fjölnismenn*, and later a professor of Nordic philology at the University of Copenhagen, Konráð Gíslason, called for a strict “adherence to the standards of language” (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson 2010: 217). At the same time, the group proposed a number of neologisms that aimed to make Icelandic functional in all spheres of society, including administration and commerce—the domains where the Icelandic language was more contaminated by foreign elements.

The early Icelandic nationalist rhetoric on language and medieval literature aimed to construct a historical link between a Golden Age of literature and contemporary Iceland and prove to the world that Icelanders were not a barbaric nation but worthy to run their own affairs as they had done in the past. The strong resemblance of the nineteenth-century Icelandic language to the one of the medieval sagas did not simply demonstrate the continuity of the Icelandic culture and nation. Even though the presence of a unique Icelandic language alone could provide grounds for a demand of national sovereignty (see Hálfðanarson 1996), the majority of scholars during the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries believed that the medieval Icelandic literature could provide the standards upon which the cultural revival of Iceland could take place. As the product of an endemic “high culture,” the perception that the medieval literature was not simply a relic of the past but a way of moving the nation forward, specifically towards independence but also progress and modernity remained a shared preoccupation.

2.1.4 Towards the twentieth century

By the twentieth century, the belief that a restored language and the saga literature should become the defining cultural standards of the present and the future of the Icelandic nation was reflected in the adoption of an official linguistic purism (*málhreinsunarstefna* or *hreintungustefna*) as an integral part of the nation-building movement (see Ottósson 1990), and the presentation of the Icelandic sagas as a literary genre that resembled the modern novel.

After the granting of home rule in 1904, efforts to purge Danicisms and other non-Icelandic features from the language became more organised and concerted. Numerous state policies on language and education aimed to enshrine the archaic and uncorrupted version of Icelandic as the official language of the sovereign state. The coinage of native terms for the modern objects and concepts not present in the medieval language also became a major concern. By that time, the Association of Engineers (*Verkfræðingafélagið*) had already begun to root out foreign words and created a number of neologisms. In 1946, the Dictionary Committee at the University of Iceland (*Orðabókarnefnd*) was established, which sought to create a dictionary of the Icelandic language.

Beyond the language itself, there was an attempt to reform the way that certain parts of the population spoke. By the 1920s, considerable efforts were made to repair the so-called *flámæli*, a “slurred” and “corrupted” speech that was deemed to characterise the lower social classes. This meant that “the nonstandard speech of lower class Icelanders was systemically attacked on the grounds that it represented a ‘pathological’ deviation from established standards, [and] a dangerous threat to the ‘purity’ of official Icelandic” (Pálsson 1995: 176). Viewed as either mentally inferior or un-Icelandic (Durrenberger 1995: 14; Lacy 1998: 28), this sense of “linguistic virology” (Pálsson 1995) added a considerable social pressure. By the 1940s, professor of linguistics Björn Guðfinnsson undertook an investigation into Icelandic pronunciation that resulted in a vigorous campaign against *flámæli* at schools and in the public media. This included an attempt in 1951 by the University of Iceland’s faculty of philosophy to prohibit anyone who committed this “wrongful” pronunciation from speaking on the State Broadcasting Service or from working as actors at the National Theatre (Jónsson 1998: 235).

Around that time, the Minister of Education and Trade proposed the establishment of an “Icelandic Academy,” whose mandate was to emphasise the protection, cultivation, and enhancement of the national language (Halldórsson & Jónsson 1993: 15; Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson 2010: 225). The proposal stemmed from the belief that a large number of neologisms that were being adopted by the public were not fully compatible with the Icelandic language (Halldórsson & Jónsson 1993: 16). Concern over the corruption of the Icelandic language was also tied to the new presence of U.S. armed forces in the country and the operation of a NATO base near the capital region (see Kvaran & Svavarsdóttir 2002: 86). Resistance to the increased use of the English language in the country also arguably led to the foundation of the Icelandic Language Committee, *Íslensk málnefnd*, in 1965. Founded by a

ministerial decree of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, the Committee was established in order to “provide governmental institutions and the general public with guidance in matters of language on a scholarly basis” (Gíslason 1965).⁹

The twentieth century also saw developments in how the saga literature was applied to the national cause and the idea of the modern. By this time, the novel had come into its own as the symbol of modern literary aesthetics, giving Icelandic nationalists a new way of interpreting the sagas. In the 1920s, a number of Icelandic intellectuals began to promulgate the idea that the Icelandic sagas were not the products of an oral culture that had come to be recorded in the thirteenth century but were instead literary creations from the start. The so-called *Icelandic School of Philology* placed the saga genre firmly on the side of literacy in the orality-literacy continuum, meaning that they were not only products of individual Icelandic cultural genius but that this genius was truly autochthonous and unrelated to a larger Scandinavian oral tradition. According to the chief ideologue of the *Icelandic School*, Sigurður Nordal (1886–1974), the sagas were not quasi-historical tales but a set of pure and complete literary creations that resembled the modern novel (Byock 1992, 1994, 2001).

This so-called “bookprose” theory had a profound effect on Icelandic saga scholarship. The *Icelandic School* issued a series of studies that assessed the sagas in terms of artistry and poetic license in an attempt to identify the authors of individual sagas (Driscoll 2012).¹⁰ Assuming that each saga existed in some original form, they proposed literary relations between speculative saga authors and traced the sources used by each. Through this work, Sigurður Nordal became known for establishing an Icelandic literary canon. Using manuscript and linguistic evidence to date the relative ages of individual sagas, along with the proposed “literary relations” and a “level of literary development,” Nordal distinguished five stages of saga-writing, in turn promoting the idea that the development of Icelandic literature was continuous right up until his day. In doing so, Nordal had created a compelling link between ancient and modern Icelandic literature.

⁹[https://brunnur.stjr.is/mrn/logogregl.nsf/ff6c260b2319251d002567ba004d88cb/7c537b15201b48ae002568690032261e/\\$FILE/R491965.pdf](https://brunnur.stjr.is/mrn/logogregl.nsf/ff6c260b2319251d002567ba004d88cb/7c537b15201b48ae002568690032261e/$FILE/R491965.pdf). Accessed on 10 March 2016.

¹⁰ Though the bookprose theory is strongly associated with Iceland and Sigurður Nordal, its roots are found elsewhere. The term “bookprose” was first used alongside its counterpart “freeprose” by the Swiss scholar Andreas Heusler (1865–1940). In *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga* (1914), Heusler devised the terms in an attempt to describe the two conflicting schools of thought on the origins and development of the Icelandic sagas

While strengthening a nationalist narrative of Icelandic cultural uniqueness and a sense of historical continuity, the intellectuals of the *Icelandic School* now found themselves at odds with the traditional outlook that the sagas accurately described events from an equally unique Icelandic history (Helgason 1998). However, the bookprose approach was not completely anti-historical in the scholarly sense; instead it exploited the contemporary perception of history as a chronology of facts. Prior to the emergence of social history, human achievements and progress were understood through an institutional lens, focusing on the actions of prominent individuals and the establishment of political and governmental structures. As such, the private lives and deeds described in the family sagas bore no relevance to and were outside the scope of history. As Nordal stated in 1957:

A modern historian will for several reasons tend to brush these sagas aside as historical records [...] the narrative will rather give him the impression of the art of a novelist than of the scrupulous dullness of a chronicler. Into the bargain, these sagas deal principally with private lives and affairs which do not belong to history in its proper sense, not even to the history of Iceland (quoted in Byock 1992: 46).

With the support of Jón Jóhanesson, a prominent Icelandic academic and avid practitioner of such institutional history, the separation between historical fact and literary fiction became central in the effort of bookprose to provide the sagas with a creative literary outlook.

Having gained wide popularity in Icelandic intellectual circles, the bookprose theory has elevated the sagas to the status of a unique literary genre. The bookprose theory is (Driscoll 2012: 19). The proponents of the freeprose theory believed that the sagas had been passed down orally through generations until they were committed to parchment beginning in the 13th century. This was the theory supported by Heusler, as well as a number of other scholars, such as the German Rudolf Meissner (1863–1948) and Gustav Neckel (1878–1940). It became closely associated with the Norwegian scholars P. A. Munch (1810–1863) and Rudolf Keyser (1803–1864) who believed that the Eddic poems recounted in a number of Icelandic medieval manuscripts were the faithful representations of Norwegian oral traditions and constituted reliable records of past events. Bookprose theory, on the other hand, originates in the work of German scholar Konrad Maurer (1823–1902). In *Ueber die Hænsa-Þóris saga* (1871), Maurer came to the conclusion that the sagas were the products of individual authors. By examining passages from different sagas that dealt with the same events, Maurer identified an artistic license that did not correspond to the idea of an accurate chronicle of historic events or a faithful adherence to oral traditions. On the contrary, saga authors appeared to interact rather freely with any oral or written sources they might have used in their writings (Aðalsteinsson 1991: 112; Driscoll 2012: 20).

generally seen as a critical thread of cultural politics that played a significant role during the last phase of the Icelandic struggle for independence (Halldórsson 1978: 318).¹¹ By reimagining the sagas as the exclusive intellectual property and cultural heritage of the Icelandic nation, it could cast them as evidence of the linguistic and thus historical continuity of the nation while also demonstrating an unparalleled cultural uniqueness. Icelanders could now be seen as not only culturally modern but as having already “reached a state of cultural sophistication centuries in advance of anything that the Danes achieved before the nineteenth century” (Byock 1992: 55). This alleged literary character of the sagas provided Iceland with a cultural heritage worthy of an independent state and reinforced the perceived value of restoring the language to its earlier form. By the time Icelandic independence was achieved in 1944, these scholarly outlooks on the Icelandic language and sagas provided the basis upon which the Icelandic national identity would continue to be built.

2.2 An Ancient yet Modern Language

“This myth of independence that we owe our existence thanks to the language [...] is unusual to the extent that it is true” proclaims author Þórarinn Eldjárn in *Ferðalok*, a 2013 documentary series that attempts to associate the heroic deeds and figures from the Icelandic sagas to the available archaeological data¹². Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the former president of Iceland, says in the same episode: “It is obvious that we would not speak that language if we did not have the sagas [...] and what it is that keeps us together, Iceland, is the language [...] We would naturally have never been an independent nation, if we could not have been able to hold on to these memories and hold dearly onto the language and used it, and hold on to these stories in the struggle of independence.”¹³

¹¹ The bookprose theory reached its pinnacle during the period immediately preceding WWII with the publication of Sigurður Nordal’s study on *Hrafnkels Saga* in 1940. Icelandic independence would follow during the course of the war in 1944.

¹² “Þessi goðsögn um það að við eigum sjálfstæði okkar og tilveru, tungunni að þakka... sú goðsögn er óvenjuleg að því leyti, að hún er sönn” (Eldjárn, Þ. In Auður Djúpúðga. *Ferðalok*. RUV: 24 March 2013).

¹³ “Það gefur auga leið að við myndum ekki tala þetta tungumál nema við hefðum átt þessar sögur...Og hvað er það sem heldur okkur saman, Íslendingum, það er tungumálið...Við værum náttúrulega aldrei sjálfstæð þjóð, Íslendingar, ef við hefðum ekki haldið fast í minningarnar, og haldið fast í tungumálið og beitt þessu tungumáli og þessum sögum fyrir okkur í sjálfstæðisbaráttu” (Finnbogadóttir, V. In Auður Djúpúðga. *Ferðalok*. RUV: 24 March 2013).

What *Ferðalok* presents is neither a new nor a novel interpretation of Iceland's national history. That most Icelanders see language as the crux of Icelandic culture and identity (see Friðriksson 2009; Leonard 2011; Rögnvaldsson et al. 2012; Whelpton 2000), as well as one of the most important national characteristics (Þórarinsdóttir 2011), is undisputed. The survival of the Icelandic language has become symbolic of the endurance of the Icelandic nation and the determination of Icelanders to survive in a harsh and desolate environment. Closely related to that understanding is the belief that the national emancipation of Iceland succeeded in part because Icelanders have always spoken a common and ancient language rooted in a unique literary history. In many respects, the series reinforces what may count as “common knowledge” amongst Icelanders and it can be placed amongst any number of banal manifestations of Icelandic nationalist rhetoric. Despite its prosaicness, this perceived centrality of the language in the process of national self-determination and independence is a metanarrative that is rooted in the general scholarship on the relationship between the Icelandic nation and language.

2.2.1 The Icelandic Scholarship

This belief in the absolute, unconditional, and fundamental role of language in the making of a national polity is undeniably reflected in the scholarship of Icelandic and foreign academics. Speaking of the origins of the Icelandic nation, Gunnar Karlsson once claimed that “we can be sure that something has existed since time immemorial which can be called ethnicity” (2009: 126). The influential Icelandic historian has flirted with the notion of a distinct Icelandic ethnic identity that emerged as early as the eleventh century. Karlsson locates the origins of this Icelandic ethnic consciousness in the medieval literature, specifically in the *Book of Icelanders* (*Íslendingabók*)—a twelfth-century account of Iceland's history from the beginning of the settlement (c.870) to 1128—, the *Book of Settlements* (*Landnámabók*)—a twelfth-century account of the first settlers of Iceland and their descendants—and the *First Grammatical Treatise* (*Fyrsta málfræðiritgerðin*). These literary works provided Icelanders with a shared myth of descent, a common history, as well as a concept of a linguistic and cultural identity (Karlsson 1994: 112-113). The later work of Arngrímur Jónsson, according to Karlsson, not only brought the ancient literature to the forefront of Icelandic culture but also endowed Icelanders with “a high degree of self-esteem” (1995: 49). Even though Karlsson makes a clear distinction between the medieval sense of a collective ethnic identity and the politically fuelled modern notion of national self-determination, he claims that the

preservation of the medieval tradition of the sagas had been a significant prerequisite in the rise of a political nationalism (Karlsson 1995: 50).

Similarly, Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has claimed that the “over-communication of [the] medieval glory and virtue” evident in the Icelandic sagas played a pivotal role in the development of a collective sense of cultural continuity that long predated the advent of Romantic nationalism and the development of national identities (1992: 107). The *Book of Icelanders* endowed Icelanders from early on with a separate history and represents “the first step towards the declaration of a separate identity” (Hastrup 1984: 239-240). At the same time, the development of a native alphabet in the *First Grammatical Treatise* and the express desire of its author to create a written language, for “us, the Icelanders” (Hastrup 1984: 240), were instrumental in the creation of a separate identity. Asserting the importance of the Icelandic medieval literature on the population, Hastrup also traces the notion of a Golden Age, stating: “By means of an optical illusion the authors of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic literature created an image of an original ‘free state’ as the essence of Icelandic social identity” (Hastrup 1984: 250-51).

On the other hand, Icelandic historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (2007 [2001]) has long considered the nation to be the product of the cultural and social developments of modernity. In his writings on Iceland’s struggle for independence, Hálfðanarson rejects the notion that nationalism involved a simple political re-interpretation of a pre-existing ethnic identity and maintains that the political ideal of national freedom was mainly imported from Denmark, also citing the general formative influence of liberalism and industrialisation. The rise of an Icelandic national awareness then becomes an inextricable part of a much wider European development. Hálfðanarson (2007) maintains that the Icelandic population was essentially “taught” to become Icelanders by the political leaders of the independence movement and focuses on the pivotal role of language and literature in the development of the national rhetoric of independence (2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2005, 2006).

Regarding the historical continuity of the Icelandic language, cultural historians and others have also investigated the role of ancient literature and literary practices in keeping the language alive. Taking into consideration that the ancient Icelandic sagas have exerted a powerful and profound influence on the ways Icelanders think about, seek inspiration for, and produce their other cultural products, the centuries-long use of the same body of reference material is not only considered pivotal for keeping a unique literary tradition alive but also for

enabling the common speaker to continuously rediscover, regenerate, and transmit the Icelandic language with minimal deviation from generation to generation. In other words, it has allowed Icelanders to replicate the historical expression of the Icelandic language and place it in their respective contemporary settings, producing writings that emulated the style and form of previous literary compositions. This has in turn given way to the creation of a modern Icelandic literary tradition that is based on an ancient language.

According to cultural historian Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, the urge to produce some form of written records, such as autobiographies, memoirs, and other so-called “ego-documents” during the post-medieval period and up to the early twentieth century is largely attributed to a set of “deep-seated psychological longings” that manifest themselves in “people’s attempts to broaden their education through informal channels, often under very difficult circumstances” (2016: 64, 65). The saga-reading tradition of the *kvöldvaka* is thought to have been the main tool to quell such longings, also serving to prepare Icelanders to face the adversities of life. In an environment where endurance and tenacity were the most necessary prerogatives for survival, the recital of ancient literature allegedly fostered courage in people (Ólason 1989a: 216), and “taught them to fulfil their roles with stoicism and accept whatever circumstance threw at them, just as the ancient heroes had done” (Magnússon 2016: 65; also Magnússon 2010: 140). At the same time, this type of informal education guaranteed the transmission of culture in a unique form and reinforced the cultural homogeneity of the population (Magnússon 1993). Coupled with the fact that literacy was prominent in all strata of Icelandic society (Ólafsson 2016), the story-telling tradition would have provided the necessary conditions “that enabled people of *all classes* to feel confident about expressing themselves on current issues and preoccupations” (Magnússon 2016: 65, my emphasis; also Magnússon, 2010; Ólafsson 2016) and have permitted the rise of a “creative-class” of autodidactic knowledge-based lay workers and independent peasant scholars (Magnússon & Ólafsson 2017: 8). At the same time, the recital of long narrative poems known as *rímur* likely played a crucial role in the conservation and perpetuation of the Icelandic language. Composed in complex rhyming quatrains, these half-read, half-sung poetic creations necessitated eloquence and a skilful command of language. According to Magnússon, “the continuous learning and practice of this poetry, with its fixed and complex rules in which one syllable out of place destroys the entire metrical structure, served to inhibit morphological change in the language and helped to keep alive its rich traditional poetic vocabulary” (2010: 95).

Regarding the historical stability of the Icelandic language, linguists tend to agree that Iceland has been characterised by a long-term linguistic conservatism (Leonard 2011), and it is generally accepted amongst sociolinguists that “linguistic change progresses most slowly in tightly knit communities which have little contact with the outside world” (Holmes 1992: 235). In the Icelandic case, Milroy and Milroy (1985b) explain the conservatism of the Icelandic language with network theory as a departure point. They argue that that “Icelandic society [...] depended in earlier centuries on the strong networks typical of rural life. Hence, despite the difficulties of climate and terrain, social networks proved to be a cohesive force, not only in maintaining social norms, but also in maintaining the norms of language” (1985b: 379). In other words, the fact that Iceland had been a community of farmsteads for a period of roughly one thousand years meant that people lived in high-density social networks (Hilmarsson-Dunn 2003) through which the close-knit ties of extended families and the local social structures of assemblies and communes encouraged linguistic uniformity and conservatism (Hilmarsson-Dunn 2003; Leonard 2011; Milroy & Milroy 1985b, 1992).

The stability of the Icelandic language on an island-wide level is also supported by a very particular type of historical mobility. Vagrant populations had to assert a nomadic status by law (Dennis et al. 2000), while peasant workers usually relocated according to the seasonal fluctuations of employment. At the same time, the inaccessibility of the interior of the country and the coastal pattern of settlements meant that any movements in the population essentially rotated along the periphery. This combination of geographic restrictions and employment regulations prevented regions from becoming isolated and has most likely contributed to the levelling of any dialectal differences which subsequently led to speech conformity and the homogeneity of the language.¹⁴ In addition to forces that may have prevented dialect formation, Árnason (2005) points out that Icelandic has always been the only language in the country and that, despite the strong Danish influence, there have never been any minority dialect groups. This mono-dialectal thesis is further sustained by the lack of extensive linguistic variability in the saga literature. The absence of any mention of linguistic

¹⁴ According to sociolinguistic theory, dialect levelling requires high mobility, and high degrees of social contact and mixing (Kerswill & Williams 1999, 2000). Having in mind that Iceland had been a community of isolated farmsteads, the model of dialect levelling seems rather paradoxical despite the seasonal movement of labourers. Leonard (2011) regards the lack of dialects in Iceland as an oddity and has recently proposed that such dialect levelling occurred prior to the settlement of Iceland.

fluctuation and norm variation in the early grammatical treatises is also taken as an indication that if any early dialect distinctions had developed these must have been lost, suppressed, or were alternatively deemed as unworthy of mentioning (Leonard 2011: 172).

Certainly, by the nineteenth century, movements toward linguistic purism, as well as the later systematic attempts to either cleanse the Icelandic language or teach certain segments of the population to speak in an “appropriate” manner, would have their own effect on dialect levelling. To that extent, Vikør states that Iceland is considered as one of the “most celebrated cases of general purism in the literature on the subject” (2010: 23). Even though it is generally accepted that nationalism played an important role in the implementation of purist strategies, linguistic conservatism and purism are also generally understood to be “a constant value-feature of the speech community” (Thomas 1991: 159). Having made their appearance long before the onset of nineteenth-century nationalist ideologies (Kristinsson 2004; Wahl 2008), purist attitudes and behaviour have been characterised as “stable” and “consistent” with “no discernible interruption or fluctuation [...] either in intensity or orientation” (Thomas 1991: 159). This general observation on linguistic purism is echoed in the tendency to classify the aims of purist strategies in Iceland as *traditional* (Geers 2005: 98), suggesting that a set of conservative linguistic behaviours inherently belong to the Icelandic population. The qualities simply happened to correspond rather aptly to the needs of the early nationalists.

Central to this stance is the notion that foreign influence on the Icelandic language had comparatively minor effects on people’s way of life and thinking (Ottósson 1990: 20), as well as the fact that the Icelandic authorities have never attempted to introduce language policies that counter the prevailing attitudes of the general public (Hilmarsson-Dunn & Kristinsson 2010: 219). It is therefore generally held that the overall efforts to purify and standardise the language have always been widely and genuinely supported by the general public (Friðriksson 2009: 86; Kristinsson 2012: 351, 2018: 246; Svavarsdóttir 2008: 455; Vikør 2010: 24). When referring to the “linguistic situation” in Iceland thus, Hilmarsson-Dunn has stressed the importance of a general underlying “social motivation of linguistic maintenance rather than change” (2003: 9), while others have opted to describe Icelanders as having a high degree of “linguistic consciousness” (Kristiansen 2005; Vikør 2010).

The idea of linguistic consciousness can be translated as a general public interest in the matters of language. When trying to explain this phenomenon, Kristinsson has noted that language usage “is a very common topic of daily discussion among ordinary people in

Iceland” (2018: 246). People tend to discuss such matters in social media as well as “in the hot tubs at Icelandic swimming pools” and at parties (Kristinsson 2018: 246), and often “call in to daily radio talk shows to discuss the latest nuances in the language and complain about blunders in speech” (Rögnvaldsson et al. 2012: 44). What drives farmers and fishermen, nurses, and teachers to participate in such a discussion is a perennial concern over the potential deterioration of the language. In doing so, the public often propose “ingenious ideas for new lexical items (purist neologisms), either for fun or out of necessity” (Kristinsson 2018: 246).

Even though the Icelandic speech community is perceived as having adopted a protectionist culture (Kristinsson 2018), it is also clear that linguistic consciousness makes ordinary members of the community active participants in the maintenance and perpetuation of the national language. There is a general proclivity to think that the creation of purist neologisms stems from the pragmatic concerns of modernity, especially developments in science and technology. This is evident in the fact that a number of state institutions of quite limited mandates enforce internal language policies, such as the University of Iceland, the Toponymic Committee, the Icelandic Broadcasting Service, the National Theatre, The Union of Icelandic Mother-Tongue Teachers, the Icelandic Association of Writers, the Icelandic Journalists’ Association, and the Árni Magnusson Institute for Icelandic Studies. Each of these entities has taken up initiatives for coining neologisms on their own accord, independently of state policies. Recall that the first organisation to systematically develop such new words and concepts for their own work was the Union of Engineers in 1919, namely “a profession which [rarely] cares much for nationalist language policy” (Vikør 2010: 24). These historically decentralised efforts largely disengage the process from the political arena.

The overall scholarship on the Icelandic language continues, in some respects, to see Iceland as a “focused” and “closed” speech community that is characterised by historical norm maintenance (Leonard 2011: 172). The major difference between the time of the Settlement and today is that the dense and complex social networks initially responsible for the standardisation and perpetuation of the Icelandic language in a period of isolation from external forces have been substituted by a “linguistic consciousness” that advocates its continuity in the face of external forces. This scholarship of language and sagas is certainly reflected in both public and official discourses.

2.2.2 Popular Manifestations and Official Discourse

According to the pamphlet “Icelandic: at once ancient and modern,”¹⁵ the continuity and timelessness of the Icelandic language is discernible “in the fact that the Icelandic authors of the twentieth century, such as the Nobel prize winner Halldór Laxness, wrote in the same language as, for example, Snorri Sturluson, one of the foremost authors in the Nordic countries in the 13th century” (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture 2001: 2, 15). The pamphlet attributes this phenomenon of speaking an “ancient yet modern” language to the fact that Icelanders were born and bred in an environment that has always favoured the transmission of a pure and intact language. As discussed above, the geographic, political, and economic isolation of Iceland, in combination with its strong literary tradition and circulation of saga material, have long been the platform upon which the preservation and continuity of the Icelandic language has been popularly contextualised and understood.

To that extent, the stability and continuity of the Icelandic language is mostly attributed to the continuous use of the language in written culture. The same pamphlet also states that the prevalence of a written culture is one of the major features that prevented the disintegration or transformation of the language and one that sets Iceland apart as one of the few places in the world with no linguistic variations or dialects (2001: 2) Above all however, this written culture have empowered Icelanders to become one of the most literate people in the world (Sizemore & Walker 1996). This emphasis on literacy, packaged as a deep-rooted, historical quality of the Icelandic people, has come to be perceived as the core of the Icelandic national identity and the singlemost important part of its cultural history. As Sizemore and Walker have claimed, literacy has long been perceived as “an essential part of being Icelandic, and an essential part of the self-image” (1996: 200), and it has equally come to be viewed as the primary marker of Icelandic national identity and a means by which the relationship of Icelanders with the outside world is forged and regulated.

Central to the image of a literary nation is the fact that Icelanders “publish more books [per capita] than other people, [we] buy more books than others, and, in all likelihood, [we] read more books than other people do” (Sizemore & Walker 1996: 201). By the year 2000,

¹⁵ “Icelandic: at once ancient and modern” was published through the combined efforts of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, the Icelandic Language Institute, and the National Committee on the European Year of Languages, 2001.

roughly 1000–1500 books had been published annually since 1980 (Karlsson 2000: 362). This thriving literary scene has been noted more recently by Ari Páll Kristinsson, a member of the Language Planning Department at the Árni Magnússon Institute, who reiterated the number of books published in 2017 (2018: 244). This image of hyperliteracy is also reflected in media produced for non-Icelandic consumers. It is not uncommon, for example, to read in the printed and the digital versions of *The Reykjavík Grapevine*.¹⁶ that “Iceland is a famously literary nation” in an article about the next generation of young Icelandic poets (see Robertson 2019), or about the amount of books published per annum (see Grettisson 2020).

The so-called *Jólabókaflóð*, or “Christmas Book-Flood” and the tradition of giving books as gifts is also frequently pointed to as a testament to the bookishness of Icelanders. According to Alda Sigmundsdóttir’s article, “The Icelanders and their big love of books” on the *Guide to Iceland* website, the fact that Icelanders have cultivated such love and appreciation of the written word is because “writing and storytelling are so intrinsically bound up with our history” (Sigmundsdóttir n.d., para 5). Referring to the poverty, harsh climatic conditions, and the oppression and humiliation suffered at the hands of the Danish “colonial overlords,” Sigmundsdóttir also claims that “what really helped Icelanders survive those times of adversity was the memory of the era when the Sagas were written, when they were still proud and independent. It gave them a sense of national identity and pride” (Sigmundsdóttir n.d., para 6). Together with the notion that “Icelanders seem to have had a strange compulsion to record the events around them,” the article concludes that books are more than entertainment for Icelanders—“they are an intrinsic part of our national identity, and remind us of the resilience of our ancestors and how far we have come since then” (Sigmundsdóttir n.d., para 8 & 9). For the Icelandic language blog, *Transparent language*, the *Jólabókaflóð* also signals the “outpouring of literary deliciousness,” the sheer enormity of which can only be apprehended if one “imagine[s] that all of the books in your country are published at the same time every year, and that your country isn’t very big (say 350,000)” (About that Icelandic Book Flood... 2017, para 2).

The foreign press also participates in this image-crafting. Various articles in such popular and widespread news media as the Guardian and the BBC News Magazine have identified the Icelandic sagas as Europe’s most important books, and proffered that most

¹⁶ The Reykjavík Grapevine is an English language Icelandic newspaper/magazine offering news coverage of life and current events in Iceland.

contemporary Icelanders still write stories and poetry, even on napkins and coffee cups (Goldsmith 2013). A 2013 BBC News Magazine article, under the title “Iceland: Where one in 10 people will publish a book” by Rosie Goldsmith is characteristic of the international portrayals of the bookishness and scholarliness of Icelanders. Reproduced enthusiastically on numerous websites and accompanied by photographs of international superstar Björk and a banner of the Icelandic national bank, *Landsbankinn*, Goldsmith’s article states, among other things: “Each geyser and waterfall we visit has a tale of ancient heroes and heroines attached. Our guide stands up mid-tour to recite his own poetry - our taxi driver’s father and grandfather write biographies” (Goldsmith 2013, para 6). In a similar fashion, Ben Myers (2008) wrote a few years earlier in his ‘The Icelandic Sagas: Europe’s most important book?’ in the Guardian: “[...] which is the best read country in the world? Recent research revealed that in Iceland more books are written, published and sold per person per year than anywhere else on the planet. On a recent trip there I discovered the average Icelander reads four books per year, while one in ten will publish something in their lifetime” (Myers 2008, para 1).

This popular perception of hyperliteracy is also expressed in a language that singles out Iceland as one of the best places to be a writer. According to the Iceland Writers Retreat website, writers who participate can draw inspiration from the Icelandic sagas and the otherworldly landscapes of the country, in addition to the general literary and bookish environment of Iceland. The Christmas Book-Flood and the ways in which Icelanders love and nurture their language alongside the fact that almost everyone in Iceland is a writer and the vast knowledge that Icelandic people have of folklore are considered to play a significant role in marketing Iceland as the ideal place to create new literary masterpieces (Iceland Writers Retreat 2016, para 6).

The recent selection of Reykjavík as a UNESCO City of Literature has also placed an official, authoritative stamp on the image of a special Icelandic literacy. Notably the first non-English-speaking city to bear this permanent title, the inauguration of the Icelandic capital spurred a number of cultural activities, such as festivals, museum exhibitions, which in turn offered the opportunity to create a grand historical narrative of the literary achievements of the nation. The timeline, as seen in the Reykjavík UNESCO city of Literature website, begins in the settlement period and moves to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which saw the production of the two most important books in Icelandic history: the Book of Settlements, *Landnámabók* (1067?–1148?), and the Book of Icelanders, *Íslendingabók* (1122–1133). It continues to pinpoint various moments or periods of composition of the most significant

literary creations. These include the King's sagas (1140–1213), the *First Grammatical Treatise* (ca. 1150), the prose and poetic Eddas (1220?–1270?), the Sturlunga saga (1214–1284), *Möðruvallabók* (1363), *Flateyjarbók* (1387–1394), and the first Icelandic translations of the New Testament (1540) and the complete Bible (1584). It recounts pivotal moments in literary history, such as the establishment of the monasteries of Þingeyrarklaustur (1133) and Viðey (1226), the authorisation of the first printing press at the bishopric of Hólar, and the efforts to collect the saga manuscripts by Árni Magnússon in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It then proceeds to take special pride in Torfhildur Hólm, the late nineteenth-century, first female writer to publish novels, only to concentrate thereafter on the repatriation of Icelandic manuscripts from Denmark, the Nobel Prize won by Halldór Laxness, the array of international prizes awarded to contemporary writers, and a number of other literary activities such as book fairs and festivals.

The idea that the Icelandic language is “at once ancient and modern” plays a catalytic role in the unity and integrity of a narrative that contains such a diverse array of literature comprised of the Icelandic sagas, religious books and grammatical treatises, the writings of Halldór Laxness and contemporary mass-produced crime novels and queer literature. This government-sanctioned understanding of the Icelandic language as ancient-yet-modern accounts for its ability to regenerate itself and adapt to the needs of society. The implication is that, when left to its own devices, the Icelandic language flourishes—all the while remaining stable—without much intervention. Its vocabulary is recycled, any loanwords are adapted to the grammatical rules and pronunciation standards of Icelandic, while the neologisms that are often created to serve modern needs are based on simple, transparent, and self-explanatory Icelandic words (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture 2001: 10).

What the latter ultimately means is that the Icelandic language employs words that are not only easily understood, but also ones that are able to transcend their historical context and temporal meaning in ways that are easily accessible and transparent. The reason behind the language's preservation, therefore, is not a stubborn refusal to change, but instead a capacity to welcome change on its own terms. The endurance of the Icelandic language is, in this understanding, neither solely dependent on its historical embeddedness in medieval times, nor the conservative will of its speakers to perpetuate it. Rather, it is owed to an ability to evolve according to internal rules and principles of language irrespective of time and historical incongruities, and without becoming stagnant, anachronistic, or incompatible with the needs of the modern speaker and author.

To speak a language that is “at once ancient and modern” can therefore be conceived of as a unique cultural reality. The quality that makes this claim of an ancient-yet-modern language particularly alluring rests only partly on the somewhat explicit survivalism that it embodies, but rather more on the alleged *ability* of contemporary Icelanders to eloquently express the modern concerns of daily life in an ancient language. To speak and write in a so-called ancient yet modern language is not merely a constant reminder of the particularities and historical depth of the Icelandic language; it is a historical-cum-modern everyday actuality that attests to the cultural continuity of Icelanders.

2.3 Afterword

The centrality of language and medieval literature in the process of national self-determination is a metanarrative that is rooted on a long scholarly tradition. Since the early modern period and up to the Romantic national revival that followed, the ancientness and continuity of the Icelandic language preoccupied numerous scholars who produced a corpus on language and medieval literature upon which the Icelandic nationalists could base their claims for independence. This scholarship has since then continued unabated and it is nowadays based on the general research on the relationship between nation and language as well as on an epistemological discourse on language. While the study of language and medieval literature initially had the scope of counteracting the negative image of Icelanders as primitive and uncivilised, it has also encouraged the construction of a tradition of literacy that has had an influential impact on the ways in which Icelanders perceive their country’s history and their sense of a distinctive national identity (Sizemore & Walker 1996: 200).

Given the importance of language and medieval literature in the formation of the Icelandic national identity, the claim that archaeology did not play an important role in the national story is not inaccurate. By the nineteenth century Iceland was perceived as nothing more than a culturally impoverished Danish province. The common perception of the time was that Icelanders had not had anything else to show for in their fight for independence other than their ancient language and their literary heritage. The Golden Age of Icelandic literature was counteracted by a monumentless landscape. Vernacular architecture did not conform to the idea of the fearless Viking warrior. The absence of any other notable antiquities was taken as a breach in the cultural continuity between the “glorious past” of the sagas and

contemporary Iceland. In this context, archaeological remains, vernacular architecture and historical and ethnographic evidence were often evaluated vis-a-vis the rich literary heritage.

3. Iceland's National Home and the Discourse of Civilisation

From the grey buildings of Aberdeen to scenic Lerwick, and then from the windswept Tórshavn to the mountainous port of Seyðisfjörður, the trip to Iceland lasted three days. By the time I set foot in Seyðisfjörður, the landscape had changed so dramatically that a thrilling sensation of having arrived at the edge of the world had surprisingly enveloped an otherwise cynical me. Yet the trip was not over. I had to reach Reykjavík at the other end of the country and then find my way to Reykholt in Borgarfjörður. After all, this was not a leisure trip: I was about to participate in an archaeological research project of a high-status medieval farmstead as a field archaeologist.

After a short bus ride to Egilsstaðir, we were all taken aback by the fact that our journey had to be halted for the day. The summer bus schedule had not yet begun and the only bus of the day had already left for its long trip to the capital. The only thing to do was to spend the night at Egilsstaðir. An employee at the information centre pointed out the accommodation—a small grassy building. Made out of turf, the front of the house was dressed with wooden panelling. Inside, four beds and a little kitchenette appeared comfortable enough to accommodate me and three fellow travellers. Despite being quite warm and cosy, a very distant and peculiar childhood memory of Reagan and Gorbachev meeting at a very 'weird' looking house in Reykjavik cropped up in my mind. Meanwhile, some well-intentioned banter about the primitive state of the country we had just arrived in had begun. The experience was something I had never expected. But one more thing that I could have never imagined was that this type of building would define my career for the next twenty years. As I prepare to return to Seyðisfjörður to excavate yet another set of old turf structures, the memory of having spend my first ever night in Iceland in a turf house springs to mind in the same way as my childhood memory did back then.

It is inescapable to speak of a country without evoking a particular landscape (Edensor 2002), cityscape, or a monument. France is linked with recurrent images of the Eiffel Tower and its vineyards, Greece with the Parthenon and its sandy beaches, and Great Britain with Big Ben and its grassy fields. These selective images of an otherwise more dynamic and heterogeneous environment do not only help define nations as bounded entities (Edensor 2002: 37), but also

as discrete social spaces and historic territories that localise and legitimise communities in time and space (Smith 1991: 16). These fixed markers carry immense symbolic capital, as they stand for symbolic values and national virtues and come to signify historical continuities that constantly act upon a sense of national belonging and self-realisation (Edensor 2002). In other words, “history runs through geography” (Cubitt 1998: 13), giving rise to “national landscape ideologies” (Short 1991) that are embedded with emotional and symbolic significance.

In that framework, Iceland has become synonymous with volcanoes, glaciers, the northern lights, and other natural wonders. As far as monuments are concerned, *Hallgrímskirkja* and the statue of Leifur Eiríksson rise above as the best-known landmarks of Reykjavík’s cityscape. The national park at Þingvellir is a place where history and nature intermingle, as it is the meeting place of the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates and the site of the ancient assembly, the *Alþingi*. But somewhere in between the natural wonders, historical sites, and the capital’s cityscape lies another somewhat underestimated, yet iconic—and without a doubt most picturesque—Icelandic cultural landmark: the turf house. Inconspicuous in its appearance, as it blends harmoniously with the surrounding landscape, this humble yet sophisticated, and at times elegant, stone-and-turf structure has been woven into the very fabric of Icelandic society from the very beginning. From the grand longhouses of the early Icelandic settlers to the modest, poor huts, and the more stylish and complex nineteenth- and early twentieth-century farmhouses, the turf house has been *the place* where generation after generation was born and raised for over a millennium.

With its last occupants finally moving into more modern types of housing well after the surge of Icelandic modernity and urbanization, the historical permanence of the turf house has frequently stood for the historical continuity of the Icelandic nation. It has been the space where the Icelandic language, customs, traditions, and beliefs have persevered and thrived, and can therefore act as a metonym for the determination of a historically poverty-stricken population to survive in a harsh and desolate environment. Nonetheless, the turf house has never really captured the national imagination of Icelanders. This may be due to the fact that Icelanders have never needed such cultural landmarks in order to draw and legitimise their national boundaries. The geographic remoteness of the country serves as the protective mechanism that has historically averted any territorial contestation from other ethnic groups (Hálfðanarson 2001), and ensured that the country retained its ethnic and cultural homogeneity and uniqueness.

At the same time, turf architecture has never been held in high esteem, either in Iceland or in the West. By the nineteenth century, turf houses were considered as dirty, unhygienic and poor in architectural design, and they were taken as indicative of the alleged primitive and barbaric nature of Icelanders. While the Icelandic sagas could attest, on the contrary, to a degree of intellectuality and historical consciousness that fitted into the western paradigms of civilization, modernity, and progress, the turf house was seen as a bastion of primitiveness and a bitter remnant of the nation's centuries-long economic, intellectual, and moral stagnation. After a short account of the turf house's history and evolution, this chapter revisits some of the earliest textual descriptions and accounts of the turf house, and discusses the ways in which the structure came to be viewed within the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grand narratives of civilisation.

3.1 Building with Turf

Turf has been used as a building material for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Loveday (2006) has suggested that turf was used as a wall-core insulating material as early as the Neolithic times. Since the identification of turf in prehistoric settings is an almost impossible task because of biodegradation, Loveday has referred to the material as the invincible structural component of the Neolithic halls of Claish, Balbridie, and Balfang in Scotland (2006). More substantial evidence in the form of stone-faced turf walls also suggests that turf played an integral role in the construction of Iron Age roundhouses in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales (Loveday 2006). Turf has also been favoured in the erection of defensive walls and boundaries (Hassall 1984; Ray & Bapty 2016; Wilkes 1974), as in the case of the Antonine Wall and parts of Hadrian's Wall in Roman Britain and Offa's dyke in Anglo-Saxon times.

Despite the evidence for the early use of turf as a building material, it is commonly believed that turf architecture emerged as a unique style in the early medieval period. With the earliest examples found mostly in the coastal regions of northern and northwestern Europe, the early medieval Pitcarmick houses in Scotland, the turf longhouses in Iceland and the Faroe Islands, and a number of other similar structures in Greenland, Norway, and Jutland are considered the prototypes of early turf architecture. From these early beginnings, turf architecture appeared to gain popularity, persisting and developing regionally in the northern European context until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as evident in the elaborate Icelandic turf farm; the turf blackhouse in the Scottish highlands, the Hebrides, and Ireland;

the Greenlandic turf hut; and the *plaggenhut* cabin in the Netherlands. Beyond the northern European context, turf houses have also been documented in the plains of Hungary, southern Russia, and Canada (Noble 2007), while sod houses are found in the Great Plains of the U.S. The latter structures were mostly used as temporary shelters by the pioneer settlers of North America. Early nineteenth-century Australian records, on the other hand, mention the presence of large turf-built Aboriginal dwellings (Howard 1992), while the Maori used turf to build storage rooms in pre-European New Zealand (Bowman 2000). At the same time, the European and the Chinese settlers of Australia allegedly brought with them their own turf-building techniques and used such structures as both temporary and permanent housing (Howard 1992).

In general terms, the rise of turf architecture is most often attributed to harsh climatic and environmental conditions, and it is associated with the absence of alternative building materials. It is therefore commonly understood that turf shelters, dwellings, and farms have arisen out of necessity (Dyer 1986, 2008; Wilkinson 2009; William 1988). Likely because of this, and despite the great diversity in turf building-techniques and types of houses across the world as well as intra-regionally (Walker et al. 2006), the turf house has carried a social stigma. The fact that large segments of the nineteenth-century lower social classes in the U.S., Australia, southern Hungary, and Scotland used turf and sod buildings as permanent housing has associated the structure with poverty, idleness, and primitiveness, with authorities, in certain instances, prohibiting the use of turf for building construction by law (Wilkinson 2009).

Stigma aside, building with turf in the otherwise barren grasslands of northwestern Europe, Australia, and the U.S., carried numerous and significant advantages. In these places where timber resources were scarce, turf was an abundant and cheap building material, and it is a relatively easy task to build an architecturally simple turf house. The archetypal turf or sod structure usually has an oval or rectangular footprint and most often contains one common space to house both people and domestic animals. Timber is only necessary for the construction of a roof frame, and the associated posts that hold the structure (Megaw 1962: 90), and can be imported from other locations. Cut from mineral-based marshlands, turf can be carved to resemble building blocks of various shapes and sizes that do not require much further processing. These are allowed to dry and then placed either around a timber frame, or on top of flat stones to form walls that, depending on the quality of the turf, craftsmanship,

and climatic conditions can consist of two or three layers. In the extreme environments of Iceland, Greenland, and Scotland, such thick walls provided greater insulation and stability than timber or stone walls. One of the major advantages of using turf is that the grassy earth carries a root system that continues to grow and acts as a binding force, giving the structure a remarkable stability and durability. A well-built turf house with appropriate maintenance can have a lifespan that often exceeds the fifty-year mark (Berge 2009: 35).

Nonetheless, turf dwellings are not without their problems. During dry seasons, turf houses are vulnerable to fires. Thatched roofs are heavy and need substantial support, and they often shelter insects, birds, mice and, in the cases of Australia and the U.S., even snakes (Noble 2007: 91). During rainy seasons, roofs leak and the dirt floors get muddy, while in dry periods, dust and dirt can easily settle down from the roof and walls, resulting in unhygienic living conditions. Because there are few openings in the thick walls, windows are both few and small, and the interiors of the houses have poor light and ventilation (Noble 2007: 91). Most of all, however, a turf house needs hard work to maintain. Even though a turf building can last for a significant amount of time with no major problems, the eventual degradation of the root system ultimately endangers the stability of the structure. To avoid collapse, the refurbishment of walls with new sod is necessary, while in certain cases entire walls may have to be torn down and rebuilt, or even whole houses dismantled and put back together again.

In Iceland, turf houses have been inhabited for more than a millennium. Through time, the structure has seen numerous transformations and improvements that fitted both the climatic and environmental conditions of the country, as well as the social requirements of each era. With many notable examples still standing, the Icelandic turf house has also given valuable insights to turf architecture around the world, and it is nowadays considered a sophisticated architectural tradition.

3.2 The evolution of the Icelandic turf house

Dating back to the settlement period, turf building-techniques were developed by the early Scandinavian settlers. During the Saga Age (870-1056), the turf longhouse (*skáli* or *eldaskáli*) was the centrepiece of the early Icelandic farmstead. The design of a typical Icelandic turf longhouse was not dissimilar to the timber longhouses found in Scandinavia, and the Icelandic version is considered to be a modification of the original Iron Age longhouse made to suit the Icelandic environment. The size, design, and architectural detail of the Icelandic

longhouse were dependent on the availability and quality of the building materials, climatic conditions, the status of the owner and the scope (permanent or temporary) of the settlement. At approximately 4–8 metres in width and 10–36 metres in length (Ólafsson & Ágústsson 2003; Sverrisdóttir 2006: 118), the biggest houses could accommodate 20 to 30 people. Bearing in mind that structural differences are clearly visible in the archaeological record, the following section describes the way in which a typical Icelandic turf longhouse was built.

3.2.1 The Icelandic longhouse

The floor plan of an archetypal Icelandic longhouse is oblong, with both ends of the building narrowing modestly at different degrees. In the earliest times, the construction of a turf longhouse would begin with the laying of walls. The walls marked the outline of the structure and were laid directly on the ground. By the latter part of the tenth century, a stone footing composed of large, flat, basalt boulders would normally be placed first. Such a foundation was used to mark the base of the structure and prevent moisture from seeping up onto the walls. Cut from nearby marshland areas with scythes (*torfljáir*), turf was cut in various shapes. The best and most commonly used types of turf for wall construction were *strengur* (long strips of turf), *klömbruhnaus* or *klambra* (wedge block), and *kvíahnaus* (rectangular block commonly used in sheep barns, corrals and milking-pens known as “milk-pen” block). After drying, alternations of *strengur* and *klambra* blocks were most often stacked in layers to raise what was normally a bow-sided wall (Fig. 3.1).

When the walls had settled, the structural support of the house was placed within. A number of timber posts on either side of the structure ran the length of the building and supported the beams of a longitudinal, double-pitched roof. The posts were either placed directly into the soil or on top of flat stones to protect the wood from rotting. Even though the presence of appropriate timber resources in Iceland is an old and ongoing debate, it is commonly understood that timber was imported from Scandinavia, though driftwood was often found on Icelandic shores (see Trbojevic 2016). According to Ólafsson and Ágústsson (2003: 9), there were two main types of frames for houses, beamed-roofed and raftered, that accommodated a trodden turf roof.

Like most early examples of turf architecture, the Icelandic longhouse consisted of a single, large space where its occupants worked, ate, and slept. Nonetheless, the wooden posts that run longitudinally along the structure divided the interior into three long aisles. On either

side, the two corresponding corridors were often divided into separate rooms by timber or turf partitions. Wooden or turf benches were placed in each room and were used for sleeping, eating, and as workspaces for domestic chores. At times, wooden panels were placed against the turf walls so as to thwart moisture from entering the living quarters. The central corridor was the largest and occupied most of the interior. Fire pits, or an elaborate long hearth ran across the length of the central aisle and was used for heat, light, and the preparation of food. Holes in the roof permitted the smoke to escape and provided much needed ventilation and light. A pantry (*matbúr*) was often situated at the one end of the building, while on the other stood an entrance hall (*anddyri*). The entrance of a turf longhouse was situated at one end of the southern longitudinal wall of the house. Located under a gable, it could be ornately carved, and the area in front of the door was most often paved.



Figure 3.1: Strengur and klambra blocks stacked together to form wall at Glaumbær farmstead (left), and klambra wall at Laufás farm (right).

It has been asserted that soon after Iceland was permanently settled, the longhouse started to change form (Ólafsson & Ágústsson 2003). Most often, these changes revolved around the construction of additional rooms at the back of the structure. The longhouses of the wealthy farmsteads at Stöng and Granastaðir, in southern and northern Iceland respectively, possess additional rooms such as sleeping chambers, latrines, and storage rooms. These were accompanied by a range of outbuildings, such as churches, smithies, and cowsheds. It has also been recently postulated that a number of early farmsteads had two or more longhouses that were used simultaneously (Vésteinsson 1998: 12-14, 2000: 168). Certainly, the earliest or poorest farm houses, such as the longhouses of Aðalstræti 14–16 in Reykjavík and

Eiríksstaðir in the northwest of the country, appear to have been on the smaller side, and were more modest, with no additional rooms or outbuildings (Fig. 3.2).



Figure 3.2: The longhouse at Hrísbú (Courtesy of Dr. Davide Marco Zori).

3.2.2 The rise of the passageway farmhouse

In the fourteenth century, the turf house underwent major changes. One of the most important alterations was the movement of the entrance towards the centre of the farmhouse. From the entrance, a paved corridor ran through the structure, essentially cutting the building in half. This passageway divided the structure into the living quarters on one side and pantry or work areas on the other and often led to a latrine or a bathhouse (*baðstofa*), which contained a stove. Spaces at each end of the main structure were cordoned off, and individual rooms with their own gabled entrances facing the front yard were created to house additional storage spaces, kitchens, smithies, and byres. As a result, the original long hallway was significantly reduced in size and the long hearth once dominant in the earliest longhouses ceased to exist. With the multiple rooms interconnected by a central corridor, this type of house came to be known as the passageway farmhouse (*gangabær*). The fourteenth-century passageway farmhouse at Gröf, the fifteenth-century farmhouses of Forna-Lá and Reyðarfell, the biggest passageway farmhouse at Kúabót, and the oldest standing farmhouse of Keldur, are all prime examples of this certain type of turf building (Ólafsson & Ágústsson 2003, Fig. 3.3).

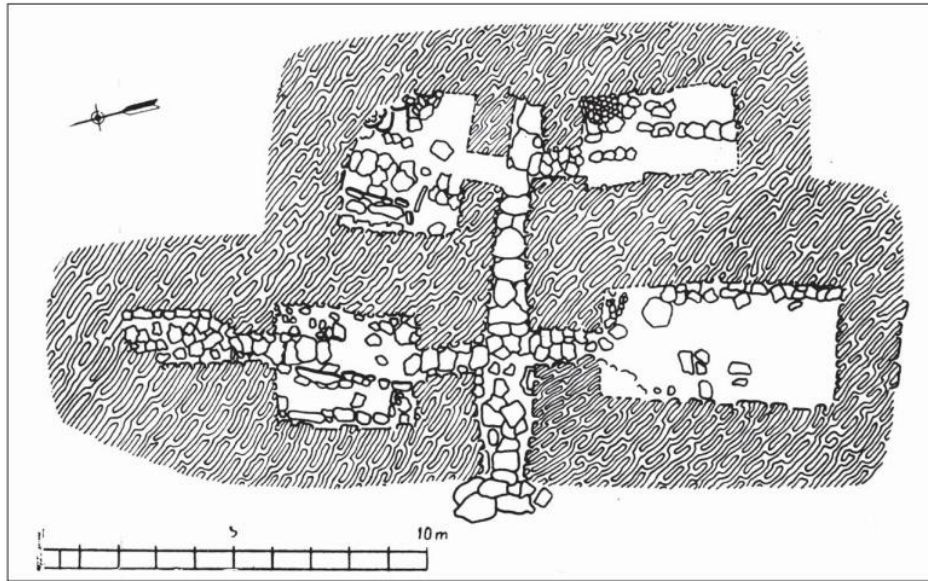


Figure 3.3: The passageway dwelling at Forna-Lá (Source Ágústsson 1982: 260).

It is worth noting that the passageway form would persist and become the most predominant type of turf house until the nineteenth century. During this time, further spatial developments occurred. While the techniques of cutting turf and the overall building methods remained similar, the interior of the passageway house has, over the years, been rearranged, including the creation of additional rooms to accommodate guests, sitting rooms, and private sleeping quarters (known as *litla baðstofa*). But if there is one internal rearrangement that is of major importance, it is the eventual transformation of the bathhouse (*baðstofa*) into a workspace and later into the primary living quarters (Fig. 3.4). It has been hypothesized that this spatial reorganization took place because of climatic conditions and a shortage of firewood (Ólafsson & Ágústsson 2003). Slightly elevated above the rest of the house, the *baðstofa* contained a stove and was the warmest room in the structure. But as the *baðstofa* slowly became the focal space of the household, the other cold, dark, and poorly ventilated rooms of the house slowly became non-functional.

3.2.3 The gabled turf farmhouse and later developments

The eighteenth century brought a further development to the turf house. In 1791, a set of proposals for the improvement of farmhouses was proposed by Guðlaugur Sveinsson, a cleric and dean of Vatnsfjörður in the west of the country. Published in the Royal Literary Arts Society, Sveinsson proposed a standardisation of turf architecture and suggested the development of three types of farmhouses (Sveinsson 1791). Small and medium types aimed

to reduce the size of the structures and to simplify their internal arrangement with a return to uniform, homogeneous, and multifunctional spaces. A third, more intricate, type rearranged the spaces in the already existing passageway buildings. One of the most innovative suggestions was to reorient all the annex buildings towards the front yard. Even though such a practice had been used in earlier times, the characteristic longitudinal roof saw its demise as each adjacent building now required its own thatched roof. This proposal gained immediate momentum and the gabled farmhouse (*burstabær*) began to predominate in the south of the country with variations noted elsewhere (Ólafsson & Ágústsson 2003, Fig. 3.5).



Figure 3.4: Reconstruction of a typical nineteenth-century *baðstofa* from Skörð at the National Museum of Iceland.

The overall outward appearance of the gabled farmhouse persisted well into the twentieth century, but the internal spaces of the structure continued to develop. As timber became more available in the nineteenth century, more rooms, such as guest and sitting rooms, the anteroom (*framhús*), and pantries, were panelled with wood and floorboards. Prosperous farms and vicarages used timber panelling and wooden floors more so than the average, poorer farmsteads, and the use of timber became closely associated with the status of the residents. At the same time, the size of the *baðstofa* increased considerably, and it often featured wood-panelled walls and a wooden floor, keeping it much cleaner than the rest of the house. The *baðstofa* was now also partitioned into small wooden compartments, each containing a bed, and the same space was used for dining, entertainment, and other domestic activities such as sewing, spinning, and the combing of wool.



Figure 3.5: The Laufás farmstead (Author's personal collection)

With the advent of modernity, the turf farmhouse saw its last major transformation. By the end of the nineteenth century, timber and later concrete houses made their appearance and began to replace the turf house as the main residential building in Iceland. In wealthier farmsteads, turf structures were thereafter used exclusively for housing workers and livestock or as storage spaces. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mass migration of farm workers to the industrial environments of Reykjavík and elsewhere also signalled the radical transformation of the typical rural household. As industrialisation transformed the Icelandic farm to a smaller, family-oriented enterprise, spaces that were previously occupied by labourers were left empty. This development spurred one of the most significant transformations, namely the creation of private spaces in the turf house. By the mid-twentieth century, efforts to modernise the remaining turf houses with electric stoves, washing machines, and telephones also took place. By that time however, few Icelanders still inhabited turf homes. Concrete buildings replaced most of the turf houses and the majority of the remaining turf structures were left to disintegrate. After one thousand years of perseverance in the Icelandic landscape, the very last inhabitants abandoned their turf homes in the 1960s.

3.2.4 Surviving turf houses

While an estimated fifty percent of all domestic structures were built of turf at the beginning of the last century (Magnússon 2010: 48), the number of turf farmhouses that stand in good

condition is nowadays very low. Initiatives regarding the preservation of turf structures were nonetheless taken up under the aegis of the Historic Buildings Collection of the National Museum during the first half of the last century. The turf chapel (*bænhús*) at Núpsstaður was the first turf structure included on the list of national archaeological artefacts in 1931 (Hafsteinsson 2010). This was followed by the ecclesiastical buildings of Víðimýri in Skagafjörður in 1936, and the church at Gröf on Höfðaströnd around 1939. By the following decade, the first farmhouses of Bustarfell in the northeast and Glaumbær and Laufás in the north of the country were added to the list. Nowadays, the Historic Buildings Collection oversees eighteen turf structures: ten farmhouses, five churches, a town house, an assembly, and a storage building. Aside from those, the reconstruction of the early longhouse at Stöng (1974) and a similar reconstruction based on the remains of the longhouse in Eiríksstaðir (1999) are some other representatives of early turf architecture (Fig. 3.6). At present, a number of the surviving farmhouses and the reconstructions operate as museums.



Figure 3.6: Aerial view of Stöng (Source Iceland360vr).

Most of the still-standing farmhouses belonged to the wealthier segments of Icelandic society and represent the high-end of turf architecture, while the more modest turf houses of the lower classes were swiftly abandoned and soon became derelict. The fact that the Icelandic landscape is nowadays devoid of a structure that was once predominant is owed to two main reasons. Firstly, the constant need for maintenance and restoration has always made the survival of turf houses a nearly impossible task. Secondly, turf architecture has not always been held in high regard. As in the case of the U.S., Scotland and Hungary, the Icelandic turf

house was long synonymous with poverty and primitiveness. Most foreign accounts from as early as the eleventh to the nineteenth century described the Icelandic turf house in crude terms and used it as a clear sign of the backward state of Iceland and the impoverishment of its people. Despite the evolution of the simple turf dwelling into an elaborate farmhouse, the use of a perishable building material and the perceived architectural simplicity of the structure were seen as a manifestation of the inability of Icelanders to progress. What follows is an analysis of the evolution of this idea.

3.3 The turf house through foreign eyes

Iceland has captured the imagination of travellers, geographers, and writers ever since the eleventh century. The earliest known account, and perhaps the most quoted one, is the work of German chronicler, Adam of Bremen, the *Historia Ecclesiae Hamburgensis* (1076–1079). In his *Historia*, Adam of Bremen gives a short description of Iceland and makes the following remark, rare for its time, on the living conditions of the local population. “This island [...] is so very large, that it has on it many peoples, who make a living only by raising cattle and who clothe themselves with their pelts. No crops are grown there; the supply of wood is meagre. On this account the people dwell in underground caves, glad to have roof and food and bed in common with their cattle”¹⁷ (Adam of Bremen 1959: 217). Despite these primitive living arrangements, the local inhabitants seek “nothing more than what nature affords” (Adam of Bremen 1959: 217). They are poor but charitable and, above all, devout Christians who hold their bishop up as a king and abide to his wishes. For Adam of Bremen, the poverty of Icelanders meant that they passed their lives in holy simplicity.

Nearly a century and a half later, the Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus provided a similar account in his monumental work, *Gesta Danorum*. For Saxo, as with Adam, the life of Icelanders might have been unusual and primitive, but the lack of luxury and life’s hedonistic

¹⁷ Cave dwelling in Iceland is a recurrent theme that has captured the imagination of the public over time in what archaeologist and former president of Iceland Kristján Eldjárn once referred to as “cave romance.” I take the stance that Adam of Bremen, as well as other early chroniclers and geographers, used the terms “cave” and “cavern” to refer not only to natural caves, but also to pit houses and earth-bunded or sunken, dugout semi-subterranean turf structures.

pleasures signified a life close to God¹⁸ (Karsten 2015: 7). It was also this lack of opulence that drove Icelanders to develop a thirst for knowledge and seek pleasure in the intellectual endeavours of literary composition and writing the history of their people for future generations. This thirst for knowledge and the simplicity of Icelandic life was, in Saxo's eyes, very similar to the life of the learned monastic society (Ísleifsson 1996: 27, 2015: 68).

By the sixteenth century, descriptions of Iceland and its people had increased considerably. Most accounts concentrated on the adverse climate and environmental conditions and painted a rather grim image of the Icelandic landscape. Alongside these descriptions of land and nature, descriptions of the living conditions and character of the local population were similarly negative. Many accounts go so far as to describe Icelanders as half-humans, half-animals of a dwarf-like stature and barbaric appearance, with a questionable morality and a tendency to practice witchcraft and believe in the devil. One of the most popular and enduring accounts is the work of a German priest and geographer, Dithmar Blefken. In his *Islandia* (1607), Blefken presented Icelanders as superstitious, filthy, and barbaric drunkards who did not hesitate to exchange their daughters for bread and other material goods. In the seventeenth-century translation of his work, published in Purchas's *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas his Pilgrimes: Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and others*, Blefken offers this description of the crowded and unhygienic habits of Icelanders:

By night the Master of the house, with all his family, his wife and children lye in one room, covered with a cloth made of Wooll which they make. And the like clothes they lap under them, without straw or hay put under. All of them make water in one chamber-pot, with the which in the morning they wash their face, mouth, teeth, and hands; they allege many reasons thereof, to wit, that this makes a faire face, maintaineth the strength, confirmeth the sinews in the hands, and preserveth the teeth from putrifaction (Blefken, quoted in Purchas 1906, Vol. XIII: 500).

¹⁸ Even though Saxo Grammaticus does not offer explicit descriptions of the living conditions and dwellings of Icelanders, there are numerous instances where he speaks of natural or man-made caves. As in the case of Adam of Bremen, I believe that Saxo Grammaticus is referring to semi-subterranean or earth-bunded turf structures and pit houses.

Like Adam of Bremen, Blefken also provides the following extraordinary and detailed explanation regarding the lack of proper domestic dwellings:

There is no Citie in the whole Iland: the seldom have two or three dwellings together. [...] All their houses are under ground, for they have no matter of building. There is not a tree in the whole Iland, except the Birch-tree, and that in one place, which also exceedeth not the stature of a man in length, and that by reason of the vehemencie of the winds that it cannot grow higher. [...] Yet sometimes great abundance of Firre-trees from Tartaria, or else-where carried by force of the waves and the Ice, arrived in Island. The chiefe use of them is in building Cabbins under the ground: you shall scarcely find a house out of the earth, by reason of the strong winds, which sometimes overthrow Horses and their Riders. [...] A Whale being dead or killed, the Inhabitants make Buildings and Dwellings of the bones thereof with great dexteritie and skill, they make also seates, benches, tables, and other utensils, smoothing them so that they seeme like Ivory. They that sleepe in these houses, are said always to dreame of shipwrack (Blefken, quoted in Purchas 1906, Vol. XIII: 506-507).

Even though these early accounts appear to be based on second-hand knowledge and reflect the rhetoric of civilisation of their own time, they established a tone for the discourse around Iceland (Ísleifsson 2011). For the centuries to come, Icelanders would be thought of as “beastly creatures unmannered and untaughte,” as English traveller, physician, and writer, Andrew Boorde (1870) once wrote, who “have no houses but yet doth lye in caves altogether like swine” (quoted in Ísleifsson 2011: 46).

Even though Iceland was generally described in negative terms, some of these accounts highlighted a number of positive aspects of Icelandic society. A case in point is the account of Swedish bishop Olaus Magnus. Despite his belief “that the minions of the devil resided in the far North” (Ísleifsson 2011: 12) and his conviction that the inhabitants of such places were wild, Olaus Magnus admired Icelanders’ simple way of life and their straightforward, unpretentious manners. Other writers, such as English clergyman and author of geographies Peter Heylin, similarly extolled the plain and simple nature of Icelandic life and the fact that the local inhabitants were content with what nature provided them. As in the earliest accounts of Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus, the virtues of simplicity and

poverty were in accordance with the values of Christian teaching, and Iceland was presented as an ideal Christian society (Ísleifsson 2011).

More importantly, Icelanders continued to be associated with the intellectual ventures of writing history and composing poetry. Many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts speak of the extraordinary ability of Icelanders to compose poems in their own language and portray them as one of the most ancient and learned peoples of Northern Europe. A work that had a central role in maintaining this perception was *Crymogæa*, written by one of the most prominent seventeenth-century Icelandic humanists, Arngrímur Jónsson. Published in 1609 in Hamburg, Jónsson was the first scholar to treat the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saga narrative as history proper (Jensson 2008: 2). By highlighting the archaic character of the Icelandic language, he set out to establish Icelandic as the historic and classical language of the Nordic world and present Icelanders as the custodians and rightful owners of a pure and “uncorrupted” language and culture. According to Jónsson the “ancient purity and elegance” of the Icelandic language and by extension culture could be found in the literary texts of the manuscripts (Jónsson 1950-52, 2: 28). The immense influence of his work would soon be reflected in numerous foreign scholarly accounts of the Icelandic language, history, and mythology, and Icelanders became widely acknowledged, as a certain Reverend Mr. Paschoud had once written, as “the greatest Wits of the North, having preserved their ancient history in Verses” (quoted in Ísleifsson 2015: 65).

3.3.1 Enlightenment and the turf house

By the late eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution was reshaping the political and economic growth in Northern Europe, and provided a new vision of humanity and civilisation. For the progressives and the Enlightenment thinkers of the time, civilisation and progress were embodied in the ideal of rationality, individual liberty and egalitarianism as manifested in industrial development, scientific discovery, and technological innovation, as well as in the rise of liberalism and republicanism. According to prominent figures like Diderot, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, these ideals stood in stark contrast with the barbarity and primitiveness that were embodied in rurality, feudalism, despotism, myth, and superstition. This dichotomy between civilisation and barbarity manifested in geographic terms, where the northern European states came to be regarded as rational, progressive, and masculine and the southern ones as superstitious, backwards, corrupt, and feminine.

The new progressive ideals of the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment needed an origin story to legitimise them. The search for that past resulted in a major shift of interest from the southern Greco-Roman cultural heritage to the cultures of the northern European states. In that discourse, the North was envisaged as the birthplace of egalitarianism and freedom. This view was largely sustained by the notion that the harsh environmental conditions of the North had hardened the local population and infused them with a work ethic and a sense of community that fuelled egalitarianism. This shift of focus towards the North placed Iceland at centre stage of a novel cultural discourse that spoke of a superior northern ancient civilisation that was in contradistinction to the inferior and decadent south. Mediated by the medieval saga literature, notions of progress and innovation were superimposed on the entrepreneurial spirit and individuality of the early Icelandic chieftains, with egalitarianism reflected in the ancient democratic institution of the *Alþingi*, and creativity mirrored in the creation of the literature itself.

This belief is quite characteristically typified in the works of Paul Herni Mallet, *Introduction à l'Histoire de Dannemarc* (1755) and *Monumens de la Mythologie* (1756), and the chapter *l'Islande*, in Diderot and d' Alembert's widely circulated *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772). According to the anonymous author of *l'Islande*, Icelanders were imbued with an ancient democratic ethos and a passion for liberty, fundamental concepts of the Enlightenment. Offering a detailed account of Icelandic origin stories based on saga narratives, the author claimed that the first settler of Iceland, Ingólfur Arnarson, decided to leave the Norwegian kingdom in order to flee the tyranny of Harald the Fairhaired, and alongside other fugitives established a *république* in Iceland. Despite the fact that this nascent Icelandic republic soon fell under the rule of the Norwegian and later Danish Crowns, Icelanders continued to despise absolute governance, and professed a deep love for liberty. *L'Islande's* extensive text on Icelandic geography, economy, religion, political status, and mythology coincided with Montesquieu's belief in the noble and courageous Norsemen who decided to leave their homelands in order to escape from the oppression of their kings and then set off to destroy the “tyrants and slaves” of other lands, “and to teach men that, nature having made them equal, reason could not render them dependent, except where it is necessary to their happiness” (quoted in Courtney 2001: 60).

Far removed from the popular imagination of previous centuries, Iceland was no longer seen as impoverished yet pious, but rather as a utopia of creativity, freedom, and individuality (Ísleifsson 2011: 15). In this context, Icelanders were reconceived as the distant

relatives of Northern Europe, and Iceland was increasingly seen as an integral part of Europe capable of progress as any other Europeans (Oslund 2011). Seen as historically primed for the ideals of the Enlightenment, the distant province of the Danish kingdom attracted the attention of the state. By the latter half of the eighteenth century, the Danish administration began to show a considerable interest in both the affairs of the province and the living conditions of the population. Behind this unprecedented interest for an otherwise neglected part of the Danish dominion was one of the most important aims of the Enlightenment, namely the eradication of conditions that inhibited human progress. In that context, “progress was to be realised through the accumulation of numerous acts of Improvement, enacted upon land, manufacture, communication, society, the self and every other sphere of human endeavour” (Tarlow 2007: 20). Iceland needed those improvements urgently. By 1707, a smallpox epidemic had claimed a quarter of the Icelandic population, while the eruption of the Katla volcano in 1755 and the famine of 1756–1757 had claimed further lives and led many to homelessness (Karlsson 2000: 177). To address this, the Danish Academy of Science commissioned the Icelandic natural scientists Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson to write a full account of the civil and natural history of the island and to report on the contemporary state of the province. In his *Reise Igiennem Island* (1772), Ólafsson provided essential information upon which a number of direct governmental initiatives and reforms in education, administration, agriculture, as well as efforts to restructure the Icelandic fishing industry would rely, in an overall effort to remodel the province into a progressive and regulated part of the Danish composite state (Róbertsdóttir 2008).

Beyond the drive for progressive reforms, the fact that Iceland was considered *terra incognita* also spurred the curiosity of a number of explorers and scientists (Agnarsdóttir 2010: 236). By the latter half of the eighteenth century, English and French scientific societies, as well as the Danish Royal Society had organised a number of expeditions. The Danish jurist Niels Horrebow arrived in 1749, followed by the French Yves Joseph de Kerguelen-Trémarec in 1767 and Marquis de Verdun de la Crenne in 1771, and then the British Sir Joseph Banks in 1772 and Sir John Stanley in 1789. They each travelled extensively throughout Iceland and alongside their team of botanists, geologists, and astronomers produced some of the most accurate-to-date descriptions of the country. Alongside their meteorological and geological observations, accurate maps, descriptions and illustrations of flora and fauna, they provided detailed accounts of the living conditions of Icelanders and the turf house. If there is one characteristic that all these accounts have in

common, it is the scientific style in which they are written. Moderate and neutral, they do not pass judgement on the Icelandic people and generally make balanced, impersonal, and benevolent critiques of their way of life.

Regarding the character of Icelanders, the population was described as a people with a good and honest disposition, whose chief amusements were playing chess and recounting the tales from former times (Banks 1783; de Kerguelen-Trémarec 1767; Olafsen & Povelsen 1805). According to Sir Joseph Banks, they had fewer vices than other people, and theft was “seldom heard of” (1783: 88). Despite the poverty, he found them hospitable, saying they “cheerfully give away the little they have to spare, and express the utmost joy and satisfaction if you are pleased with their gift (Banks 1783: 88). Likewise, for Ólafsson and Pálsson, even the inhabitants around the glaciers with reputations for rudeness and dishonesty appeared to have adopted good and civilised manners due to “the good order established amongst them, as well as by their intercourse with the other inhabitants of the island [...]” (Olafsen & Povelsen 1805: 77-78).

Despite the lack of physicians, Icelanders also appeared to have, according to Kerguelen-Trémarec, “fine teeth” and “enjoy[ed] their health admirably” (Agnarsdóttir 2013: 20). According to Horrebow, Icelanders were also industrious, as most people had “several occupations, never neglecting, or omitting anything that ought to be done” (1758: 120). On the contrary, De Kerguelen-Trémarec noted that Icelanders were often lazy and prone to drink, but attributed this to the Danish merchants who imported alcohol (Agnarsdóttir 2013: 21). Most accounts also mention the poetic genius of the local inhabitants, whose riddles and poems exhibited inventiveness and intellect (Banks 1783: 154). It is to that effect that Sir John Stanley stated that, while the condition of Icelanders “with respect to all the comforts or necessities of life is rarely superior to the savage state, their moral and intellectual qualities raise them to a level even with the most civilized communities of Europe [...] without any fear of inferiority, amongst the informed and well bred of any society in London, Paris or any other capital” (quoted in Agnarsdóttir 2013: 208).

These accounts are also some of the rare moments in history that the turf house received a sober critique. All the authors recognised that turf architecture was not static, noting variations in size and style both regionally and according to social status. More importantly, the turf house was seen as an inevitable outcome of the interaction between *Man* and *Nature*. This perception reflected the Enlightenment concept that humans and their

environment are reciprocally produced. One of the most representative works in this respect is Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson's 1772 *Reise Igiennem Island*. Ólafsson and Pálsson observe that "the worst houses are in the southern part of the island, which being inhabited principally by fishermen, contains nothing but miserable huts" (1805: 12). They attribute negative foreign perceptions of the turf house to the fact that travellers of earlier times had never journeyed enough through the country to realise that the Icelandic houses were not stereotyped, mostly drawing their conclusions from what they experienced in the poor southern fishing villages. Ólafsson and Pálsson also observe that the turf house is suitable to the Icelandic environment and enumerate the positive aspects of the turf house, while advising ways in which turf buildings can be improved:

Icelanders have adopted a manner of building very suitable to their country; they are more secure from cold than in apartments surrounded by brick-walls. The houses, at the same time that they better resist the intemperance of the seasons, are more secure than other kinds against earthquakes; for there have been numerous instances, in which very violent shocks have not damaged any one of them, while every person walking in the open country has been thrown down. The present manner of building, however, in Iceland, is not so solid as that which prevailed about two centuries ago; the ancient art of building is forgotten, while the timber of the present day is too bad and scarce. It would be an improvement to their houses if they were not to apply their covering of turf in a moist state immediately upon the wood-work, but to place between them a thick layer of dry moss or hay; besides this, their present walls are too thin, though there are some houses that have existed upwards of a century, as may be ascertained by the difference in their structure, and it would be well, if the art of building adopted by their ancestors were restored (Olafsen & Povelsen 1805: 13).

Besides these proposals, Ólafsson believed that signs of progress were seen in the living condition of the population. The fact that tea, sugar, and chinaware were present in many peasant homes, while liquor, coffee, vegetables, and spices were found in the wealthier farmsteads, was for Ólafsson a sign of new-found prosperity and progress. Even if liquor affected people's morals, he saw the overall abundance of products as having a positive impact on the population as plenitude gradually refined the population and showed that Icelanders were leaving the past behind (Olafsen & Povelsen 1805: 147). That refinement and progress was in tension with other ideals, though; as Ólafsson expressed in his poems

Helblinda and Búnaðarbálkur (1832: 53, 43), certain sections of society were still geared towards a “strange apathy” and an “overpowering lust for fornication,” as well as a parochialism and a conflicting lack of interest in progress.

The Enlightenment in Iceland was geared towards the “wonderful capacity” that differentiates humanity from animals (Millar 1771 [1806], quoted in Tarlow 2007: 17), that of self-improvement. The improvement projects initiated by the Danish authorities aimed to teach Icelanders new skills and methods for their future development and prosperity. Equipped with this knowledge and new sets of skills, Icelanders would be capable of overcoming the natural disasters that often afflicted the land and there would be no turning back to the stagnant past.

3.3.2 The nineteenth century

The benign attitude towards Icelanders did not last long. Even though the official accounts of the scientific expeditions refrained from using negative stereotypes to describe Icelanders, unofficial reports continued to reveal unfavourable sentiments towards the population. A case in point are the writings of a number of Stanley’s associates, such as physician James Wright, chemist Isaac Benners, and astronomer, draughtsman, and surveyor John Baine. As if sprung straight from a sixteenth-century account, Benners described Icelanders as “the most stupid wretches” he had ever seen (quoted in Aho 1993: 7), while Baine spoke of them as “the most avaricious creatures that can be” (quoted in Aho 1993: 7). Afflicted with skin diseases and having disgusting habits such as sharing already chewed tobacco, they were regarded as dirty and unhygienic. As Baine wrote, “[...] one that sees their houses, cloathes and persons must be of the opinion that a great part of their misery has originated from their want of cleanliness” (quoted in Aho 1993: 7).

These negative descriptions were not without cause. The eruption of Laki in 1783–84 had a devastating effect on Icelandic society. Sixty percent of the grazing livestock perished from hydrofluoric acid and sulphur dioxide poisoning, and within two years the associated “Mist Famine” claimed the lives of nearly twenty-five percent of the population (Karlsson 2000: 180). As poverty, homelessness, and disease ravaged the local population, the helplessness of Icelanders in the face of natural disasters and the inability to improve their condition conflicted with the Enlightenment idea of self-improvement.

By the turn of the century, such negative sentiments were reflected in most foreign accounts of Iceland. On his Icelandic expedition, Sir George Steuart Mackenzie would state that “we could not endure” to be touched by the natives due to the filth and cutaneous diseases they carried (Mackenzie 1811: 123). Mackenzie also spoke of the Icelandic home as “little removed from the savage state” (1811: 295) and described in some detail its unhygienic properties:

The thick turf walls, the earthen floors, kept continually damp and filthy, and the personal uncleanliness of the inhabitants, all unite in causing a smell insupportable to a stranger. No article of furniture seems to have been cleaned since the day it was first used; and all is in disorder. The beds look like receptacles for dirty rags, and when wooden dishes, spinning-wheels, and other articles are not seen upon them, these are confusedly piled up at one end of the room. There is no mode of ventilating any part of the house; and as twenty people sometimes eat and sleep in the same apartment, very pungent vapours are added, in no small quantity, to the plentiful effluvia proceeding from fish, bags of oil, skins, &c. A farm-house looks more like a village than a single habitation. Sometimes several families live enclosed within the same mass of turf. The cottages of the lowest order of people are wretched hovels: so very wretched that it is wonderful how anything in the human form can breathe in them (Mackenzie 1811: 115).

Upon visiting a poor farmhouse, Scottish minister and missionary Ebenezer Henderson similarly recollected the way in which he gasped for air in the poorly ventilated room that he was offered for the night, and the “universal scratching that took place in all the beds” (1818: 85) from lice infestation. English botanist, Sir William Jackson Hooker never failed to notice the lice and the skin diseases that afflicted the locals. “The sick and the lame are seen crawling about in almost every part of the island,” he wrote, and attributed the prevalence of disease not only to the high cost of medicine but also to the extreme ignorance of the people (1813: xxvi).¹⁹

¹⁹ It is worth noting that Hooker and others often used the same language to describe populations of different ethnic backgrounds. The unhygienic lifestyle of Icelanders was for instance often compared to the “unhealthy” habits of the Sámi people of Lapland and the Inuit of Greenland and Canada. In his account of Iceland Hooker quotes French astronomer and traveller Jean-Baptiste Chappe who had previously noted of the Kamchadals in

Towards the middle of the century, the issue of disease, drunkenness, and malodorousness, as well as the overcrowdedness and lack of ventilation of the turf house became the most recurrent and significant concern to those who travelled around Iceland. As early as 1835, English geographer, John Barrow wrote of the vice of drunkenness in Reykjavík, and made numerous references to diseases such as scurvy and leprosy, which he attributed to uncleanliness and the lack of proper clothing (1835: 119).²⁰ Lord Arthur Dillon described the Icelandic turf houses as hovels and associated the many cutaneous diseases that afflicted Icelanders with poor diet and the lack of vegetables (1840: 17, 82). The disagreeable smells of the Icelandic farmhouse were also a major concern for the Anglican priest and novelist Sabine Baring-Gould, who wrote that “the stifling foulness of the atmosphere can hardly be conceived, and, indeed, it is quite unendurable to English lungs” (1863: 60).

Austrian explorer and travel writer Ida Pfeifer is nonetheless one of the first foreign travellers who associated the prevalence of disease with the overcrowded, dirty, and stifling environment of the Icelandic turf house. Following a detailed description of an Icelandic home, she writes that:

On entering one of these cottages, the visitor is at a loss to determine which of the two is the more obnoxious—the suffocating smoke in the passage or the poisoned air of the dwellingroom, rendered almost insufferable by the crowding together of so many persons. I could almost venture to assert, that the dreadful eruption called *Lepra*, which is universal throughout Iceland, owes its existence rather to the total want of cleanliness than to the climate of the

Siberia: “These people are replenished with so much vermin, that by raising their braids, they pick up vermin with their hand, put it in a pile and eat it” (Hooker 1813: 10). Hooker’s description of Icelanders is also almost identical to another eighteenth century account of the Kamchadals from Russian explorer, naturalist, and geographer, S. P. Krasheninnikov. For Krasheninnikov, “the natives of Kamchatka are as wild as the land itself. [...] They are filthy and vile [and] they are so infested with lice [...] that, using their fingers like a comb, they lift their braids, sweep the lice together into their fists and then gobble them up” (quoted in Lincoln 1994: 119).

²⁰ John Barrow reserved a very similar critique for the Irish. Portraying them as petty thieves and drunkards, Barrow also referred to the living conditions of parts of the country in dire terms. On his approach to Limerick’s town centre: “Nothing that I had yet seen equalled the streets and the houses of this Old Town, as I understood it to be called, for their dirty, dingy, dilapidated condition, the people at the doors, the windows, and in the street, ragged, half-naked and squalid in their appearance” (1836: 279). For a more detailed comparison of Barrow’s impressions of Iceland and Ireland, see Hálfðanarson (2016).

country or to the food. Throughout my subsequent journeys into the interior, I found the cottages of the peasants everywhere alike squalid and filthy. Of course I speak of the majority, and not of the exceptions; for here I found a few rich peasants, whose dwellings looked cleaner and more habitable, in proportion to the superior wealth or sense of decency of the owners (Pfeiffer 1852: 68-69).

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, child mortality and premature death were firmly attributed to the noisome, dark, and poorly ventilated Icelandic farmhouse. Like Pfeiffer's association of those conditions with disease, American naturalist Samuel Kneeland correlated the dirt and smell with premature death: "[...] the odors of fish and oil predominated everywhere, and the interior of the houses betokened discomfort, dampness, closeness, and want of cleanliness, which must be a fruitful source of disease and premature death, especially in children" (1876: 45).

This preoccupation with the living conditions of Icelanders is in line with a larger discourse that associated unsanitary conditions and habits with immorality and primitiveness. Even though such ideas were entertained during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they reasserted themselves during the first half of the nineteenth century on a firmer scientific basis. By the time Mackenzie, Hooker, Barrow, Dillon, and others were writing their accounts, the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation were being felt across Europe. The growth of industry and the associated expansion of urban areas had resulted in polluted and crowded living conditions, which, alongside unsanitary habits, had made the major European cities an ideal environment for the transmission of contagious diseases.

Central to that concern was the belief that disease was transmitted via dirt and odours. Of the theories circulating in the 1840s, the "contagionist" view attributed disease to contagious agents that were transmitted by dirt, while the "anti-contagionist" or "miasmatic" theory associated sickness with putrefactive odours that emanated from decaying organic matter (Peterson 1979). Though the two theories clashed, their proponents agreed that environmental conditions had a direct impact on health. As dirt and bad odours became scientifically associated with disease, dirty environments also came to be directly linked with drunkenness, prostitution, and crime of the cities. The overcrowded slums of the working classes became conceptualised by the bourgeois society as primitive and, at times, even exotic

places that carried not only disease but the potential of civil unrest that threatened social stability (Beder 1989).

But cleanliness was not just a macro-level matter for state authorities or the philanthropic gestures of industrialists. It was, more importantly, a personal affair, since poverty itself was no excuse for the peasant, or industrial worker, to have an unclean home. For Samuel Smiles, one of the most popular figures of the so-called sanitary science, the improvement of housing conditions would mean nothing if the inhabitants were not trained in matters of “cleanliness, thriftiness and comfort” (Smiles 1883: 49). Smiles felt that it was only those who were lucky enough to be brought up in humble yet clean, comfortable homes, with distinct gender roles who were likely to transcend poverty. The fact that a number of great industrialists, inventors, scientists, and other important historical figures came from such humble yet healthy environments was proof that a clean home assured the moral and intellectual development of the individual, guaranteeing in turn both the progress of society and the nation.

With the growing awareness of hygiene and sanitation, the sodden floors and leaky roofs of the Icelandic turf house, together with overcrowding, vitiated air, and the “filthy” habits of its inhabitants resembled both the poor dwellings—at least in conditions, and in some cases design—and the manners of the European and American peasants and industrial workers. Iceland may have captured the imagination of Europeans by means of the medieval Icelandic sagas, but most travellers became greatly disappointed upon discovering there was nothing particularly sophisticated, noble, or inspiring when coming face to face with the poverty and living conditions of Icelanders (Hálfðanarson 2014a, 2014b, 2016). Far removed from the middle-class imagination, life in Iceland resembled more the primitive existence of the native peoples in the Russian steppe, Lapland, and Greenland, or for that matter the slum neighbourhoods of urban environments of the West.

To that extent, the architectural style of the turf house itself was not even the greatest of concerns for travellers. In certain cases, the well-constructed gabled farmhouses resembled similar structures found elsewhere in Western Europe and were even regarded as decent and rather pleasant (McCormick 1891). What bothered most foreign travellers were instead the ways in which these buildings were inhabited. Overcrowdedness, poor sanitation, and unhygienic habits were more salient than any inherent problems with turf architecture. As in the cities they fled from, the unsanitary conditions in Iceland must have been considered

responsible for leading people to idlelessness, drunkenness, primitiveness, and social decay. As the presence of dirt, smells, and disease had become an important measure of civilisation, the living conditions of the turf house came to symbolise the lack of progress and justified the fact that Iceland was still part of the Danish Empire, unable to govern itself. Even though the turf house was intimately tied to a romantic version of an agrarian society that preceded a now decadent European civilisation, the living conditions associated with this humble structure were untenable.

4. Turf house semantics and the surge of modernity

The excavation of a turf house is no easy task. Its life is pervaded by anarchy and its final deposition is chaotic. While turf houses still stand, they need maintenance and repair. Walls collapse and have to be taken down and put up again. At other times they need to be reinforced with more turf. After their abandonment, wooden posts may be ripped out of the ground to be reused. Some abandoned turf structures become dumping grounds, while others become foundations for new houses. When they do finally collapse, the roof material gives in first. This is followed by the walls. Rubbish, peat ash, volcanic ash, and windblown material get mixed in and eventually cover the whole structure. What is often visible on the ground is just an amorphous mound of soil.

If an archaeologist is to understand a turf house, he or she has to be immersed in it in a sensory and bodily manner. In most cases, the colour of turf deposits is misleading. Red, orange, brown, and yellow are all mixed together, giving the remains of the whole structure a uniform appearance. What we have to do then is to look carefully at the inclusions: Wooden twigs may indicate roof material; loose but clean soils may reveal collapse material. The firmer a turf deposit is, the more likely it is the remains of a wall in situ. Often we have to tap a deposit with our trowels and listen to them carefully. Working in early Settlement sites, where the distinction between natural soils and the deposits that constitute walls is very difficult to distinguish, the hollow sound that emanates from a turf deposit is often what makes the difference. As far as dating is concerned, some archaeologists taste the volcanic ash that is lodged into the turf walls. I personally have developed a habit of smelling turf deposits. Roof and collapse material have an earthy smell, floor deposits can have quite the stench, and walls are almost odourless. By the end of each day on the field, turf has crept up in our shoes and clothes; our faces have darkened and our hands are stained. We need to feel the dirt in order to understand it.

In a period when monuments and monumental architecture were considered marks of civilisation and national genius, the lack of architectural sophistication in Iceland, alongside the absence of “notable” archaeological remains was a reminder that Icelanders were uncivilised and unable to carry the responsibility of establishing an independent national state. In the wider discourse of national independence, modernity and the development of an

Icelandic urban culture, the turf house featured in the lengthy debates concerning the living conditions of the population and Icelandic politicians made it their mission to convince Icelanders to move from their turf homes to more modern types of housing (Hafsteinsson & Jóhannesdóttir 2015).

Despite the centuries-long prejudice against turf architecture, the turf house has been largely reinvented over the last twenty years. In the contemporary environmental dialogue over eco-friendliness and sustainability, the ecological unobtrusiveness, architectural simplicity, and durability of the turf house has rehabilitated its image from an unhealthy nineteenth-century hovel to a twenty-first-century “eco-home of the future.” Riding a wave of neo-nostalgia, the structure has also attracted the attention of artists and designers and has entered the realm of aesthetics, coming to embody the aesthetic experience of life in Iceland. At the same time, extensive reconstructions and repairs, exhibitions, and field courses that teach the traditional methods of building have been established in an effort to conserve the historic integrity and authenticity of the Icelandic turf house.

Connecting modern-day concerns over green architecture, environmental sustainability, and aesthetic values with the distant past, the turf house is being incorporated into the twenty-first-century paradigms of civilisation and progress, just as the Icelandic sagas did into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paradigms. The turf house may see itself transformed into a monument that speaks not only to national unity and shared history but to Iceland as an inherently modern nation, and following its reputation for clean energy, as a model for future innovation. This chapter maps out the metamorphosis of the turf house from a symbol of poverty and the backwards, uncivilised state of Iceland into a cultural icon that is emblematic of a forward-looking nation. In doing so, it discusses the qualities and conditions that have allowed this transformation and, by attempting to place the structure in the wider context of Icelandic modernity, re-examines its cultural significance.

4.1 Icelandic modernity and the turf house

By the nineteenth century, Iceland was the subject of an ambivalent European discourse. The country manifested an economic, technological, and material backwardness, but also had qualities that adhered to the European standards of civilisation. Icelanders were conceived of as childlike, lazy, and primitive, as witnessed by the state of their homes and their unhygienic habits, but were also somewhat civilised, seen in their high literacy, and their ability to recite

and compose poetry and to play chess. Iceland presented an anomaly for the dualistic colonialist and imperialist rhetoric of the time, which aspired to differentiate the civilised from the uncivilised (Lucas & Parigoris 2013). Caught between nostalgia and modernity (Hansson 2011), this tension between primitiveness and civilisation both distanced Iceland from and brought it close to European culture, earning it a rather ambiguous status within Europe (Oslund 2011).

There is no doubt that this ambiguous status largely preoccupied the early Icelandic nationalists. In their efforts to portray the Icelandic nation as worthy to run its own affairs, Icelandic politicians developed certain strategies that aspired to show the world that Icelanders were just as civilised as their European counterparts. A nostalgic movement envisaged an Icelandic national polity organised around the traditional rural culture, while a more radical one pressed for the modernisation of the country. The former included influential figures such as Tómas Sæmundsson, who believed that urbanisation and seafaring would lead to the moral degradation of Icelanders and looked to re-establish the ancient parliament, *Alþingi*, at its original location at Þingvellir (Hálfðanarson 2007: 70). The latter faction aimed instead to create a new urban culture with a strong middle class and argued that Reykjavík would be the ideal place for the seat of government.

The leading figure of the Icelandic nationalist movement, Jón Sigurðsson, was also a strong advocate for the modernisation of Iceland. Sigurðsson made a mockery of the nostalgic, traditionalist views and proposals saying that, “if the only purpose of our existence would be to demonstrate to other nations how people lived in the Nordic countries in ancient times [...] then it would be most appropriate to dress us up in old costumes and move us to Christiansborg Palace in order to exhibit us there every Thursday, as any other antiquities, to tourists and academics” (quoted in Hálfðanarson 2012: 256). According to Sigurðsson, if Iceland truly desired to “follow the times and other civilised nations, it needed a political and cultural centre, or a true capital city [...] to serve as a point of contact between Icelandic society and the outside world, from which ideas and goods would spread to other parts of the country” (Hálfðanarson 2012: 256).

The first signs of modernity that Jón Sigurðsson envisaged were already in motion. Following the disastrous Laki eruptions in 1783–4, the Danish authorities had eased their long-standing trade restrictions. The loosening of trade restrictions and the associated development of permanent trading stations meant new employment opportunities and

encouraged denser settlements. Out of the six Icelandic trading harbours established at the end of the eighteenth century, Reykjavík began to emerge as the nascent de facto capital of Iceland.

This development had a direct impact on the architecture of the capital area. Even though Reykjavík could “for a long time [...] be called a turf house city”²¹ (Óla 1958: 33), the idea that “the capital was originally built as an industrial city” (Óla 1958: 33) led the local authorities to prohibit the construction of turf houses in the centre of the town as early as 1842 (Stéfánsson 2019). As a result, Reykjavík experienced an unprecedented boom of wooden house construction, while the rest of Iceland witnessed a steady rise of both commercial and residential timber structures. At the same time, the introduction of corrugated sheet metal would revolutionise Icelandic architecture. As Mornement and Holloway state, “ships travelling north from Britain to buy sheep would carry cargoes of corrugated iron to sell in Reykjavik, where it quickly became clear that the material was well suited to the isolated volcanic island with limited construction materials” (2007: 137). Cheap, durable, fireproof, and moisture resistant—as well as prefabricated—corrugated metal architecture in the form of churches, houses, and industrial warehouses proved to be rather popular.

Icelanders welcomed the twentieth century as “an era of freedom and prosperity or as a time when the nation would finally live up to its potential” (Hálfðanarson 2012: 252), and the grant of home rule in 1904 seemed to open the floodgates of progress and modernity even further. This important step towards self-determination was seen as a unique opportunity to improve the economic conditions of the country as well as the moral state of its citizens (Hálfðanarson 2012: 258), and in turn show to the world that Icelanders could achieve progress independently of the Danish state. In the same year that Iceland achieved home rule, the first hydropower turbine spun into operation in Hafnarfjörður, and two years later the telegraph revolutionised Iceland’s communications. More importantly, the mechanisation of the fishing industry and the diversification of the Icelandic economy began to change the social and economic landscape of Iceland in a radical way.

With the decline of agricultural economy and the creation of new jobs, the effects of industrialisation were reflected in Icelandic demographics. From 1890 to the end of WWI,

²¹ “Höfuðborgin var upphaflega byggð sem iðnaðarborg. Þó var ekki hátt á henni risið, og um langt skeið mátti hún kallast torfbæaborg.” (Óla 1958: 33).

permanent or seasonal internal migration gradually brought nearly half of the Icelandic population into developing areas, transforming the small chartered fishing towns into what resembled small-scale urban industrial hubs (Hálfðanarson 2012). The population of Reykjavík alone grew at a rate of 8.3% annually between 1897–1908 (Magnússon 2010: 174). This mass migration from rural regions to urban areas resulted in the dramatic decline of hired servants and labourers, transforming the household composition of farms and leading to the negligence of turf dwellings and structures (Gunnlaugsson 1988). The influence of urbanisation on the turf house is clearly illustrated in a 1940s study written by a professor of medicine at the University of Iceland, Guðmundur Hannesson. According to his estimates, in 1910, turf houses made up 52.4% of the total number of houses in the country, with the percentage dropping dramatically in 1930, when turf houses amounted only to 27.1%. Alongside this development, constructions from timber—and especially stone—increased considerably (Hannesson 1943: 193).

Modernity came along with an “insatiable desire for the new and its seeming rupture with the past” (Hálfðanarson 2012: 260). In line with the *fin de siècle* belief that the twentieth century would bring progress and a clear break from the past (Owens 1999), modernisers began to view Icelandic vernacular architecture as an obstacle to modernisation and national independence. As early as 1878, the local newspaper *Ísafold* described the turf house as “harmful.” It also criticised the presence of crudely built timber houses and associated Icelandic architectural practices with the “foolish national vice” that pervades Icelanders—their unwillingness to change. According to the anonymous author: “Our way of holding on to old customs is one of the nation’s vices [...] Architectural habits have truly become a bad tradition. A man with mediocre intelligence can see that our tradition of building houses in this country is bad for the nation; it causes damage to the country and its people [...] we need vigour and courage to put this ancient bad habit to rest, to stop building sod-huts and timber-shacks and start using stone architecture” (*Ísafold* 1878: 5).

Echoing the concerns of the larger nineteenth-century sanitation movement, other publications such as *Kvennafræðarinn* offered recommendations and guidelines on how to keep a house clean and improve one’s living conditions (Briem 1888). Such practical advice on hygiene and sanitation helped to frame cleanliness and improved living conditions as being of national importance. As surgeon-general J. A. Hjaltalín states in his *Nokkur orð um hreinlæti* (“A few words about hygiene”), “[...] everyone must see how important it is for us that foreign nations do not think that we resemble primitive people or barbaric nations,

because they can be without us, but we cannot be without them” (1867: 4). According to Hjaltalín, the nauseous feeling that foreign travellers felt as soon as they set foot in Reykjavík’s harbour and the fact that they were often lost for words when coming face to face with the Icelandic negligence “for everything that is related to our health, both in diet, clothing and houses,” were unacceptable (1867: 4).

Hjaltalín’s work set the standards for subsequent advice literature that urged people to raise their living standards. Ventilation, lack of light, low ceilings, and the lack of outhouses, along with the accumulated rubbish heaps on farmsteads became recurrent concerns. Unsanitary habits, such as spitting on the floors and the presence of animals in domestic spaces—on top of the overall lack of personal hygiene—were also broadly criticised. Newspaper articles, such as *Hættulegir ósiðir* (“Dangerous bad habits,” 1897) associated unhygienic habits with the prevalence of lice, infections, and tuberculosis. In that context, Guðmundur Hannesson spoke of the turf house in the weekly provincial newspaper *Bjarki*, in 1899, as an unhealthy, impractical, and ugly underground hovel (Hafsteinsson 2010).

By the turn of the century, a number of autobiographical accounts also emerged that reminded the population of the dreadful conditions that had pervaded life on the Icelandic farm. The midwife and writer Ólöf Sigurðardóttir gives a graphic account in her autobiographical *Bernskuheimilið mitt* (“My Childhood Home,” 1906). According to Sigurðardóttir, the leaky turf roof, the dirt floors and the unpanelled walls, the crude windows, and the lack of furniture made the farmhouse she was brought up in “as bad as any dirt shack could be” (quoted in Magnússon 2010: 49). This dismal picture was made worse by some of the customary practices concerning hygiene. As she states:

All clothes were washed in warm urine – collected urine – and then rinsed out in water. Shirts were changed once a month, but underwear and bed linen very rarely, once or twice each winter, and then it was almost impossible to get them clean. [...] Urine was usually used to wash hands, but milk, milk whey and milk curds were used for washing the face and considered better than water. Clothes were washed in pots – food pots of course. The chamber pot, which was made of wood, was used for washing hands [...] Everyone ate from a bowl. Twice a year – before Christmas and on the first day of summer – they were washed out using stock from smoked lamb, but otherwise they were licked clean by the dogs after they had been used (quoted in Magnússon 2010: 55).

Notably, though, as the appalling living conditions of rural life became a recurrent theme in newspaper articles, autobiographical accounts, and advice literature, the newly emerged stone-and-wood dwellings that accommodated the migrant workers in Reykjavík were by no means described in better terms. Nearly as dysfunctional as the turf house, these crude buildings were poorly insulated and suffered from overcrowding and inadequate ventilation. As far as the personal hygiene of urban dwellers was concerned, the habit of washing bed linens and clothes in boiled urine, as well as the fact that most people rarely bathed, came under severe criticism. According to a physician of the time, Steingrímur Matthíasson, there was “no civilized country more lice-ridden than Iceland. And Reykjavík is no exception. Ask the doctors! [...] It is a huge national disgrace that it is the duty of everyone to fight against, and I would ask all good Icelanders to do so” (quoted in Magnússon 2010: 56).

Despite the fact that Iceland’s urban poor appeared to live in such dire conditions, modernisers, physicians, and intellectuals were nonetheless more critical of the living conditions of the country folk and, by extension, the turf house. The matter of cleanliness in urban areas may have indeed been a major concern, but it was a side effect of the urbanisation and industrial development that exhibited to the outside world Iceland’s ability to progress alongside other nations. Even if the conditions in both situations were squalid, the traditional turf house and the living conditions of the peasantry were a sign to the outside world that Iceland still lagged behind its European counterparts. The fact that a number of turf houses were still present in Reykjavík was even more disappointing, as they were according to Matthíasson, both “[...] unfit for human habitation and an appalling disgrace to the town” (quoted in Magnússon 2010: 183). To that extent, the turf house was cast as a national problem and the improvement of hygiene and the general well-being of the population became associated with the elimination of such dwellings (Hafsteinsson 2010: 267).

While many villainised the turf house and looked to eradicate it, some voices pressed instead for the inclusion of the turf house in the modernisation projects of the countryside. As early as 1912, Torfi Bjarnason advocated such an approach in his “Um byggingar í sveitum” (“On buildings in the countryside”) in the journal *Búnaðarrit*. Bjarnason felt that the turf house had been endowed to Iceland at its birth and had provided shelter to Icelanders for one thousand years. He attributed the poor conditions in the dwellings not to their innate form, but to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poverty and the overall negligence of the Icelandic

people in maintaining their homes (Bjarnason 1912: 177). For Bjarnason, timber houses were disadvantageous since all the building material had to be imported. Improvements in construction and the adaptation of the turf house to the needs of modern society would be a viable financial option as well as a sign of national evolution and maturity.

Yet such voices were few and far between. The architecturally modest dwelling of the common man was not in itself adequate enough to capture the “spirit” of the Icelandic nation. Given that the antiquarian hunt for monuments and monumental architecture proved to be highly unsuccessful, the cultural capital of the turf house remained marginal. According to many intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the lack of monumental architecture in Iceland was indicative of a society more preoccupied by securing its survival rather than developing anything of cultural importance and value. Geographic isolation, the harsh environment, and poverty were regarded as crucial factors that inhibited the development of monumental architecture or the emergence of a sophisticated vernacular architectural style. Despite the efforts to elevate the significance of the turf house, the poor architectural style of the structure and the continuous use of turf as a building material continued to be a reminder of the benighted character of the Icelandic nation, and the structure was excluded from the nationalising project with the argument that it lacked any aesthetic qualities (Hafsteinsson 2010).

Often referred to as *moldarkofar* (dirt huts) or *moldarhreysi* (dirt hovels) (Hafsteinsson 2019: 68), turf houses received a further blow in the 1920s. While conducting research on the mortality rates of tuberculosis, physician Sigurður Magnússon came to correlate the disease with the living conditions in turf houses. According to his 1924 article “Berklaveikin og konurnar” (“Tuberculosis and women”), in the daily newspaper *Morgunblaðið*, the high mortality rate of women compared to men in the northern and eastern regions of Iceland was attributable to the fact that women spent more of their time in the dark and damp environment of the turf house. Magnússon called for the addition of more windows for better ventilation and light and tried to motivate young women to spend more of their leisure time pursuing outdoor activities.

The decline of the turf house’s popularity can also be attributed to the modernisation of the agricultural sector itself. Traditional farming methods declined with the introduction of artificial fertilizers and modern machinery, as well as the construction of large-scale drainage systems, facilitated by substantial state financial and legal support for farmers (Jónsson &

Dýrmundsson 2000: 304). As part of this support, the Icelandic Parliament introduced the Building and Land Settlement Fund and Workers' Dwellings Law in 1928 and 1929 respectively, which allowed for the granting of long-term loans to farmers for the construction of new residential buildings. On the other hand, the problem of housing in ever-expanding Reykjavík also necessitated new solutions. Even though concrete buildings had already made an initial appearance before 1900, a disastrous fire in 1915 prompted a prohibition of wooden house construction, making concrete the dominant building material in the capital area. Following the influenza epidemic of 1918 and the economic depression of the 1930s, considerable efforts were made to ameliorate unhealthy housing conditions.

By the late 1940s, architect Þórir Baldvinsson (1948: 85) was encouraging the abandonment of the few turf houses that were still occupied. Exasperated by the fact that the rural population had not embraced new building materials, he castigated the vernacular building tradition and spoke of it as an old custom that did not fit the needs of society. A few years later, the agronomist Ólafur Jónsson would likewise condemn it for its historical and archaeological insignificance. In his “Byggingamál sveitanna” (“Buildings in the countryside”), published in the agricultural journal *Ársrit Ræktunarfélags Norðurlands* 1950–51, Jónsson saw a “major flaw” in the manner in which Icelanders had always built their homes. Clearly referring to the rapid pace by which turf disintegrates and the resulting invisibility of the structure in the landscape, Jónsson stated that “all the buildings from the old times are gone, sunk into the ground and nothing is left other than grassy, obscure ruins” (Jónsson 1951: 11).²² While similar observations could be made of the rest of the Scandinavian states, they were in the privileged position to have a few “castles” (Jónsson 1951: 12).

By that time, traditional farming practices and, by extension, the use of turf houses came to represent the old way of life. As Hallgrímur Jónsson wrote in *Morgunblaðið* in 1954: “No nation in the world has ever had such a burst of activity in recent years as our nation. In relatively few years, it has changed from reasonably well-to-do farming and fishing nation,

²² “Oftr heyrum vér rætt um það með trega, hve fátækir vér séum af öllum fornum minjum öðrum en bókfelli. Það þykir skaði mikill, að vér skulum hafa byggt svo illa og úr svo lélegu efni, að allar byggingar frá eldri tímum eru horfnar, sokknar í jörð og hafa ekkert eftir skilið annað en grónar, ógreinilegar rústir.” (Jónsson 1950-51: 11).

one could say, to a wealthy industrial, accounting, and commercial nation”²³ (Jónsson 1954: 6). Modern Iceland appeared to have left the past far behind and had triumphantly entered the “age of innovation.” The old rural way of life and the modern urban one were seen as incompatible. This polarization between the “old” and “new” ways of life is reflected by Ólafur Jónsson in a later article in *Ársrit Ræktunarfélags Norðurlands*. After a lengthy account that speaks of the aversion of the young Icelandic population to farm life, Jónsson states that there is no further use to speak of the turf house, since Icelanders had long escaped from this dire situation (Jónsson 1955: 53-54).

It is only once the turf house faced complete eradication that certain voices emerged and urged people to reconsider the cultural value of the structure. One such voice—an avid defender of turf architecture—was the Icelandic architectural historian and artist, Hörður Ágústsson. In his seminal two-volume work, *Íslensk byggingararfleifð* (Icelandic Architectural Heritage 1998, 2000), Ágústsson attempted to discredit the negative perceptions of the turf house and tried to re-establish its primacy within the Icelandic building tradition and Icelandic history. Both a pioneer of the concrete art trend of the 1950s and a member of the newly formed Architectural Heritage Committee, *Húsafriðunarnefnd*,²⁴ Ágústsson often spoke of a *torfbæjarkomplexinn*, a “turf-house complex.” His term referred to the inferiority complex that pervaded Icelandic politics and the public imagination vis-à-vis the monumental architecture and cultural achievements of other nations. According to the architect, there was “no need to have an inferiority complex when one compares Víðimýrarkirkja Church in Skagafjörður to St. Peter’s Church in Rome. There is no fundamental difference between these buildings [...] The law of both is the same. The form is equally beautiful” (1998: 21).²⁵ Despite Ágústsson’s efforts, the turf-house complex would persist, while his idea that form

²³ “Engin þjóð í veröldinni hefur tekið annan eins fjörkipp nú hin síðari ár eins og okkar þjóð. Hún hefur á tiltölulega fáum árum breytt úr bjargálna bænda- og útvegsmannþjóð í efnaða iðnaðar-, skrifstofu- og verzlunarþjóð, ef svo mætti segja. Yfir þjóðina hefur gengið peningaalda og uppúr henni hefur svo risið hin svonefnda nýsköpunaralda” (Jónsson 1954: 6).

²⁴ *Húsafriðunarnefnd* was established in 1970. The committee acts nowadays as an advisory board under *Minjastofnun* (Cultural Heritage Agency) and evaluates applications for the Architectural Heritage Fund (*Húsfríðunarsjóður*).

²⁵ “Það er alveg óþarfi að hafa minnimáttarkennd þegar maður ber saman Víðimýrarkirkju í Skagafirði og Péturskirkjuna í Róm. Það er enginn eðlismunur á þessum byggingum [...] Lögmálið í báðum er það sama. Formið er jafn fagurt” (Ágústsson 1998).

and simplicity were equal in merit to size and grandiosity would have to wait another two decades to be appreciated.

4.2 Towards the twenty-first century

Even though a number of turf farmhouses were included over the years in the Historic Buildings Collection, the structure in general continued to be seen as a symbol of cultural stagnation. This perception would change radically towards the end of the twentieth century, however, when Iceland would assume a position as an equal partner and contributor in the Western grand narratives and discourses on environmentalism and post-industrialism. The scientific consensus beginning in the 1990s regarding the adverse effects of greenhouse gases—and especially human-induced emissions—placed the Arctic at the centre of a global environmental debate. Central to this debate has been the realisation that the rapid decline of Arctic sea ice and the resulting climatic effects not only pose an immediate threat to the ecosystems and local cultures of the Arctic, but will also have dire effects on the rest of the world (Keskitalo et al. 2008).

Within the above framework, the Arctic region has been reconceptualised not only as an environmentally sensitive area of global importance but also as a political region with a specific geographic delineation (Keskitalo et al. 2008: 3). Alongside the establishment of international environmental organisations and agreements such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the Kyoto Protocol (KP), a geopolitical strategic alliance emerged that exclusively concerns the Arctic region and an initiative for “Arctic-wide cooperation” was launched in 1987. Two years later, Finland summoned the eight Arctic states—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Soviet Union, and the United States—for a conference in Rovaniemi in 1989 to discuss the protection of the Arctic environment (Koivurova & Hasanat 2008: 52). A few years later, the Ottawa Declaration formally established the Arctic Council, “a high-level forum to provide a means for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States – including the full consultation and full involvement of Arctic Indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants” (Arctic Council n.d., para 1). The Arctic Council came to be a “symbol of the emergence of the Arctic as an international region” (Keskitalo 2008: 97).

Through the advocacy of the Council, the Arctic region has come to be considered a unique ecosystem, containing not only some of the most pristine natural landscapes in the world but also important cultural areas and rich archaeological sites that are in need of protection, improved management, and international recognition. To achieve this protection and allow for responsible management, the nomination of Arctic sites to the UNESCO World Heritage List that embrace both the natural and cultural values of the Arctic was adopted as an effective strategy by the Council and its affiliates (Viikari 2009: 194-195). The inclusion of cultural heritage is based on the belief that the Arctic is a special region where nature and culture are particularly intertwined, reflected in the interdependence of a number of traditional practices and local environments such as sea-ice hunting and fishing (Viikari 2008: 189–191). The newfound value of non-monumental Arctic archaeological sites is attributed to the similar notion that indigenous populations have historically adapted successfully to Arctic conditions with minimal environmental impact (Viikari 2008). Practices such as pastoral transhumance and traditional resource management evident in the archaeological record are now understood as potentially valuable information for both environmental protection and future sustainable development in the region (Almund et al. 2012; also Clarke 2010; Lehtinen 2006; Shove 2010b).

In Iceland, this contemporary understanding of the relationship between cultural and natural heritage is reflected in the adoption of new strategies concerning the protection of cultural and natural sites. As early as 1999, the Ministry for the Environment passed the Nature Conservation Act no. 44/1999, which explicitly included sites of cultural importance. It states in its objectives that: “The Act shall facilitate the nation’s access to and knowledge of Icelandic nature and cultural heritage and encourage the conservation and utilization of resources based on sustainable development” (1999, Article 1). Using an integrated approach, six sites of natural and cultural importance have been nominated for inscription into the World Heritage List.

One of these nominations is *The Turf House Tradition*. Submitted by the National Museum of Iceland in 2011, the nomination is based on two criteria for selection, as set by the World Heritage List. It presents the turf house as “an exceptional example of vernacular architectural tradition” and as “an expression of the cultural values of the society [that] has adapted to the social and technological changes that took place through the centuries” (UNESCO Tentative List – The Turf House Tradition 2011, para 17 & 81). The fact that

Icelandic turf houses were used by all social classes, and the development of unique architectural styles, evident in the turf “chateaux” of Grenjaðarstaður, Laufás, and Glaumbær, provide the basis upon which the Icelandic turf house was set apart from similar structures found elsewhere in Northern Europe. The proposal closes by comparing the turf-house building tradition to the earthen architecture of the already inscribed sites of Trulli of Alberobello in Italy, Fujian Tulou in China, and others, and it argues that the Icelandic Turf House Tradition should be considered an equally exceptional example of a building tradition that exemplifies “a particular type of communal living [...] and, in terms of their harmonious relationship with their environment, an outstanding example of human settlement” (UNESCO Tentative List – The Turf House Tradition 2011, para 101).

This convergence of nature and culture in contemporary thought is also mirrored in an increased interest in paleoecology. As an academic interest, it was developed long before environmentalism gained widespread popularity and credibility in political discourse. Beginning in the 1970s, numerous projects attempted to integrate archaeology, paleoecology, and history in an effort to enhance the understanding of Norse migrations (see Arneborg & Grønnow 2005; Bigelow 1991; Housley & Coles 2004; McGovern 1990, 2004; Morris & Rackham 1992; Ogilvie & McGovern 2000). It was during the 1990s popularisation of environmentalism, however, that this sort of interdisciplinary practice was consolidated in North Atlantic archaeological research, incorporating the discourse on global climate change (Amorosi et al. 1996; Bawden & Reycraft 2001; Descola & Pálsson 1996; Kirch 1997; McGovern 1994; Redman 1999; Spriggs 1997; Steadman 1995). Admittedly, and as McGovern et al. state, such works have aimed at a wider audience interested in global change topics, which in turn transformed the North Atlantic region into an arena for an “international, interdisciplinary research into long-term, human-environmental interactions that most funding agencies identify as worthy of global change support” (2007: 28).

Through such research projects, we witness an ever-so-slight change in the ways in which the Iron Age and Medieval Scandinavian populations are conceptualised. The investigation of the long-term interaction between humans and their environment in the North Atlantic and the recognition of successful resource management patterns (see McGovern et al. 2007) would lead many to speak of these populations as possessing a previously unremarked “environmental consciousness” that largely contradicts the earlier depiction of them as aggressive entrepreneurs and warlike invaders and pillagers.

Taking into consideration this shift, one can already imagine its effects on the humble turf house. Both the natural recyclable materials with which the structures were built, as well as the minimal disruption of the turf house's appearance in the environment fit well the environmental paradigm of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. More importantly however, the turf house has come to signify the mutual relationship between people and environment as envisaged by the Arctic Council. This newly found cultural capital of the turf house manifests itself in numerous and diverse ways.

One commendable manifestation of the structure's newly discovered importance is its inclusion in the realm of green architecture. Also known as "sustainable architecture" or "green building," the concept of green architecture is an offshoot of the environmental sensitivities of recent years and revolves around the construction of buildings in accordance with environmentally friendly principles, such as the minimization of resources "consumed in the building's construction, use and operation, as well as curtailing the harm done to the environment through the emission, pollution and waste of its components" (Ragheb et al. 2016: 778). In this regard, vernacular buildings across the globe have come to provide not only inspiration, but also "instructive examples of sustainable solutions to building problems" (Mamun & Ara 2014: 46), for what has been characterised as an effort to discover modernity in tradition (Mamun & Ara 2014).

Recent practice in Iceland has been to use the turf house as a symbol of sustainability and eco-friendliness. The turf house meets many of the necessary environmental requirements for the green-building certification programme LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design agency). It is built with a natural material that does not significantly disturb the environment. It is not invasive, and the land erosion around its construction is minimal, while it also exhibits a basic landscape design that does not contribute to the local heat-island effect noticeable in urban environments. As far as the interior environment is concerned, moisture control is achieved by the good insulation provided by turf, while the distribution of heat is well managed in the common area of the *baðstofa*, aided by the special Icelandic condition of a generous availability of geothermal heating. In short, the turf house is according to LEED an innovative, novel design (n.d., para 3).

Iceland-based architectural firms, such as PK Arkitektar and Studio Granda Architects, have attempted to modernise the concept of the traditional turf house to create "a semi-rural architecture that blends in with the landscape" (PK Arkitektar n.d., para 1).

Illustrative of the above efforts are the twenty grass-roofed vacation cottages recently built by PK Arkitektar in Brekkuskógur. According to Pálmar Kristmundsson, architect and founder of PK Arkitektar, “these [...] houses follow the same pattern (as traditional turf houses) with rich architectural variations like the covered entrance porch and the emphasis on views of nearby mountains and lakes” (Springer 2017, para 36). Having acquired international acclaim for their organic and modern design, the project signals, according to architect Hildigunnur Sverrisdóttir, a new public appreciation and understanding of the quality and sustainability of turf houses as well as a “paradigm shift about building [in] this style again” (Springer 2017, para 32).

Aside from the trend toward green architecture, the underlying matter of unhealthy living conditions in the turf house has also been tackled. One characteristic academic work on the issue of health is the 2005 paper “The impact of Icelandic turf structures on occupant health,” published in the journal *Gerontechnology*. Through a thorough examination of materials and building geometry, biological contaminants, and the indoor environment, Van Dijken et al. conclude that the occupants’ health in the turf house was not influenced by the building properties and argue instead that any prevalence of disease appears to have been caused by behavioural conditions of the occupants (Van Dijken et al. 2005: 165).

As far as the cultural value of the turf house is concerned, certain activities have developed that aim to engage the public in the preservation of the turf building-tradition. Field schools that teach traditional turf-house building techniques thrive on a popular desire to save the traditional construction skills, and therefore the integrity and authenticity of the turf house. Two of the most widely known field schools are the Heritage Craft School Project, *Fornverkaskólinn*, located in Skagafjörður, in northern Iceland, and the Icelandic Turf House Project, *Íslenski bærinn*, at the Austur-Meðalholt farm in the south of the country. The Heritage Craft School has emerged from a partnership between the Skagafjörður Heritage Museum, the Carpentry Department of the Northwest Iceland Comprehensive College, and the Tourism Department at Hólar University College, and aims for the promotion of traditional building skills and the recording and preservation of the vernacular names and terminology associated with traditional Icelandic building methods. The course is based on the Icelandic conservation practice as defined by the cultural heritage management law and offers both theory and practical application of skills through the work of builders, self-proclaimed “turf masters,” tourism developers, and historians (Fornverkaskólinn n.d.).

The Icelandic Turf-house Project is run under the aegis of SEEDS, a non-governmental, non-profit, volunteer organization, and promises to open a “window into the Viking world” to those who are interested “in green architecture, eco-culture, design and artistic work” (SEEDS – Volunteering for Iceland n.d.). It more specifically offers “a hands-on experience with all natural building materials—turf, stone, clay, wind and water—in the Arctic setting of Iceland” as well as an opportunity to “engage in dialogue with experts, examine the tactile qualities of various materials from the point of view of the participants’ own experiences, background and notions of sustainability, recycling and contemporary architectural and three-dimensional practice and possibilities [...] and experience the unique Icelandic setting in terms of geography, climate, natural energy, history and society through fieldwork and excursions” (Listaháskóli Íslands n.d., para 9-10).

The SEEDS program focuses not only on the craft behind the structure, but also on its aesthetic attributes. The founder of the field school is Hannes Lárússon, a performance artist and author of a memo describing the qualifications of the Icelandic turf house for the World Heritage List (Hafsteinsson 2010: 271). For him, the turf house is the cradle of Icelandic civilisation—a key feature in the identity of Icelanders as well as Iceland's contribution to the history of the world. Lárússon has spoken of the *baðstofa* as a sanctuary and a national treasure and one of the most remarkable Icelandic contributions to three-dimensional design (Lárússon 2016: 20). By taking the stance that “in the subconscious, all Icelanders live in turf houses” (Hay 2015, para 5), the resurrection of traditional building-practices, alongside an examination of the visual aesthetics and environmental qualities of the turf house are seen by Lárússon as a way to reestablish the links between past and present and restore a lost part of Icelandic identity. His effort to preserve building traditions at Austur-Meðalholt aims to garner respect for the otherwise underestimated and misunderstood heritage of the turf house and, in turn, help his compatriots “to deepen their understanding of their own history, the profound sense of individuality and adaptability in their culture, and how all of this stems from a carefully negotiated relationship with the land, from which we can all learn” (Hay 2015, para 4).

In the present day, the turf house is conceived of not only as a source of inspiration for green architecture but also as a vehicle through which one can acquire valuable insight into the aestheticism of Icelandic life—a philosophy of a life perceived of as close to and harmonious with nature. It is in this nexus between environmentalism and a new-found

aesthetics that the turf house has been largely reframed as the eco-home of the future as well as “the jewel of Arctic architecture,” and as “the house that kept Icelanders alive and nurtured their culture through the centuries” (Íslenski Bærinn – Turf House n.d.). Amplified in the public media, the turf house has been transformed from a place of stagnation into a dynamic and heterogeneous memoryscape where the historical continuity and uniqueness of Icelandic culture meet and become relevant to the wider world.

4.3 The Turf House Revisited

For German sociologist Ulrich Beck, the twenty-first-century threat of global warming and climate change represents the first time in history that the political world, as well as the general public, has become aware that the effects of environmental change are felt by every nation, irrespective of geography, ethnicity, religion and culture. In many respects this realization challenges some of the basic concepts underlying national identities and the stability of geography, as well as the logic of modernity, industrialisation, and progress (Beck 2009). As pollution, soil erosion, sea-level rise, and all the other by-products of industrialised societies became issues of international concern, a new sense of cosmopolitan solidarity among nations and a new vision of modernity and progress has arisen (Beck 2009). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century concepts of modernity have been turned on their heads and have given way to a rhetoric of a future in which sustainability, renewable energy, green architecture and the return of a harmonious symbiosis between humans and their environment have become the ultimate signifiers of civilisation and progress. This sense of cosmopolitan solidarity has also prompted the formation of geopolitical alliances whereby smaller nations assume leading roles and responsibilities.

As this new sense of the future was embraced by the Arctic Council from the very beginning, Iceland was given the opportunity to become an equal and strategic player in a geopolitical alliance that included superpowers—Russia and the United States. In other words, Iceland assumed an equal role in an international entity of ostensibly environmentally conscious and, above all, *civilised* nations. The inclusion of Iceland into the Arctic Council was thus viewed as an historic event by Icelanders, where they were finally given the chance to move from their status as a marginal, peripheral nation to the centre of a discussion of global significance. As former President of Iceland Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson stated, to be “drawn from the fringes of international affairs into the center focus of global events” signalled the “*historic* transformation of the North,” and gave “new opportunities to make our

voices heard and influence the course of events, to make contributions that others regard as crucial, to come forward with ideas and participate in developing new strategies.” (Grímsson 2009: 22, my emphasis).

It was only once Iceland began to participate in an environmental discourse as an equal contributor in the international scene that the humble turf house also came into its own as a piece of worthy cultural capital and received its deserved place in Icelandic history. The late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century examination of the past for contemporary ecological solutions has been central to this development. It is through this search for modern solutions and the associated projection of a modern environmental consciousness into the distant past that the turf house has come to represent modernity and civilisation—analogous to the way that the Icelandic literary heritage did so in the era when literature was a better fit for the prevailing rhetoric of civilisation. Contrary to the popular perceptions of the previous centuries, the turf house has come to stand for an ancient-yet-modern environmental consciousness and has become the vehicle for an alternative vision of modernity that recasts Iceland not only as an inherently modern nation, but a modern nation *par excellence* (Loftsdóttir 2012a; Loftsdóttir & Lind 2016; Naum & Nordin 2013a, 2013b).

This desire to portray an atavistic Icelandic environmental consciousness as part of an alternative and modern way of thinking is deeply entangled with a wish to renegotiate the historical injustices and prejudices of the previous centuries. As the West is gradually moving towards post-industrial economies, modernity no longer bounds Icelanders to the imagery of industrialisation, urbanisation, and city architecture that defined civilisation at the time when Iceland was struggling to end its colonial dependency on Denmark. Within this context, the “modernity” that the ecological properties of the endemic turf house possess heralds a crucial emergence from the shadow of that past. Both the permanence and the unique evolution of the turf house *in Iceland and only in Iceland* constitute an uncontested point of departure where Icelandic history can be reframed as running its own unique and independent course. Most importantly, this course can be placed on an equal footing with the historical discourses and achievements of the other traditionally “civilised” nations.

Viewed this way, the decline of the turf house and the relatively fast adoption of other architectural styles and building materials in the twentieth century can also be recast as a transient and anomalous historical phenomenon. In more specific terms, the disappearance of the structure from the Icelandic landscape can be understood as historically anomalous in

light of the fact that Iceland “simply talked itself into modernity” (Hermannsson 2005: 350), attempting to anxiously achieve in a matter of decades what the rest of Europe slowly and steadily accomplished over two or three centuries. To that extent, there is a belief that the Icelandic population impulsively adopted a version of modernity that was uncoupled from the local Icelandic culture.

In this context, the quest to modernise Iceland was a huge driver in the nationalist movement and has largely been attributed to a desire to prove that Icelanders were as civilised as their European counterparts. As Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson has rightly asserted, there has always been a “perceived need for Icelandic culture to change and display additional proofs of a higher level of civilization in its architecture” (2010). At the same time, the surge of modernity and urbanisation can also be attributed to the changing aesthetics of a growing urban Icelandic middle-class and its anxiety to subscribe to a larger cosmopolitan culture. Always looking abroad for models of modern life, the middle-class bourgeoisie uncritically adopted foreign lifestyles so as to emulate their European counterparts. The adoption of foreign architectural styles can likewise be seen as the consequence of an anxious desire to follow the course of those civilised foreigners. In the new, contemporary light, those responsible for the demise of turf architecture are viewed as never having appreciated the intrinsic cultural capital of the turf house.

But the so-called “moral mission” of politicians and nationalists to eliminate the turf house was not simply a product of the destructive forces of modernity. Despite the centuries-long prejudices against the structure, the turf house had always been a concurrent marker of cultural capital. It was a link to the heroes and pioneers who settled Iceland and manifested a life harmonious with nature. It was *the* space where the Icelandic language and culture was nurtured and thrived despite foreign control and adverse climatic conditions. In this respect, the turf house was absolutely compatible with the basic tenets of Romantic nationalist ideology. On the one hand, the turf house was the living embodiment of the untamed and imaginative life of the rural folk and thus exemplified the remnants of the nation’s spirit. This romanticised rural realm, as embodied by the turf house, has always been the locale which encapsulated the *authentic* in the form of myths, heroes, pioneers, and peasants in a consistent and close relationship with the land. At the same time, the structure embodied the Romantic notion of the “fatherland.” Seen as the repository of the nation’s moral vision and its primordial values, the “fatherland” was to be rediscovered in those places of natural beauty

and cultural importance, or what Hutchinson has called the “mysterious reservoirs of the national spirit” (2004: 113).

But just as the foreign travellers of the time had difficulty in associating these Romantic notions with the squalid reality of Icelandic life, so too did the Icelandic elite. Despite efforts to “improve” turf architecture, the cold and increasingly unusable spaces of turf houses made it easier to believe that the structure had outlived its purpose and represented a poor architectural tradition, not to mention an unhygienic environment. If the turf house was to retain any of its positive characteristics and be considered a distinctive and worthy cultural tradition, it needed to be emptied and elevated above the daily life and habits of its inhabitants. In other words, the cultural capital of the structure had to be understood through the scholarly insights of the “enlightened” Icelandic intellectuals and academics and not through its poor inhabitants. The Icelandic peasantry might have been responsible for conserving traditions and customary practices, but they were not considered capable of protecting this culture in the face of modernity and progress or, for that matter, able to project it in a manner that was advantageous to the aesthetics and ambitions of the nationalist elite.

If turf architecture was to play any part in the nationalist story, the turf house had to become an artefact for history books and museum exhibitions, where the antithesis between the old and the new could be used to clearly illustrate the progress of the Icelandic nation. The demise of the turf house was, in part, the result of an effort to constrain its social biography, accentuate its cultural capital, and transform it into a manageable symbol of cultural heritage that essentialised a long-gone past. Taking this into consideration, it can be argued that the continuous use of turf structures is likely one of the main reasons behind the initial reluctance to include them in the Historic Buildings Collection. While this unwillingness initially gave way to include only structures of religious importance, a certain number of turf farmsteads began to be included in the collection once the use of such structures decreased dramatically. The overarching perception that the turf house lacked aesthetic qualities however, prompted the preservation of only a few buildings. Of these, only the wealthy, elite farms received considerable attention, while the more modest turf houses were brought to the brink of extinction. Being more aesthetically pleasing because of their more spacious arrangements, complex architectural style, and continuous restoration, these “elite” turf houses would come to represent all of Icelandic vernacular turf architecture and the living conditions of the past.

It is not accidental that the properties added to the Collection in the 1940s, namely Bustarfell, Glaumbær and Laufás, were the most elaborately built gabled turf farmsteads, with extensively panelled walls and wooden floors and were equipped with generators, sewing machines, and electric stoves. These architectural improvements and amenities illustrated a relative degree of comfort and even a hint that turf houses had entered the modern era. At the same time, they were invested with a history that reached far back to the Settlement. The presence of more architecturally advanced buildings, such churches and timber structures in Glaumbær and Laufás, also spoke to an evolution and progress of the Icelandic nation.

More importantly, these still-standing turf “chateaux” had improved sanitation. Cleansed from the smoke, smells, crowding, and all the other sensory properties that had driven many in the past to speak of the turf house as one of the most inadequate and primitive types of housing, the turf chateaux could embody a greater cultural capital through the new aspirational national virtues of tidiness and cleanliness. These aesthetically pleasing, spacious, and architecturally complex farmhouses could also satisfy the national imagination of a prosperous farming community that was in no need of foreign models in order to progress towards modernity. This image could also be employed to reinforce a political model of national unity that emphasized the “harmony” and “uniqueness” that pervaded the Icelandic farming society as opposed to the disruptive effects of the fast-paced and ever-changing modern life of industrial environments.

This image of a comfortable living in a fairly sanitary environment would play a crucial role in resolving the centuries-long paradox that spoke of Icelanders both as primitive and civilised, childlike and intellectual. Icelanders had been historically perceived as the poor and rustic relatives of Europe just as much as they were the successors of a civilisation that held an enormous cultural capital. With the former image reflected in the architecturally primitive turf house and the latter attested by their medieval literature, the balance most often fell in favour of the first image and Icelanders were excluded from the Western master narratives of civilisation and modernity. The refurbishment of the turf house in the mid-twentieth century can thus be seen as an effort to overcome the ambiguity between a past cultural greatness and a contemporary primitiveness.

The refurbishment of the turf châteaux would also signal a renewed relationship with the past, whereby the traditional forces of Icelandic society could claim anew a more dynamic place in history and thus a relevance in contemporary Iceland. This desire to reestablish a

connection with the past is partly owed to the fact that Icelandic modernity turned out to be very different from the one that the nationalist elites imagined (Hálfsanarson 2012: 264). The conservative farming elite, and most nationalist intellectuals, advocated for the preservation of a peasant society, and envisaged agriculture as the main driving force of the modernisation process. Despite their aspirations, Icelandic modernity was instead driven by the anonymous crowd who flocked into the industrial hubs of the country to escape poverty and unemployment. With the collapse of the traditional peasant society and the radical transformation of the settlement patterns of the country, the status of the once-powerful farming elite was endangered.

This “fresh” look into the past could not involve an anachronistic symbol of poverty and barbarism like the modest turf house. In a country that lacked any monumental archaeological remains, this could only be achieved by an effort to cleanse the turf structure from the habits of the peasantry, crystallise it in the form of the turf chateaux, and colonise it in turn with the aesthetics of the nationalist elites and the history of the Icelandic landed gentry from the settlement period to modern times. Rather than being a symbol of historical continuity and more recently one of future innovation and modernity thus, it is suggested that the sanitised turf chateaux are illustrative of the ways in which the nationalist imagination of the Icelandic elite has colonised the structure. In this regard, the survival and institutionalisation of the turf house has been a project that advanced the vision and desires of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalist elites for a modernity rooted in the country’s unique history, and served the vested interests of the conservative Icelandic elites and their efforts to claim participation in modernity. The Icelandic repossession of modernity in its rural identity and turf architecture will nonetheless only acquire significant momentum by the end of the twentieth century—a time when the concept of modernity itself became redefined, and was no longer equated to industry and urbanisation.

4.4 Afterword

Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis once noted the dramatic encounter of the so-called archaic elements of earth, air, fire, and water in what they characterised as the “porous architecture” of the city of Naples (1978 [1924]). They were drawn to the idea that the city, built in an unstable environment with highly volatile and physically unreliable materials, would eventually succumb and return to nature. Architecture had failed to stabilize the space and transform it, making the lived experience of Naples one of being in a “crisis” environment

rather than a planned one. For Benjamin and Lacis, this made Naples an allegory for the mercurial forces of modernity. Naples was a rejection of the notion of the city as the privileged site of modern existence and its precarious existence placed doubts over the idea that progress and modernity are homologous and inevitable (Chambers 2000). However, Benjamin and Lacis also saw the city as a composite phenomenon where culture and nature, and the ephemeral and the historical, coexist. Buildings, streets, and homes were not simply threatened by nature but also confronted with political instability and the social lives of their inhabitants. Likewise, the Icelandic turf house has never been the simple outcome of a harsh environment. Neither has it been solely a product of a counter-culture that has resisted the first wave of modernity, only to serve as an inspiration for another. As this chapter argues, the turf house has also been a contested *topos* where political desires clashed, often aiming to restrain the structure's sedimented pasts in order to transform it into a national *topos* that speaks of the cultural unity and kinship of Icelanders and, as of late, present Iceland to the world as a truly modern nation.

5. Decolonising the Manuscripts: Nationalism, Colonialism and the Social Biography of Objects

“Even our imaginations must remain forever colonised”

(Chatterjee 1993: 5)

The realities of archaeology are quite mundane. The early mornings and the long drives to the site; the rain, the wind, and the layers of clothing; the sun, the dust, and the longing for a shadow to hide in. Frozen soil needs to be thawed, dry soil needs to get wet, wheelbarrows get stuck in the mud. Troweling, defining stratigraphy, mapping, digging, taking notes—only to start all over again for the next deposit. Artefacts, ecofacts, and samples have to be placed in bags and buckets that need to be appropriately labelled. After that, off to the lab and the office to catalogue artefacts, sort out paperwork, make long lists of contexts, drawings, and photographs only to write a technical and dry interim report. After a few weeks in the office, you get fidgety and long for a return to the field. There is nothing really romantic with our day-to-day activities.

A little romance towards the profession can be reignited by the promise of digging in far-off lands. Those who get the opportunity to work in Greece, Egypt, and Jordan are envied. Those who have been in Japan, India, Peru, Siberia, and South Africa make us crave for adventure. My own chance for adventure came on a wet day in a muddy Irish field, when a colleague asked me if I would like to work in Iceland. I wasted no time, and a few days later all was set: I had contacted the director of the excavation and prepared for my long trip. I was going to participate in an archaeological research project in Reykholt.

When I announced the news to my colleagues, some were surprised, others congratulated me, and a few were jealous. One in particular asked me if I knew anything about the site I was going to work at. My sheer ignorance agitated him. “Reykholt is one of the most historic places in Iceland,” he said. “It is the home of the legendary saga-writer Snorri Sturluson. You have to start reading the sagas, my friend!” I laughed out loud and teased him by saying that I could not even find Iceland on a map. Moments later, I remembered my poor performance in ancient Greek and Latin at school. I also remembered the words of an archaeologist who visited our school on career day: “An archaeologist has to have a great knowledge of ancient languages, mythology, and literature.”

The scholarship surrounding the Icelandic manuscripts is admittedly vast. Given the popularity of the sagas over the centuries, much of the scholarly research revolves around their dissemination through the ages. The role of collectors, scribes, and printing-houses has been a popular topic (Hufnagel 2012; Jónsson 2012; Lansing 2012; Lethbridge & Óskarsdóttir et al. 2018; Ólafsson 2012, 2016), alongside discussions of manuscript transmission, textual variants, and changing representations through the ages (Driscoll 2016; Lethbridge 2010). Others have addressed the manuscript itself as a medium for reading, education, and entertainment (Ólafsson 2008), while there is a large corpus of work on hand-writing styles, design, and the aesthetic and artistic attributes of the manuscripts beyond their literary content (Jóhansson 1997; Jónsson 2003; Lethbridge 2018; Liepe 2009; Mårtensson 2011; Rowe 2008).

Others have equally opted to speak of the political economy of the manuscripts and treated them as markers of cultural and national identity (see chapter 2). A number of works have concentrated on the historical projects of collecting and weaponizing the manuscripts for political purposes in Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland (Hálfðanarson 2011; Skovgaard-Petersen 1993, 2012). The final and successful recovery of thousands of manuscripts by the Icelandic state three decades after independence has also been discussed both in relation to the symbolism it carried for the Icelandic nation and within the context of a wider discourse on the return of cultural treasures to their places of origin (Greenfield 1996). Archaeologists have also examined the ways in which the discipline became embroiled in the relationship between the sagas and nationalism when early antiquarians began to use the sagas to locate archaeological sites and monuments—a practice that foregrounded the literature, but nonetheless conscripted archaeology to the nationalist cause (Friðriksson 1994; Lucas & Parigoris 2013). In doing so, they have also discussed how archaeology exhibited a philological and historical thread.

Despite this abundant scholarship on the manuscripts initiated from a number of disciplines, certain events in the lives manuscripts have been largely ignored. These events refer to what may be called here, the “alternative” uses of books and manuscripts. In most cases, these uses differ from the conventional sense of manuscripts as reading material. Instead the focus is on their transformation into physical mediums and objects that may not always be related to the initial purpose of their creation. Some of these uses are circulated as popular anecdotes about certain vellum manuscripts that became sieves, shoe soles, vests, or sewing patterns, which naturally decommissioned the manuscripts as mediums of reading,

entertainment, and education. These dramatic events in the life of certain manuscripts have mostly been portrayed in scholarly publications as a form of destruction, sometimes enhancing the “saviour” role of the legendary manuscript and book collector Árni Magnússon and portraying him as a hero and national benefactor (see Jónsson 2015). In this context, the purposeful “mishandling” of manuscripts is most often associated with the reuse of parchment during times of economic struggle, and quite contrary to the national narrative of an ancient-yet-modern language, with the inability of Icelanders to comprehend the ancient dialects of the texts which rendered the manuscripts useless.

Nonetheless such moments of transfiguration of ancient objects are of immense importance in archaeology. For a discipline that revolves around materiality, time, and the reconstruction of the social and cultural biographies of objects and their agency (Gosden & Marshall 1999; Hodder 2012; Meskell 2004), the deliberate manipulation and “mishandling” of ancient artefacts are not necessarily acts that are disengaged from the purposes of their creation and do not necessarily exhibit a certain ignorance or a lack of appreciation for their possible ‘hidden’, ‘intrinsic’, or ‘spiritual’ properties. Instead, such acts of manipulation often signal a more dynamic interaction between people and objects that suggests a more lively interplay between the past and the present.

The use of manuscripts as sieves and shoe soles may appear anomalous in the life of ancient artefacts, but to past people or indigenous communities at large, such use might have carried enormous significance. Whether in the case of Aboriginal rock art, Native American artefacts, ancient Greek statues and buildings, or medieval Icelandic manuscripts, the subsequent use, manipulation, modification, and reworking of ancient objects attest to the idea that they played a more active role in the daily lives and routines of past people. These events in the life of artefacts also allude to the fact that objects do not possess a single and unchanging identity, but a social biography that is determined by the ways in which they are perceived across time and space (Kopytoff 1986; Tilley 1991).

This chapter poses the following questions. Why have these integral parts of the social biography of the manuscripts been ignored? Why is it assumed that the “alternative” use of manuscripts was related to poverty rather than being the outcome of a more creative and imaginative engagement with ancient objects and the past? More importantly, how much of these current interpretations are projections of the national image of Iceland as a bookish and literate nation? The first part of the chapter traces the origins of this philologically-centred

mentality and challenges the predispositions of archaeologists, cultural historians, manuscript experts, and the public. The second part discusses the way in which we can approach the alternative uses of manuscripts.

5.1 The Desecration of Manuscripts

As recently as September 2016, a humorous sketch encapsulating the ways in which we have so far approached the aforementioned moments in the social biography of Icelandic manuscripts was broadcast in the second episode of the documentary series *Orðbragð* (*Word Choice*) by the national television channel RÚV. Three minutes into the programme, viewers are transported back to early eighteenth-century Iceland to see none other than Árni Magnússon, the great collector and “saviour” of the Icelandic manuscripts. Wearing the period attire of a gentleman and a scholar, he knocks at the door of a poor farmhouse. He introduces himself to a humbly dressed woman and explains the purpose of his visit, which is none other than the search for old books. The woman invites him in, but not before he wipes his feet on the door mat. Magnússon immediately realises that he has just wiped his feet on a page of an old manuscript. “Nei, nei!” he exclaims and swiftly picks the page up to examine it for a moment, before he enters the house. Upon entering, he takes hold of a funnel made out of another page of the same book. With utter surprise he then lifts a sieve only to realise that it was made from yet another page of the same manuscript. “This used to be a big book” the woman says, “but now there is not much left of it.” It turns out that she had used many of the book’s pages to fix her husband’s undergarments. “It was a Christmas present,” she continues—she had read the book but did not like the story very much. The sketch ends with Árni Magnússon howling in despair and bursting into tears, and the viewers are brought back to the present at the Árni Magnússon Institute. A manuscript expert handles the book featured in the sketch, holding up the pierced page once used as a sieve (Fig. 5.1). “I am ready to forgive them,” he says. After all, they lived in poverty, he continues, and adds that if these people had the financial means, or awareness of the cultural value of the manuscripts they would have never committed such acts.

The image of Árni Magnússon presented in *Orðbragð* may be exaggerated, but is not unique. Naturally for someone who relentlessly collected every little scrap of parchment, Árni Magnússon subscribed to the idea that ancient manuscripts were carelessly destroyed due to a lack of appreciation. As he notes in a letter to the Danish king in 1721, he had the contents of those manuscripts he was not able to purchase transcribed, “solely to the end that such

materials should be saved from destruction, since most in that country care now not greatly for such things” (quoted in Jónsson 2015: 129). On the other hand, one does not fail to notice that the *Orðbragð* sketch is modelled after a scene from Halldór Laxness’s novel, *Iceland’s Bell*. The novel recounts the deeds of Áрни Magnússon, through the character of Arnaeus Arnaeus, who at one point enters the home of Jón Hreggviðsson's mother only to find pieces of parchment that have been used for a number of different purposes (2003 [1943]: 22–25). Hidden under a bed next to other precious recyclable objects such as horseshoe fragments, shoe-patches, fibres, horns, bones, and scraps of wood, Arnaeus discovers six pages of the *Skálda*, a manuscript that contains “the most beautiful poems of the northern hemisphere” (Laxness 2003 [1943]: 25). Laxness makes a direct connection between the reuse of parchment and poverty when Arnaeus says: “I will take these misfortunate shreds with me [...] They cannot be used to patch breeches or mend shoes anyway, and there is little chance that such a famine will come over Iceland that you would consider using them for food. But you shall have a silver coin from me for your inconvenience, good woman” (2003 [1943]: 25).

Contrary to the representations in *Orðbragð* and *Iceland’s Bell*, the reality of how Áрни Magnússon collected manuscripts was likely less dramatic. While Magnússon left behind a large collection of private letters, much of his correspondence and other works were lost or destroyed, and not much information is left regarding how he collected manuscripts. Having corresponded with more than two hundred and fifty people, most of Magnússon’s surviving letters are also devoid of personal sentiments towards the treatment of manuscripts, and it is only when “read with care” that some inkling of his feelings can actually be discerned from them (Jónsson 1999). What is known is that contrary to the image of knocking on poor farmhouses, much of his manuscript collection was either purchased from or gifted by a learned Icelandic elite. He respected those who did not want to part with their manuscripts, and a number of scribes were employed to transcribe their contents instead (Jónsson 2015: 129). Magnússon’s marginalia and other notes are mostly concerned about the provenance of manuscripts, as well as their content and information on previous ownership (Jónsson 2012).



Figure 5.1: Manuscript page from Physiologus (AM 673 a I fol.) used as a sieve. (Courtesy of the Árni Magnússon Institute).

Taking this into consideration, it appears that the portrayals of Árni Magnússon in *Orðbragð*, or *Iceland's Bell* have less to do with the historical character and they are more of a projection of a general discourse around cultural treasures. They rely more on popular sensitivities towards antiquities, where the mishandling or manipulation of ancient objects may be seen as violent and even sacrilegious acts. The image of cultural treasures lying on the dirt floors of turf houses, handled by unrefined, ignorant, malodorous, and flea-infested peasants is for example quite titillating. To that extent, there are not many people who would disagree that the damp, lightless Icelandic farmhouse was no place for the manuscripts. Most would easily subscribe to the idea that the appropriate safekeeping of manuscripts can only be guaranteed in the controlled environment of museums, institutions, universities, or even private collections. Cultural treasures are to be surrounded by scholars and academics who know the value and history of ancient things; artefacts are to be carefully handled by experts who know how to protect and preserve them better than anyone else. This reaction is conditioned by the fact that we have all learnt to appreciate antiquities in a very particular manner. Cordoned off in museum display cases, they are to be appraised quietly as visual, aesthetic objects and repositories of knowledge in need of constant care and protection (Edwards et al. 2006).

An alternate way of conceiving of these uses of manuscripts is to acknowledge that, in a poverty-stricken country like Iceland, the reuse of vellum was likely inevitable. This need to reuse material may have even led, rather paradoxically, to the physical preservation of a number of manuscripts that would have otherwise been simply discarded with no further thought. For as nineteenth-century travellers frequently noted in their memoirs, Icelanders were a rather strange breed. They were quite ignorant, bestial, and childish but also in possession of rather good manners and, more importantly, an awareness of their glorious past and their so-called literary heritage (Ísleifsson 1996).

This is quite precisely the image portrayed in *Orðbragð*. The peasant woman had *read* the manuscript, but exhibits ignorance towards the value of the book she possesses. For her it was not a cultural treasure; it was simply a “bad” story. The manuscript then could be put to better use for the sake of cleanliness of her home as the door mat indicates, and the comfort of her husband. Even so, in this paradoxical Icelandic world of intellectuality and ignorance, or good manners and crudeness, most of us today would agree that the otherwise honest and well-intentioned peasant was simply not the best caretaker of cultural treasures, precisely because we have been retrained to see them as cultural treasures.

Whether we decide to condemn or make amends with these Icelandic “noble savages,” it is certain that the image of a literate but also ignorant Icelandic peasant largely reflects the liminal position of Iceland in the European rhetoric of civilisation. Icelanders might have professed a certain degree of intellectuality, but had not yet reached that stage of “civilisation” that allowed them national independence. This is partly due to the fact that literacy alone had been regarded as a semi-civilised state which could only be alleviated by a further cultural refinement. The cultivation of such refinement was part and parcel of the effort by the Icelandic intellectual elite to show to the world that Icelanders belonged in the community of civilised nations.

5.2 Literacy, barbarity and civilisation

“One of the first things I had been taught as a child was never to believe a single word in the newspapers and nothing but what is found in the sagas,” says *Ugla* in Halldór Laxness’s *The Atom Station* (1948 [2004]: 78). First published in 1948, the satirical novel is about a country girl who decides to move from her beloved valley to the capital. As she takes up employment in the home of a member of parliament, *Ugla* meets politicians, communists, anti-

communists, as well as various members of an increasingly snobbish and arrogant elite. In doing so, she is confronted with a mindset that is in sheer contrast to her own cosmology. Having acquired her morals and sense of being from the Icelandic sagas, she keeps juxtaposing her *native* values to the *alien* ideas she comes across in the city. Faced with the notion of romantic love, she dismisses it outright, as “there is no mention of love in *Njáll’s Saga*, which is nevertheless better than any romantic literature” (1948 [2004]: 72). On questions of the soul, Uglya recalls that, in “*Njáll’s Saga* there is no mention of the soul, nor in *Grettir’s Saga* either, still less in *Egill’s Saga*, and these three are the greatest of the sagas” (1948 [2004]: 68). As though they are scripture, she says: “One could talk about the sagas, but not criticise them” (1948 [2004]: 69).

Despite the burlesque characters and the surreal environment of the novel, Laxness’s portrayal of the newly emerging urban culture of the capital and the associated cultural rift between the urban and rural populations is not inaccurate. Written at a time when Iceland was on the crossroads of modernisation, Reykjavík was no longer regarded as just some provincial Danish town. A national museum, theatre, and a university had been established, making the capital into the heart of Icelandic national culture. As Reykjavík became an increasingly urban centre, the rural population began to lag behind in matters of culture, politics, and ideology. Given the fact that there are very similar literary representations in many different European as well as non-European contexts, this condescending image of the rural folk in *The Atom Station* is not particularly peculiar.

One aspect of Uglya’s character is nonetheless especially informative and deserves further clarification, namely her inclination to believe what she read in the sagas *verbatim et litteratim*. Literary critics may explain this away as a product of Laxness’s literary creativity, political ideology, reactionary views, and efforts to engage his readers. It may also be seen allegorically, demonstrating the clash between old Iceland and the emergence of a new, modern nation. Without necessarily contesting these interpretations, there is another way to contextualise Uglya’s backwardness that can also illuminate the inspiration behind the portrayal of *Orðbragð*’s peasant woman.

There is no doubt that, at the time Laxness was writing his novel, the majority of Icelanders regularly read the sagas and generally still believed in the historical accuracy of the texts (Byock 1992: 54). Many Icelandic scholars shared a similar view on historicity for many centuries. Taken to be historical accounts still legible in their original form by Icelanders, the

sagas had, since the sixteenth century, been considered proof of both the ancientness and the historical continuity of the Icelandic language and the nation. During the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the ability to read and write attested to by the sagas was also considered a cultural characteristic that set Icelanders apart from the uncivilised people of the world and constituted a fundamental argument upon which the Icelandic nationalist movement had based their demands for national emancipation.

The use of literacy as a measure of civilisation was deeply rooted in an underlying assumption that colonial subjects were illiterate and thus uncivilised. This idea was sustained by a number of reports that described the ways in which non-literate cultures perceived writing as a supernatural or spiritual feat. The ability to read the mind of a person recorded in a book and therefore understand events from a spatial and temporal distance was equated to the magical powers of the shamans (Axtell 1985, 1988; Goody 1968, 1987; Ong 1982; Todorov 1984). During the first-contact situations of the sixteenth century, native populations were also astonished at the value Europeans placed on books as they did not provide “anything with which to drive away hunger” (Wogan 1994: 415). English cleric Samuel Purchas (ca. 1577–1626) formalised this distinction and drew a dichotomy between the civilized-Christian, and the barbarous-pagan populations according to the possession or lack of literate abilities, believing that God had granted “Europeans” with a so-called “*literall advantage*” (Kearney 2009: 194). Though the reports of indigenous populations mystified by texts have been largely refuted in recent years, the propagation of the image of the uncivilised native who saw the literate European as a supernatural being attests to the early modern European discourse about literacy as a mark of civilisation as well as Western superiority (Wogan 1994: 410).

This colonial discourse on literacy in fact displays many theoretical undercurrents of the larger rhetoric surrounding “civilisation.” Central to this broader discourse was the idea that barbarous societies were unable to think in nonmaterial, purely abstract terms. Ever since the first-contact situations in the Americas and Africa, merchants, missionaries, and colonisers, had encountered indigenous populations whose beliefs were seemingly rooted in the divine and supernatural efficacy of material objects. This “barbarous” state of immanence was not something altogether alien. To many Protestants, it resembled the idolatrous Catholic veneration of objects. This was often observed with dismay when Catholic missionaries found

their efforts at conversion much easier through the use of trinkets, amulets, crucifixes and images of saints (Kearney 2002).

By the eighteenth century, this discourse was not only circulated in the form of anecdotal stories in travel literature but was also reflected in the writings of intellectuals like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). When referring to the African continent, Hegel claimed that the people of “the land of childhood” were excluded from *human* history because they were slaves to their material world of objects and things (1956: 93). Transfixed by a barbarous *material fetishism*, they were unable to attain a consciousness that transcended the material world or, as Hegel puts it, “the consciousness that there is something higher than man” (1956: 93). In the influential language of Hegel, the infantile African populations could have no understanding of human freedom, and slavery came as a natural condition. It was the responsibility of the enlightened European coloniser to guide and gradually emancipate the barbaric populations.

By the time Hegel was expressing his version of civilisation however, literacy alone did not sufficiently render a society civilised. This is evident in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rhetoric of Western superiority that was used to describe a number of literate-yet-backwards “fringe-European” populations. Though the ability to read and write was established as a central feature that distinguished the civilised from the uncivilised, the spiritual poverty, backwardness, and ignorance of these otherwise literate populations was directly associated with the inability to understand texts in a “proper” manner, as well as with the misuse of books and manuscripts.

This rhetoric developed in an era when the scholarship on Eastern Christianity and Near Eastern languages and history peaked, alongside an antiquarian desire to collect manuscripts from Greece, Egypt, and the Levant, namely those places considered to be the cultural birthplaces of Western civilisation. European travellers, and especially collectors, often took pains “to illustrate that manuscripts were neither read nor kept in good condition” (Kominko 2015: lii). Almost exclusively discovered in the “scholarly environments” of the Christian monasteries of Egypt, Greece, and the Holy Land, stories about ancient manuscripts scattered on floors, piled up in oil cellars, crammed in wall niches, burnt as fuel, and used to cover pots or jars of preserves (Curzon 1852: 75), are common. Even in these purportedly scholarly environments, the naive, ignorant, superstitious, and insatiable monks and abbots responsible for the safe-keeping of manuscripts neither possessed the interest nor the skills to

understand the ancient dialects and languages in which the manuscripts were written. In many cases, the incomprehensibility and antiquity of such documents often rendered them to be treated as sacred relics and potential transactions could have the spectre of curses on anyone who might have sold or parted with certain books (Curzon, 1852: 369).

One of these literate yet unenlightened fringe populations resided on the other side of Europe, in Iceland. As in the case of the colonial subject, it was the responsibility of the enlightened elites to assume an equally paternalistic role in order to guide and gradually emancipate the primitive, unrefined and child-like folk from superstition, irrationality and immanence, and bring the nation into the modern age. Within this context, national elites steeped in the same charter myth of civilisation as the colonisers and embraced the same set of criteria for distinguishing the civilised from the uncivilised which in turn fuelled the so-called civilising mission of the colonial subject on the one hand, and the peasant folk and lower classes on the other.

The glorification of the Golden Age of saga literature and its use as a founding narrative by the Icelandic nationalist elites came with a desire to educate and regulate the ways in which the Icelandic population engaged with literature at large. Even though the storytelling tradition of the *kvöldvaka* and an overall literary culture had been thriving for centuries (Ólafsson 2008), the lay literary taste and creations, as well as the reading habits of Icelanders, would receive intermittent criticisms and interventions from church officials, scholars, nationalist intellectuals, and educators. These efforts to regulate literary practices long preceded the emergence of nationalism and continued well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

5.2.1 The Problem of “Unprofitable Songs”

One of the concerns that preoccupied the post-Reformation church authorities in Iceland was the fact that superstitions and beliefs in hidden beings, elves, and magicians were interwoven in popular tales and legends, as well as in many of the Icelandic sagas (Houser 1966).²⁶

²⁶ Apart from the *Íslendingasögur* (Icelandic sagas) which recount the stories of the first generations of Icelanders in the period between ca. 930-1056, a number of other literary genres rivalled and at times surpassed the popularity of the sagas. These were mainly the heroic *formaldarsögur* (legendary sagas) and *riddarasögur* (knights tales). The *formaldarsögur* genre (ca. 1250-1400) differs quite significantly from *Íslendingasögur*. The

During the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this aspect of oral folk narratives and legends roused the discontent of the leaders of the Lutheran church. Considered to be remnants of idolatrous pre-Christian times (Driscoll 1997), the bishop of Hólar, Guðbrandur Þorláksson, became concerned that these tales could corrupt the hearts and minds of Icelanders and sought to re-educate the Icelandic lay population (Bryan 2017: 22). Apart from overseeing the translation of the Bible into Icelandic, Þorláksson collected and published a book of hymns as a Christian alternative to the proliferation of the popular *rímur* and secular poetry. In the preface of this *Sálmabók*, the bishop claimed that “[...] men might be able to put away unprofitable songs of Ogres and of the Heathen of old, *Rímur*, naughty love-songs, amorous verses, sonnets of lust, verses of mockery and malice, and other foul and evil poesy, ribaldry, wantonness, and lampoonery and satire, such as are loved and used by the commonalty of this land” (quoted in Driscoll 1997: 14). Such “unprofitable songs” were in many cases the popular manifestations of the material from the medieval legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), the Icelandic family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*), as well as Eddic poetry (Bryan 2010, 2011; Driscoll 1997).

During the eighteenth-century, efforts to undercut the popularity of the *sögur* and *rímur* came in the form of two decrees on domestic discipline: The *Decree on House-Visitation* (*Forordning Vm Huus-Vitianer aa Islande*) on May 27, 1746, tasked the clergy with the suppression of the lay-culture of storytelling:

The priest shall enjoin members of the household to protect themselves from unprofitable stories and unlikely fables and fictions, which have been found in this country, and in no way permit them to be read or recited in their houses, so that children and young people will not be corrupted by them (quoted in Driscoll

stories take place long before the settlement of Iceland, in mythological pre-Christian Scandinavian settings. Mythological figures like giants and elves are quite characteristic of the genre. The *riddarasögur* were mainly translations of European and especially French romances, though there are a number of indigenous Icelandic narratives that were inspired from the chivalric genre. Old Norse mythological themes do not appear in the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, though there is one occasion where the god Óðinn appears as the teacher of magicians (Lassen 2005: 95). *Rímur* (Rhymes) was also a popular genre of long narrative poems. It first emerged during the fourteenth century and the subject matter derived from foreign romance, courtly and epic poetry, the *Íslendingasögur*, and historical or contemporary events in Iceland. Its popularity arose during the late Middle Ages, and remained the favourite Icelandic poetry genre until the nineteenth century.

1997: 14).

A few days later, on June 3, the *Decree on domestic discipline in Iceland* (*Tilskipan Vmm Huus-Agann A Islande*) stressed the responsibility that the master of each household had in protecting its members “from unbecoming talk and jesting, oaths and curses, vain histories, or so-called sögur, and amorous verses, or rímur, which are unbecoming of Christians to have to do with, and displease the Holy Spirit” (quoted in Driscoll 1997: 15).

By the second half of the eighteenth century, the superstitious beliefs associated with popular stories and songs were considered to be an obstacle that hindered not only piety, but cultural and economic progress. For enlightenment thinkers like Hannes Finnsson (1739–1796) and Magnús Stephensen (1772–1883), old romances, folktales, and especially *rímur* were “anathema” (Driscoll 1997: 17). They sought, like the bishop of Hólar before them, to disseminate an alternative, enlightenment-inspired genre to compete with the so-called *lygisögur*, the name given to refer to the popular “tall-tales” of the legendary sagas and translated romances (Eggertsdóttir 2006: 230). Stephensen’s profound disapproval of the literary habits of Icelanders has led him to create a more “constructive and useful” literature that also had clarity and taste. Using an innovative literary format, Stephensen wrote fables and poems in the form of Socratic dialogues that promoted the basic tenets of the Enlightenment. In doing so, he also parodied popular modes of poetry by creating verses that “rivalled the worst aspects of the *rímur*” verse (Senner 1985: 55).

Hannes Finnsson likewise found the legends, fairytales, and stories of trolls to be “full of immorality and superstition” (quoted in Driscoll 1997: 18) and maintained that the existence of fables or literary works that incorporated the supernatural could only be justified if they taught lessons about human morality. Since Iceland had reached a universal literacy by the end of the eighteenth century (Ólafsson 2008), Stephensen’s and Finnsson’s projects did not have to address the ability of the population to read but rather the capacity to understand what was read and to develop a critical understanding of a text. This concern is reflected in the words of Finnsson who once wrote in apparent exasperation that, “whenever I read a fable to someone, I was asked more than once whether that had happened, whether it were true or not” (quoted in Senner 1985: 29). Finnsson’s efforts to root out superstition and ignorance

resulted in the production of a literature that he hoped could rival the entertainment value of the traditional stories told in the *kvöldvaka* and of *rímur* poetry (Senner 1985: 28).

These attempts of bishops, priests, governors, and educators to replace, rationalise, or even blend traditional beliefs with the tenets of the Enlightenment were not particularly successful. In the greater European rhetoric of civilisation however, this Icelandic insistence that the fictitious, the spiritual, and the metaphorical were rooted in real events and thus a material reality, echoed character traits that could be found in the indigenous, barbaric populations of the colonies. The literal interpretation of texts, stories, and fables, and thus the inability to distinguish fact from fiction or reality from fantasy illustrated the lack of a “civilised” insight that could differentiate the material from the spiritual world. These Icelandic peasants committed the same fundamental category error that distinguished the credulous, non-European, non-Christian *Other* from the rational European man of the Enlightenment (Kearney 2002).

While the Icelandic peasant might not have been fully transfixed by the sort of materiality described by Hegel, he or she could be associated much more closely with the image of the non-European colonial subject through the fact that both parties shared a similar primitive and child-like propensity to believe in superstitions and irrational phenomena, as well as an inability to distinguish between the spiritual and the material. In this light, the works of Finnsson and Stephensen can be seen as the first organised and systematic domestic attempts to “civilise” the Icelandic peasantry by “correcting” its literary culture.

5.2.2 The Aesthetics of Ancient literature

The credulity of the Icelandic peasant was not the only reason why literacy was not enough to confer the mantle of civilisation on the nation. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the perception of Icelanders as primitive was also rooted in a criticism of the aesthetics of ancient Eddic poetry. Pivotal in this discourse was Hegel’s schema of cultural development. According to Hegel, a global pattern of aesthetic development, the so-called *Weltgeist*, could be identified and ordered in three mutually exclusive and successive stages of cultural and literary evolution: a primitive or “symbolic” phase, an intermediate “pagan” and “classical” phase, and a third—the most noble and civilised—Western-Christian “Romantic” phase. The first two stages were beset by primitive superstitions, so Hegel castigated the scholarly elevation and celebration of Old Norse mythology and held negative views of the Eddas,

assigning them not even to the intermediate but to the most primitive and “symbolic” class of literature. Hegel also argued for the creation of a *new* mythology that could eliminate all the irrational beliefs of the past. A mythology based on reason in this instance could reconcile the nation’s past with the present, and in turn lead to a more enlightened society (Halink 2017: 49). In Hegel’s own words:

I have been unable to acquire a taste for these hollow longueurs, these fundamental natural symbols which yet come into the narrative with a particular human form and face, Thor with his hammer, the Werewolf, the terrible mead-drinker, in short the wildness and murky confusion of this mythology. It is true that this whole Nordic sort of nationality is nearer to us than, for example, the poetry of the Persians or of Mohammedans generally, but to try to impress on our civilization today that this is something which should claim our own deep native sympathy and must be something national for *us*, is an attempt, however often ventured, which means overvaluing these partly misshapen and barbaric ideas and completely misconceiving the sense and spirit of our own present.²⁷

A similar Icelandic discourse on the aesthetic value of literature began in earnest during the nineteenth century and played a significant role in further undermining the lay literary taste and reading habits of Icelanders. One of the first to criticise the Icelandic poetic tradition in light of its aesthetic value was poet Bjarni Thorarensen (1786–1841). Thorarensen believed that *rímur* poetry was vulgar and tasteless and maintained that it was generally “laughable that [the] participants [in literature] here have no understanding of the being and nature of poetry and have [...] not gone forward with the times” (quoted in Óskarsson 2006: 283). Similarly, Tómas Sæmundsson believed that the traditional *rímur* poetry was a thoughtless habit that only served the mundane purposes of entertainment and education (Eggertsdóttir 2006). Sæmundsson advocated instead for the intrinsic value of the poetic art, namely one that is disassociated from its potential didactic, moral, or other functional role. From Sæmundsson’s perspective, the “gift” of writing and literary creation may follow the rules of the intellect, but it also has its own rules and therefore a value in itself. To that extent, he maintained that “real artists” were more or less unknown in Iceland (Óskarsson 2006: 184).

²⁷ “Hegel’s Lectures on Aesthetics. Part 3, Section 3, 1770-1831.” Retrieved from <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ae/part3-section3-chapter3.htm>.

In his 1839 article *On Icelandic literature (Um bókmentirnar íslensku)*, published in the fifth volume of *Fjöltnir*, he attacked the publication of *rímur* poetry and other “useless and unnecessary books” and contemplated the responsibility intellectuals have as mediators in the cultivation of a literary taste. For Sæmundsson, the public was not in a position to determine which works were to be published for the simple reason that they would only opt for the literary works with which they are already familiar. In his words:

“[...] even if they choose rather from the lower end than the higher, they should not be handed poor books and allowed to waste their time and money in the pursuit of ignorance, when what they sought was knowledge, rather they should be shown, in this matter as in others, how to distinguish between good and bad, since they cannot do so for themselves; the needs of the public should decide what is written and published, and not the people themselves; it is the intellectuals who must decide for them; they should not be given books that nourish their prejudices and hamper their progress, even though these are what they want and the prospects of profit more immediate” (quoted in Driscoll 1997: 22-23).

For Jónas Hallgrímsson on the other hand, *rímur* were not simply an uninspired and unoriginal tradition, but one that was largely responsible for “destroying and spoiling all feeling for what is beautiful and poetic and worthy of good poetry” (quoted in Óskarsson 2006: 285). His own attack against the *rímur* tradition was launched in the 1831 third issue of *Fjöltnir* under the title *The Rímur of Tristan and Indiana (Rímur af Tistrani og Indíönu)* in which he vociferously denigrated the work of the popular *rímur* poet Sigurður Breiðfjörð (1798–1846). According to Hallgrímsson, Breiðfjörð’s *rímur* of Tristan and Indiana were written in an “abject and ridiculously ugly” style that distressed and nauseated readers (Driscoll 1997: 24). From an aesthetic point of view, the language use was unconsidered and full of clichés, formulas, and Danish words. The generally incomprehensible poetic language was also distasteful as it followed strict metrical patterns and formulaic expressions (Halink 2017: 415). “As *rímur* are composed, and have been composed until this time,” Hallgrímsson would write, “most of them are a disgrace to the nation” (quoted in Gunnlaugsson 2019: 78).

Poet and essayist Benedikt Gröndal (1826–1907) shared a similar aversion to the traditional *rímur* poetry. Even though Gröndal believed that the ancient poetry of the Edda represented a unique creative moment in Icelandic history, he also played down its aesthetic qualities, considering Eddic poems to be an embryonic form of poetry that should be

cultivated in a more original and creative manner. For Gröndal, *rímur* poetry was a genre that was “full of Edda” (1851: 272), in the sense that it used outdated and fossilised techniques and he accused *rímur* poets of being conventional and unoriginal (Halink 2017)²⁸. Echoing Sæmundsson, Gröndal also held a belief that grammarians, antiquarians, and other scholars were the only ones appropriately equipped to understand and appreciate Iceland’s ancient literature, making them the rightful arbiters in studying and disseminating it.

Gröndal’s belief was articulated in his review of *Fjórar Riddarasögur*, a publication of four popular romances, two of which were written before the Reformation and were preserved in vellum manuscripts. In an article published in the journal *Þjóðólfur*, Gröndal harshly criticised the editors of these popular *lygisögur* for their lack of knowledge about antiquity, grammar, and the critical treatment of texts. Central to his criticism was the editors’ claim that they had selected the texts from “the most complete, oldest and best manuscripts” (Gröndal 1852: 368). For Gröndal, cultural artefacts like the ones presented in *Fjórar Riddarasögur* had to be handled according to the legitimised philological practices of trained practitioners, such as the scholars of the Antiquarian Society in Copenhagen. Only in this way could the texts avoid “contamination” and retain “their sanctity” (Gröndal 1852: 368). For him, the fact that the “printer and the shoe maker” who published the four tales made a statement regarding their completeness and antiquity was unacceptable. Levelling some accusations that the stories in the publication might have been written by the editors themselves, he characterised the book as “distorted, without sources, and incorrect” (Gröndal 1852: 368), claiming that the intention of the editors to profit off of the publication was a mockery of the nation.

These attacks on the lay literary culture were not a united front. Feelings towards the *rímur* tradition varied considerably, and not all manifestations of this popular style were equally criticised (Halink 2017). They also seem to have had little effect on curbing the popularity of *rímur* in Icelandic culture. The fact that *rímur* “continued to be composed, recited, published, and enjoyed throughout the 19th century” attests rather to the opposite

²⁸ Gröndal used the term Edda to refer to the stylistic characteristics of the *rímur* and not their contents, which were not explicitly mythological in nature (Halink 2017: 249). The phrase, “fullar af Eddu” on the other hand, is attributed to Jón Árnason, Egill Jónsson, Einar Þórðarson and Benedikt Gröndal, in their “Auglýsing” – Advertisement – published in *Þjóðólfur* 2 May 1851. The short article advertised the forthcoming publication of epic poetry entitled, *Drápa um Örnar – Odd*.

(Driscoll 1997: 24). The denigration of *rímur* as a genre though, did have an adverse effect on the works of Romantic poets. As Egilsson has pointed out, the association of *rímur* with Old Norse mythological motifs often discouraged educated Romantic poets from using those images in their own poetry (2008: 105).

Nonetheless, through imitating and also developing the scholarship practiced by Europe's intellectual elites, Icelandic scholars did not simply contribute to a general academic discourse on ancient literature. The mobilisation of Old Norse-Icelandic literature also aimed to present Iceland as a cultural nation with its own unique and prestigious literary accomplishments. This required the "construction of a national canon of quintessentially Icelandic literature" (Halink 2017: 289), one that would be embodied in both the poets and the saga authors of the past and the writers and intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Icelandic scholars were ready to reappropriate as well as "regenerate" the culture according to Hegel's scheme of civilisation development and the generally understood standards of culture set by the progressive nation-states of the world.²⁹

This imperative led to a gradual rift between what was considered "high" culture, confined to a sophisticated Icelandic elite, and a "low" culture that belonged to the lay population. In literature, this was manifested with a dichotomy drawn between genres that poets and intellectuals could appreciate and another, more popular type read and enjoyed by

²⁹ In regards to Hegel's scheme of civilisation, the work of Grímur Thomsen (1820-1896) is quite indicative of the efforts to reconcile the philosopher's theory on aesthetics and history with a more positive interpretation of Old Norse literature. While remaining loyal to Hegel's method of classification, Thomsen disclaimed the mutual exclusivity and rigidity that pervaded Hegel's scheme of civilisation. Instead, he proposed a 'pagan-romantic' category (Gunnlaugsson 2007: 181) which could be applied to describe the role of Old Norse literature in the greater historical scheme of human evolution. The main point of departure was the idea that much of what Hegel valued in the Romantic-Christian culture had already been prefigured in pre-Christian Scandinavia (Halink 2017: 225). Through his work Thomsen argued that the individualism and stoic character of the ancient saga protagonists resembled that of the Shakespearean popular characters and thus matched Hegel's description of the Romantic-Christian literary era. Through such comparative analysis Thomsen set to prove that the Nordic spirit has always been akin to the Christian spirit. To that extent, the Old Norse texts could no longer represent the final stages of an earlier primitive era, but as the cradle of the romantic spirit attested in Western literature. Through this novel adaptation of Hegelian philosophy and aesthetics, Thomsen spoke of a unique Nordic identity which was set apart from other, 'symbolic/primitive' pre-Christian societies and sustained that a return to the ancient Scandinavian literature as a source of inspiration was not a regressive move to a barbaric and primitive past, but a way in which the Nordic people can rediscover their own original and unique spirit.

the common people, like the *rímur*. The former “high” literature is tied to the emergence of a Copenhagen-based intellectual elite who, like Tómas Sæmundsson, began to adhere to the idea of literature as a phenomenon to be valued and appreciated according to the aesthetics and inner beauty of the literature itself, as well as the originality and inspiration of the author (Óskarsson 2006). This growing distinction was not just about the content and style of the genres. One thing that most educated Romantic intellectuals objected to was the way in which this “high” poetic culture of Iceland’s past was “denigrated” through the *rímur* genre. In doing so however, Icelandic scholars found themselves denigrating a popular lay culture that was largely responsible for the transmission of the sagas through the centuries.³⁰

By the first half of the twentieth century, this rift became more evident, largely driven by what became known as the Icelandic School of philology. By the 1920s, the desire to elevate Icelandic literary culture was reflected in the efforts to re-conceive of the sagas not as folk histories but as unique literary works that spoke to the inventiveness, intellectuality, and imagination of Icelanders. The so-called “bookprose” approach of the Icelandic School, discussed in the previous chapter, maintains that the sagas are fictional works created by enlightened, intellectual Icelandic authors rather than the collective efforts of medieval scribes and later collectors who transcribed stories that had already been formed in an oral tradition (Byock 1984-1985, 1985, 1992, 1994, 2001; Driscoll 2012; Halldórsson 1978).

These scholars approached the *Íslendingasögur* almost exclusively from an aesthetic point of view (Halink 2017). They saw these works as having a greater literary value than had previously been assigned to them and they rather “aggressively advanced [...] the assumption, that as developed literature, the sagas were no longer to be confused with less sophisticated oral histories or folk sagas” (Byock 2001: 75). Genres beyond the *Íslendingasögur* did not fit

³⁰ As Jürg Glauser (1994: 106) has observed in relation to Benedikt Gröndal, the attitudes towards the traditional literary culture and practices also entailed a bourgeois cultural elitism that often brought the discontent of the conservative Iceland-based elites. One of the main objections regarded the controversial tone through which the *Fjölnir* group of scholars tried to communicate their ideas. Even though some of the general ideas expressed by the *Fjölnismenn* have been generally accepted, many others were thought of as too radical to be taken into serious consideration within the national movement. As bishop Steingrímur Jónsson (1769-1845) had once written to Jón Sigurðsson, many people disliked *Fjölnir*’s “arrogant tone and provocative scolding or the fact that it seems to like—indeed to relish—entering into competition with other writers” (As quoted and translated in Ringler 2002: 35).

this paradigm of Old Icelandic literature as a true and original contribution to world culture and were generally ignored.³¹ By brushing aside all these other genres, the Golden Age of Icelandic history could also be relocated from the colonial-inspired image of a barbaric yet noble society of ninth- and tenth-century settlers, to the civilised thirteenth- and fourteenth-century society responsible for creating such a unique literary style. By refocusing attention from the content of the sagas to the creation of them, the national Icelandic heroes were not to be found amongst the first settlers and viking chieftains of the ninth and tenth centuries but amidst the learned people who produced the sagas during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

According to this reading, the national past was more aligned with the dominant imagery of civilisation than it had been in the earlier perceptions imposed by the more “cultured” colonial powers. Even though the Icelandic School never issued a manifesto with a clear political disposition (Driscoll 2012: 21), their bookprose approach had a great potential for repositioning the Icelandic nation in the greater rhetoric of civilisation. The relocation of saga origins from a shared Scandinavian storytelling tradition to a written Icelandic one rendered the foreign claims to Old Icelandic literature unfounded, and the genre could now be viewed as an explicit cultural product of the Icelandic nation and as unique cultural contribution to world civilisation (Byock 1992, 1994)³². Both wholly Icelandic and unique as literature, the sagas could now place Iceland among the elite, civilised European nations.

In this outward-facing effort, Icelandic intellectuals also redefined their own role within Icelandic society as the bearers and protectors of a native high culture. As Jesse Byock has frequently stated, the scholars of the Icelandic School stepped in as cultural leaders who comprehended the value of the sagas better than anyone else (1985, 1992, 1994, 2001). As

³¹ It has to be noted here that the sentiments towards the lay *rímur* tradition were often permeated by a certain ambiguity. Quite noteworthy in this instance is Sigurður Nordal’s appraisal of the fifteenth-century *Skíðaríma* category as a great piece of art (Neijmann 1996: 28), while he generally considered the *rímur* versification as the “most absurd example of literary conservatism that has ever been noted” (as quoted in Neijmann 1997: 28).

³² See Maurer (1860), *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart, vorwiegend nach mündlicher Überlieferung gesammelt, und verdeutscht von Dr. Konrad Maurer*. Also Ólsen, *Strøbemærkninger til Eddakvadene* (Copenhagen 1908); idem., *Til Eddakvadene: til Völuspá* (Lund 1914), and *Til Eddukvadene: til Hávamál* (Lund 1915). Icelandic historian Jon Aðils (1903) also believed that Icelandic culture combined the Nordic love of freedom and oral tradition with the spirituality and literary abilities of the Irish.

part of a newly emerging cultural elite, the intellectuals of the Icelandic School saw themselves, in the words of Sigurður Nordal, as the beneficiaries of “one of the most powerful literary movements in recorded history” (quoted in Byock 1992: 46, 52) and thus the rightful cultural leaders of Icelandic society.

5.2.3 Voices of Discontent

This new understanding of ancient Icelandic literature as the product of a high culture also entered into the nationalist efforts to educate the general public. Before the turn of the 20th century, the matter of educating the masses had acquired significant momentum in the nationalist rhetoric. As the periodical *Ísafold* noted in 1893, “education and knowledge are the true life force of nations; they are the bread of life for mankind; they give men spiritual and physical abundance, they enrich the nations and give them freedom, honour and prosperity” (1893: 241). Similarly, the journal *Fjallkonan* maintained in 1900 that “the schools [...] should be the precursors of nationalism, progress and knowledge” and urged school teachers to “first of all love their country and nation” (B. B. 1900: 1).

During the early years of the 20th century, the idea that a proper understanding of a text involved more than basic literacy would also surface. Much of the latter discourse is owed to the work of psychologist and academic Guðmundur Finnbogason (1873–1944), *Lýðmenntun* (*Public Education*). While *Lýðmenntun*’s scope was far reaching, special attention was paid on cultivating reading skills. His ideas reached a larger audience in a 1903 article entitled *Móðurmálið* (*Mother Tongue*) in the journal *Norðurland*. According to Finnbogason “reading skills are the key to the spiritual wealth of the nation” and the proper cultivation of the mother tongue from an early age is pivotal to the way in which the nation “thinks and feels” (1903: 105).

Regarding reading per se, Finnbogason stresses that “words should evoke clear and vivid ideas about what they represent, and the first duty of the teacher is to teach students to break down every subject they read about, to think about it, set it alive in their minds, so it becomes flesh of their flesh and bone of their bones.” He continues on to say that “understanding the content is conditioned for proper reading, and as we read correctly, the right understanding grows within ourselves.” By contrast, “a wrong reading has the opposite effect, [...] all haste reading is detrimental to spiritual development.” For Finnbogason “heathen troll stories cannot be read in the same manner as the lord’s prayer, and a hymn

cannot be read as a *rímur*, and a *rímur* cannot be read as a hymn” and while “only a relatively small number [of people] can become truly genius at reading, all those who are *average-minded* should at least learn to read in such a way that the subject is more or less understood and enjoyed” (1903: 105, my emphasis).

Having been characterised as the “flagship of Icelandic public education” (Jóhannsson 1994: 18), the ideas promulgated in *Lýðmenntun* reverberated over the course of the next few decades. In the same year as *Lýðmenntun* was published, the journal *Fjallkonan* spoke of “perfect reading skills” as one of the most beautiful arts, but one in which Icelanders “are lagging far behind from all the civilised and educated nations.” It warned that “complaints are heard from all directions that the upbringing of the nation has been neglected and that the country is left uncultivated” (1903: 138). Similarly, the editor of *Ísafold*, Björn Jónsson, wrote that one of the most damaging and misleading ideas of the time was that “we are already and have been one of the most educated nations in the world” (1904: 1). According to Jónsson, “reading skills and writing in themselves are no education,” and if the nation is to be educated, it needs to be cultivated in the same manner as one cultivates the land, only to add that “stupidity and prejudice” are like a pestilence to be blasted away if need be (1904: 1, 2). Twenty years later, an article entitled “Lestur” (“Reading”) in the periodical *Lögrjetta* would assert that “reading skills are key to all book learning” and that, even though “rumour has it that in our nation, every grown and sane Icelander can read [...] some people seem to believe that the nation is declining in this matter” (Arason 1926: 3). In *Alþýðublaðið*, teacher Ó. Þ. Kristjánsson would note on the other hand that “reading skills are the key to high, invaluable education [and] a precondition to a spiritual life” (1935). For Kristjánsson, book-reading is only a precondition; one has to read *a lot* and *well* in order to achieve meaningful results. Much of this public discourse echoed the underlying notion that the ability to read “though valuable, [is] not a single measure of the education of nations” (Jóhannesson 1949: 93).

The sense that there were better or worse genres and good or bad ways of understanding texts went back at least to Bishop Guðbrandur and the Enlightenment thinkers who first set out to improve the moral character of the nation. What was different about the dialogue around moral, national education in the first half of the twentieth century was the fact that the “good” ways of understanding texts risked becoming the guarded province of the elite. Refashioning the *Íslendingasögur* as the products of an ancient, literary high culture abided to new standards of academic legitimacy and views of the past. Such reinterpretation

ultimately meant that a newly emerged understanding of ancient literature was at odds with that of any reader who believed in the historical accuracy of the *Íslendingasögur* texts. Icelanders were now being faulted not just for the materiality they ascribed to the supernatural aspects of the romances and *riddarasögur* or the superstitions of the *rímur*; they were being faulted for the materiality they ascribed to the *Íslendingasögur*—texts that had been understood for centuries as histories. The act of reading ancient literature correctly required skills that most readers did not possess. “Meaning” was no longer something to be found in the text but instead discerned obliquely through initiation into a new set of shared codes of communication and interpretation determined by the intellectual elite. If the peasant folk and working classes were to understand and fully appreciate the new cultural capital that emanated from these otherwise familiar works, they were obliged to recognise and negotiate their way around conventions of writing, modes of literary styles, and interpretative paradigms.

These new interpretative paradigms were not uncontested, particularly the criticism of the *rímur* tradition. A good insight in this instance comes from the Kjær Collection preserved at the Icelandic National Museum. From 1927–1930, Danish teacher Holger Kjær conducted extensive research on old home-schooling, folk education, and the overall culture of the Icelandic countryside. Through interviews and questionnaires, Kjær aimed to show the benefits of Icelandic home-schooling and to reveal the “original” Nordic methods of education with the hope of applying them in modern times.

Kjær’s informants speak consistently of the *rímur* tradition in positive terms. In fact, the praise for the entertainment and educational value of *rímur* is often accompanied by criticism of the ways that the tradition had been undervalued. In an almost direct rebuke to the ideas of Tómas Sæmundsson, informant Björn Guðmundsson stated that *rímur* poetry was a unique art and a special talent that not many people possessed. If anything, the centuries-long presence of *rímur* and its cultural centrality had increased the desire to read further and to discover the ancient literature that lay behind the rhymes. The same informant refers to the *rímur* poetry as the “legacy of Icelanders” and “a gift from his ancestors” (Þjóðháttaafn 3/15: 529)³³, saying that the time has come when the nation should be more grateful to tradition.

³³ “Arfur Íslendingsins”, “gjöf frá forfeðrum hans”, sem hafi komið “lengst framan úr heimnum.”

Quite noteworthy is also the account of informant, Einar Jónsson. In a paragraph entitled, “Jónas Hallgrímsson,” Jónsson attributes the declining popularity of the *rímur* tradition to Hallgrímsson’s influential, harsh criticism and states that “it is as if the nation no longer dared to sing or create poetry, after the old hymns and rhyming songs were condemned” (Þjóðhátta safn 3/4: 839).³⁴ Jónsson writes that, at the times when the nation knew no better, singing and rhyming were the best way to please and inspire people and he reiterates that it is through the *rímur* poetry that Icelanders committed themselves to the sagas. Similarly, Jónas Illugason states that *rímur* were a good method for remembering the sagas. Of the argument that the *rímur* had little literary value, Illugason calls on the critics to be careful in their judgement, since one has to remember that a number of words used in *rímur* may nowadays sound as unintelligible and nonsensical, but they “were at one time considered as good and valid” (Þjóðhátta safn 2/32: 592).³⁵

Likewise, informant Jóhannes Guðmundsson notes that many art historians and poets have spoken poorly about the *rímur* tradition and held it responsible for corrupting the literary taste of the nation. While he agrees that *rímur* may have limited aesthetic value, he also maintains that the purpose of rhyming was not to create art per se. The creation of rhymes was rather a coping mechanism that gave temporary relief from darkness, hunger, and poverty. “Rhymes are sprouted from the spirit of the depressed, oppressed and tormented” (Þjóðhátta safn 3/17: 816).³⁶ he states. They are a “cry against the weather, the disasters of nature, the cold, the darkness, the drowsiness, the gloom, and all the drudgery” that life in Iceland entails (Þjóðhátta safn 3/17: 817).³⁷ Through this temporary relief, “the child and the old man, younger and older, lived in the life and struggles of the characters [recounted] in a miraculous, much stronger way, than when a story was read or told” (Þjóðhátta safn 3/17: 816).³⁸

³⁴ “Það var eins og þjóðin þyrði ekki lengur að syngja né kveða, eftir að bæði sálmasöngurinn gamli og rímnakveðskapurinn var fordæmdur.”

³⁵ “[...] á það verður líka að líta að ýmis orð sem okkur nútíðar mönnum þykir vitleysa voru á einni tíð talinn góð og gild. Og hafa þarna geymst.”

³⁶ “Upp úr andlegum jarðvegi hins beygða, kúgaðra og þrautpínda almúga eru rímurnar sprotnar.”

³⁷ “Kveða gegn veðrinu, gegn hamgangi náttúruaflanna, gegn kuldanum, myrkrinu, káfinu, myrkfælninni og öllum þeim óvættum sem sækja að óhörðnuðum unglíngi úti í blindhríð íslenska skammdegisnótt.”

³⁸ “Barnið og gamalmennið, yngri sem eldri, lifðu sig inn í líf og baráttu sögupersónanna á undraverðan hátt, miklu sterkari hátt, heldur en þegar saga var lesin eða sögð.”

For Guðmundsson, *rímur* can only be fully appreciated in the environment that created them; the comfort of modern times is not a setting where *rímur* can have a profound effect. “In the lighted and heated concert halls, [rímur] would sound like the echoes of the voices of the dead” (Þjóðháttasafn 3/17: 818)³⁹. Likewise, reading verses and chanting rhymes in the comfort of one’s modern home would be a blatant and pointless affair. This is one of the main reasons why young people may find *rímur* tiring, incomprehensible and a slow read. But Guðmundsson has no desire to return to the *rímur* era. He does stress however the importance of recognising their cultural value as they kept the nation alive when living conditions were in the most “abominable” state (Þjóðháttasafn 3/17: 818)⁴⁰.

Beyond the defence of the *rímur*, voices also objected to the conception of the Icelandic sagas as literary works rather than histories. As Magnússon notes, “ordinary Icelanders with only the most limited formal education had no hesitation in coming forward to argue the toss with any academic scholar who was so bold as to cast doubt on the veracity of the sagas” (2016: 70). One such ordinary Icelander was Helgi Haraldsson (1891–1984), a farmer from the district of Hrunamannahreppur. By the latter half of the twentieth century, Haraldsson would achieve the status of a national celebrity for his fierce attacks on those who questioned the truthfulness of the Icelandic sagas (Magnússon 2016). His polemics were published in the Progressive Party (*Framsóknarflokkur*) newspaper *Tíminn* and found a certain resonance among people of his own age and background with what has been characterised as his “unscholarly” style (Hughes 2016: 25).

Haraldsson was “[...] so fond of *Njáls saga*, [...], that [he] would never dishonour it by discussing with anyone, whether or not it is fiction to the core” (1968: 178). He nonetheless did so in two articles from April 9–10, 1948, where he castigated the overall scholarly view of the sagas as fictional works (1948a, 1948b). Much of Haraldsson’s popularity, however, is owed to his review of Halldór Laxness’ 1952 novel, *Gerpla* (*Wayward Heroes*). As Haraldsson says in *Tíminn*, dealing with the sagas should be a sacred matter and it is the responsibility of every good Icelander to make sure that the medieval sagas remained unchanged through the ages (1953a: 4). Written in the style of medieval romances (*riddarasögur*), *Gerpla* was a satirical attack on hero-worship and the role of religion in

³⁹ “Í lýstum og hituðum samkvæmissölum mundu þær hljóma sem hjáróma raddir úr gröfum hinna dánú.”

⁴⁰ “[...] haldið lífinu í þjóðinni líkamlega og andlega á sinn hátt, þegar mest svarf að.”

warfare. But for Haraldsson the novel did nothing more than denigrate the value of ancient literature in a sacrilegious manner.

In his words, “either Halldór [Laxness] is mocking himself or the Icelandic nation, or perhaps both at the same time” (1953a: 4). With “pornography and blasphemy” permeating the book, the only thing that shone through, were the phrases Laxness had stolen from the medieval sagas. Regardless of Laxness’s widely acknowledged talents, Haraldsson had never before encountered “such overwhelming amount of drivel in one and the same book” (1953a: 4). Haraldsson continued his rant the following day, when he claimed that he has “[...] faith in the Icelandic people, that it [*Gerpla*] will never be a popular work, however much it may try, to turn our Golden Age literature into a huge pile of rubbish” (1953b: 4). In Haraldsson’s eyes, Laxness might as well have been east of the Iron Curtain helping the communists rewrite the history of mankind (1953b: 4).

These invectives returned years later in 1971, when Haraldsson condemned the Icelandic School’s take on the historicity of the sagas as a form of disloyalty to the nation. In his words:

The latest research is this, that Ingólfur Arnarson never existed [...] what does one think the Norwegians would say to that if they were told that *Heimskringla* is an absolutely unreliable history to its core and that Harald the fair-haired never existed? [...] These university educated half-wits of ours should be prosecuted for high treason. If that is not the correct name for this kind of activity, what is one to call it? I am asked, what does it benefit us to involve ourselves in “Manuscripts Home!” and to put them in the hands of these people? (quoted in Hughes 2016: 26).

Haraldsson was not the only public voice that expressed the way in which the “common folk” viewed the scholarly debates on the Icelandic sagas. The same sentiments are reflected in a more measured manner in the writings of Kristín Geirsdóttir (1908–2005). Having lived most of her life in the relative isolation of the remote farm of Hringver in Tjörnes, Geirsdóttir nonetheless closely followed the scholarly debates of the time and felt the need to voice her own concerns over the new academic trends in her 1979 article, *Fáein alþýðleg orð* (A Few Words from the People). Published in the literary journal *Skírnir*, Geirsdóttir is first and foremost apologetic for even entertaining the thought of participating in

a scholarly debate, for “it is not easy for a woman in the north of the country with little schooling and capabilities to address a matter that has always been, to a certain extent, in the hands of educated and highly trained people” (Geirsdóttir 1979: 5). After all, the world of scholars is a “closed” one and the only reason she dared “to put words here” is due to the fact that “as far as I can remember [...] these books [the sagas] have been extremely dear to me.” She continues on to say that the way in which she approaches these books “may likely be called *emotional*,” and notices that “this kind of thing is not in favour among modern literary commentators. But there are also various things in these matters that I have difficulty in understanding, and it is hard to reconcile them with my ordinary native common sense” (Geirsdóttir 1979: 6).

Having perhaps exaggerated her shortcomings, Geirsdóttir’s criticism picks apart the claim that the Icelandic sagas are historically unreliable. She refers to the 1974 work of Sveinbjörn Rafnsson on *The Book of Settlements* (*Landnámabók* 1974), in which he stressed that “we must not believe too much in the written records” and that “we need to review all of our oldest history and smash it all down and rebuild it” (1979: 5). For Geirsdóttir, such comments are incomprehensible, and she poses a number of questions: If we are not to believe in written sources, then where can we find sources that we can trust? How can *modern* people distinguish fiction from reality? If it is right to take all our oldest history for review and smash it all down, how can we rebuild it? How can one expect a *true* antiquity if it is based on the way of thinking of those who live in the twentieth century? (Geirsdóttir 1979: 5).

Having voiced these concerns, she places the blame squarely at the feet of the Icelandic School. “In 1940, Sigurður Nordal decided to prove that the saga of *Hrafnkell Freysgoði* was purely fiction. Many scholars have accepted that theory, and although there were objections from both scholars and the common folk, there is no doubt that this has had, as might be expected, a great impact [...T]he opinion that has become the most common among scholars, at least the younger ones, is that our Icelandic stories are, if not entirely novels, artfully made” (1979: 8, 9). She also argues that Laxness’s essays on the Icelandic sagas may “sparkle and shine through the poet’s imagination and style,” but they are absurd and hardly believable. Despite the “artistic value” of these essays, they make little sense of “the truths of ancient literature” (1979: 22). For her, the sagas “were first and foremost seen as true stories that had been passed down from one person to the next.” But this is not to say “that they were believed without casting any doubt [...] I remember that what was once called

‘superstition’ [...] was generally not taken seriously and was rather considered as an exaggeration or [a figment of] imagination” (1979: 7).

For all her humility, her conclusion rivals any other academic study. Geirsdóttir agrees with the view that modern times may need “a real or imagined past” that fits the needs of the present. Yet she maintains that this past will always be created at the expense of a “true” account and in turn at the expense of those who may identify with it in different ways. Geirsdóttir repeated her viewpoints in two additional articles, *Hugleiðing um fornsögur* (Meditation on Ancient Tales 1990) and *Hvað er sannleikur?* (What is Truth? 1995). Both published in *Skírnir*, they commented further on the authorship of the Icelandic sagas, the matter of place-names, as well as the work of archaeologists.

5.2.4 A Class Rhetoric

These arguments were part of the growing cultural rift between the rural population and the new urban bourgeoisie of Reykjavík that Laxness depicts in *The Atom Station* (2004 [1948]). Written at a time when Laxness maintained that the Icelandic sagas were literary creations, his main character Ugly relates to the sagas she grew up with what comes across as a credulous and immature way (1945, 1946). She might have been able to read and engage with ancient literature and poetry, but she lacked a full, nuanced understanding of the author’s intentions. As she expresses a growing desire to reach such a sophisticated understanding, “[...] the first demand is that you base poetry on objective psychology and biochemistry; secondly, that you have followed in detail every development in art since the days of cubism; and thirdly, that you acknowledge both quarter-tones and discords and moreover can find the point in a drum solo” (1948 [2004]: 46).

Ugly’s “uncomplicated” relationship to the sagas typifies the characteristics that the intellectual elite saw in the peasant folk who lagged behind when it came to the affairs of the modern world. Laxness also depicts the leadership caste of the nation as arrogant and spoilt, even portraying on a different occasion the matter of national independence itself as an aspiration more relevant to the Icelandic elites than the common working classes (*Salka Valka* 1981 [1931]). This double-edged sensitivity to the cultural divide between the naive peasant and the snobbish urban classes encapsulated the debates regarding the value of the Icelandic sagas in the mid-twentieth century but whose seeds had been laid earlier.

While Icelanders as a whole might have shared a strong conceptual bond with the sagas, the ways in which this bond was felt and expressed often collided. Specifically, the intellectuals who sought to renew Icelandic culture attempted to do so according to a colonialist-cum-nationalist civilisation rhetoric that was not particularly alluring to the wider Icelandic population. As Geirsdóttir had noted, the reinterpretation of the sagas as literary classics and the construction of a “new past” that fitted the needs of modern times did not take into consideration how the common folk constructed their own identity (1979). Feeling alienated and excluded from this new identity-forming process, discontent was to be expected. As played out in Laxness’s novels, this discontent was at times expressed in terms of class. The voice of Jóhannes Guðmundsson, who had defended the value of *rímur* to the rural Icelander, is in this instance indicative of the way in which the common people had come to see the comfortable living conditions of the modern intelligentsia as increasingly out of touch with the everyday toil in the countryside as well as the living conditions of urban workers. Living in a home that featured such amenities as central heating and electricity also meant an inability to fully comprehend the harsh realities that forged the character of Icelanders.

This class divide manifested in terms of literature and the literary practices of Icelanders may not have always been as sharp as suggested here. Neither the intellectual elite nor the common folk were organised in a united front that clashed. After all, the Icelandic School’s interpretation of the sagas was also criticised by scholars who still adhered to the historical value of ancient literature, making them allied with the common Icelanders who forged their identities through the ancient texts. At other times, the world of intellectuals was not always as “closed” as Geirsdóttir claimed. Through public lectures, members of Reykjavík’s working class had access to the “new” cultural capital promulgated by Iceland’s leading scholars.⁴¹ One such example comes from the recollections of a certain Elka Björnsdóttir. Having worked most of her life in domestic service and other manual labour, Björnsdóttir had developed a keen interest in education, culture, and labour issues. She was a member of the Icelandic Literary Society (Hið Íslenska Bókmenntafélag) and a founding member of the Social Democratic Party (Alþýðuflokkurinn; Magnússon 2011: 189). Having attended the lectures of scholars such as Sigurður Nordal and feeling drawn to the affairs of

⁴¹ According to Magnússon (2011: 197), “these lectures were set up in a systematic attempt to educate and inform the young nation, to encourage it to build up sufficient self-confidence to be able to aspire to national independence.”

the world, she also developed a certain aversion towards people of her own social standing. As she states in her diary: “[...] it is much better to sit unknown among such cultured folk than among many other people, including one’s equals” (in Magnússon 2011: 198). Such views as those expressed by Björnsdóttir and Geirsdóttir thus largely attest to the ways in which the colonial-cum-national rhetoric of civilisation converged at times with a social class discourse (Ahmad 1992; Balibar & Wallerstein 1991).

While the image of the naive countryside folk and the arrogant bourgeoisie is simplistic, it is nonetheless deeply-etched in the rhetoric of early modernity. Examples abound from the period of modernisation and urbanisation, but the trope still exists today. Suffice it to say that one such cultural manifestation is the sketch from *Orðbragð*. Using a hotchpotch of ideas from different eras, *Orðbragð* subscribes—in 2016—to the same colonial-cum-nationalist worldview. In this iteration, the kind, innocent, literate, and yet ignorant peasant commits the double sin of not recognising the manuscript as an invaluable ancient artefact and also not appreciating the text as a literary classic and cultural treasure. Immersed in her own sense of materiality and incapable of discerning the inner meaning of some Hegelian humanity, she needs the guidance of the national hero, poet, scholar, and educator.

Like popular culture, contemporary saga and manuscript scholarship still carries little threads of this colonial-cum-national rhetoric of civilisation. Even as the authoritative scholarly view of ancient literature as the ultimate expression of a highly sophisticated culture has become more nuanced, much of the contemporary scholarship still only deals with the “high-end” manifestations of the early Icelandic literary culture. This is not to say that the lay literary practices have escaped academic scrutiny. There are works that examine the central role of the previously criticised *rímur* tradition as well as the influence of the *kvöldvaka* and lay scribal cultures in the dissemination the sagas (Magnússon 2010, 2016; Ólafsson 2016). Nonetheless, there are instances when we can recognise a tendency to interpret the lay literary manifestations vis-à-vis a civilised-uncivilised continuum. Notably though, we can also trace a propensity to place the common Icelandic folk at the higher end of the continuum.

One such example is the way in which Icelandic historian Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon interprets the literary abilities of the aforementioned Elka Björnsdóttir:

Elka's cultivation of literature and poetry, which, of course often demanded a systematic application of abstract concepts, proved exceptionally useful to people like her when faced with the new, industrialized world of the 20th century. Icelanders appear to have found the leap from the turf cottages of the 19th century to the steam trawlers and mechanized technology of the modern age comparatively easy in comparison to well-known cases in other European countries, and accomplished the adjustments needed without losing their links to the past. This attitude – the readiness to embrace the new while holding on to customs and attitudes developed over the centuries – left its mark on the country's culture and economy (Magnússon 2011: 199).

The idea that the peasants and working classes might have possessed the same “type of cultural literacy” as Iceland's leading scholars and intellectuals fails to recognise the increasing tensions between the common folk and the nation's elite. Keeping in mind that people like Elka Björnsdóttir were increasingly influenced by the suffrage and socialist movements of the era and actively participated in numerous other discourses more relevant to their daily life, the view of a speedy home-grown adaptation of Icelanders to the exigencies of modernity through an inherently sophisticated understanding of literature and poetry is exaggerated.

Current scholarship appears to underestimate the lasting impact of the nineteenth-century nationalist intellectuals and the later Icelandic School on the ways in which Icelandic literary material is interpreted, understood, and experienced—both in the academy and in public discourse. As scholarly imaginations have over time coincided more with the aspirations of the nationalist elites and the shadow they left behind, those imaginations have also left certain events in the life of manuscripts unattended—ones that contradict the image of Icelanders not simply as literate but culturally literate. These events include the “alternative” uses of books and manuscripts.

5.3 Imagination Reclaimed

In *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*, essayist Ann Fadiman recognises two types of readers: the bibliophiles and the annotators (2000: 32, 34). According to Fadiman, the former have a platonic relationship with the book. They try to keep their books intact and unaltered or, as she describes, “in the state of perfect chastity” in which they have “left the

bookseller” (Fadiman 2000: 34). It is a responsibility that the bibliophile takes seriously and considers noble. To them, any mishandling of the book is a deterioration and distortion of the “wisdom” it carries and is thus an act that is disrespectful, even sacrilegious. On the other hand, the annotators have a more visceral relationship with the book (Fadiman 2000: 32). They introduce their opinions, theories, and objections by scribbling them down in the margins of their books. In doing so, they come into dialogue with the book and its author and can open similar debates with subsequent readers as the book gets passed on. For the annotator, the book’s worth rests in the words and not in its appearance and materiality as it does for bibliophiles. The book is not the glue, the paper, the thread, and the ink but the information content. A “hard” use of the book’s material form is thus not a sign of disrespect but of intimacy (Fadiman 2000: 32). Needless to say, the two groups do not get along very well. For the bibliophile, the annotator is irresponsible, self-indulgent, anarchistic, and sacrilegious, while for the annotator the bibliophile is a square and a bore.

Despite their differences, both “bibliophiles” and “annotators” converge on the view that the book is one of the most iconic emblems of human civilisation. Regarded as a conduit through which wisdom and culture is passed from generation to generation and a gateway to past and present thoughts, feelings, emotions, and perceptions, the book is viewed as one of the most definitive material symbols of the essence and totality of the human condition (Pearson 2008). As such, the physical presence of the book in the library, the office, and the home is not something to be taken lightly. And aside from its symbolism, though people may not attribute the same value to each and every book they own, they nevertheless engage with the book’s materiality in a similar manner, that of reading.

This appreciation of the book cannot be uncoupled from the notion of literacy. Even though there is not one standard or universal definition of literacy, the view that literacy is a prerequisite for human civilisation has dominated the relevant discourse, to the point of being definitional. The evolutionary paradigm of an orality-literacy dichotomy has long attributed the rise of the Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite, and Chinese civilisations to the invention of writing systems (Goody & Watt 1968: 36). The “art of reading and writing” has also been intimately associated with the rise of logical and analytical thinking and thus the development of more complex mental functions (Daniell 1999; Ong 1982). At the same time, others have spoken of the functional value and overall benefits of literacy. Even in its most rudimentary form, the so-called functional literacy is defined as “the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfil their own self-determined objectives as

family and community members, citizens, consumers, job holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing” (Hunter & Harman 1979: 77). Literacy is also considered as a form of adaptation “necessary for [the] effective performance in a range of settings” (Scribner 1998: 73).

What may tie these dominant discourses on literacy is the notion of cultural literacy. As Hirsch claims in *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*: “reading and writing are not simply acts of decoding and encoding but rather acts of communication” (1987: xiii). This means that “an active understanding of the written word requires far more than the ability to call out words from a page or the possession of basic vocabulary, syntax, grammar, and inferencing techniques.” By employing standard and, according to Hirsch, “classical” or “canonical” texts, groups establish common knowledge and a collective memory which in turn allows them to communicate, work, and live together (Hirsch 1987: x). Through these common reference points, people can also attach new meanings and ways of understanding to old ones. This process forms the basis upon which communities are built and sustain their coherence and continuity (Hirsch 1987: xiii). Whether it is to sharpen analytical thinking or to find a role and adapt to the needs of society, book-reading is regarded as a necessary enterprise.

Taking cultural literacy into consideration, the embodied appreciation of books generally revolves around their primary function; that is, reading the texts and understanding their meaning. According to this understanding, the purposeful mishandling and destruction of books demonstrates disrespect for their artefactual and aesthetic dimensions, signals a devaluation of the text’s meaning, and jeopardises their transmission. But as people preserve, categorise, exhibit, and even revere their private book collections, they often come to appreciate books in ways that are disengaged from the act of reading and understanding their content. There may be times, for example, when books are bought because they are aesthetically pleasing—some books are indeed judged by their covers. Private collections are often arranged according to the size, age, colour, or for that matter any other aesthetic quality, that the books may carry. Users also sense a book’s weight, which, in relation to its colour, size, and title can form distinctions between what is considered a “heavy” or a “light” read. The latter books tend to occupy the more intimate spaces of our homes, while the former are placed in bookshelves that exert a certain authority and serve a symbolic purpose. On those shelves people can proudly gaze at their books and feel that they possess the power of knowledge. They may pull a book off the shelf to show it to a friend, a colleague, or a guest to

perform their “intellectuality” and to affirm to themselves and others that they understand the truths and realities of our world. There are also those who love the smell of books. They may open a book and bring it close to their nostrils for no greater purpose than to summon memories of school, university, or a loved one. Alternatively, it is not uncommon to see books dismantled to be framed and displayed as works of art, turned into wallpaper, or ironically transformed into bookshelves, reduced—or exalted—to decorative forms and fashionable furniture.

As with many other pieces of material culture, books may endure long past the time of their creation and the purposes of their production. Whatever the aims of its informational content, it may journey on to use as a beloved story, a decorative, prestigious, or fashionable item, or even a sacred totem. But each time it is cast in a new role, it still embodies its previous lives, making it at once a material reality of the present and a relic of the past. The book may be typically thought of as a repository of knowledge and wisdom, but it is also an instigator of memories; one that may actively engage with present-day worries and concerns that do not always revolve around the act of reading itself but still depend on an embodied and sensory engagement. For all of the experiences described above do not just remind us of the places or instances where we might have come to love or hate the book. They constitute memories of ritual initiations, daily routines, and affective moments that define the relationships we have with objects.

It is only recently that scholars and academics have become sensitive to this other, more embodied and sensual way of appreciating books and manuscripts. Leaving behind the quest for the “original” form of texts that defined philology for centuries, a so-called *material* philology now reminds us that literary works do not exist independently of the material conditions they embody (Driscoll 2010). The realisation that the physical attributes of a text are an essential part of its meaning opens the door to an understanding of books and manuscripts as physical objects that are produced in socio-politically and economically defined environments and that their consumption can vary from time to time and according to the values that each and every society embraces.

This movement towards understanding “texts in context” has led scholars to examine the numerous ways in which people encounter texts and thus “the complexity of relationships that can exist between texts, practices and contexts” (Myrvold 2010: 1; also Cantwell Smith 2005; Coburn 1984; Levering et al. 1989; Timm 1992;). According to anthropologist Karin

Barber, the understanding of a text's culture-specific meaning opens up "to view the sheer range of ways in which texts can be constituted and apprehended, the range of relationships they can establish between speaker/writer and hearer/reader, and the ways in which they can be valued and held to have meaning" (2007: 13). As part of a broader interdisciplinary emphasis on the principle of embodiment (Bynum 1995, 2011; Ganz 2012; Mascia-Lees et al. 2011), others have also stressed the experiential nature of reading. Texts have come to be viewed as bodies themselves and textuality as part of a technological apparatus that consists of "objects, bodies, senses, spaces, and times alongside beliefs, doctrines, myths, rituals and behaviours" (Brent-Plate 2016: 211).

Within the broader scholarship on the agency and life of objects (Gell 1998; Latour 2005; Law 2002) and matter and materiality (Bennett & Joyce et al. 2010; Miller et al. 2005), scholars have also begun to explore the affective and corporeal properties of books and manuscripts and thus the ways in which they are experienced through the sensual acuties of people beyond the act of reading. A wide range of text-consumption has now been discussed through seeing, hearing, touching—even smelling and tasting. This appreciation of texts through the senses was generated by the so-called "tactile turn" in art history. With an increased emphasis first placed on the haptic qualities of books and manuscripts (Ganz 2012; also Bacci & Melcher et al. 2011; Dent et al. 2014; Ganz & Schellewald et al. 2019; Jung 2010; Rath et al. 2013; Wenderholm 2006), the sensorial dimension of iconic books and texts and the social power and cultural symbolism their materiality entails has also been discussed (Watts et al. 2013).

In this new material philology, there is also room for books and manuscripts whose communicative function did not rely solely on the text (Moerman 2010). In the Japanese Buddhist practice of producing sutras, Moerman identifies texts that are *only* appreciated in terms of their physical properties and presence. Elaborately produced, only to be buried afterwards, he has observed that "the value of [sutra] production and use lay in their media as much as in their message; what mattered most were the time, place and materiality of their deployment" (Moerman 2010: 87). In other religious traditions, sacred texts are treated in a manner similar to deities or high-status individuals, "even when the texts are considered obsolete and useless" (Myrvold 2010: 1). Superannuated scrolls of the Torah are given their own graves in the cemetery (Schleicher, 2010), while worn out copies of the Quran are either ceremonially burnt or buried in tombs (Svensson 2010, 2017). Likewise, there is a Sikh practice of elaborate cremation rituals for old printed copies of scripture (Myrvold 2008), and

a tradition of placing Buddhist manuscripts within statues of the Buddha or in monastery walls, only to be rediscovered in the distant future (see Gyatso 1996; Veidlinger 2006; Walser 2005). These ritualised disposals of sacred texts attest to the text's ontological ambiguity as an object to be manipulated and destroyed without losing its meaning. Such work has also sustained the idea that "texts do not merely serve to communicate referential messages and symbolic meanings, or reflect their historical context, but can assume the most diverse functional roles even becoming social actors" (Myrvold 2010: 2).

Regarding the role of books, scrolls, and manuscripts as social actors, the historical record provides numerous examples. The ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* offered protection in the afterlife and copies of it were placed in tombs. From 1500 BCE onwards, ready-made versions of the book were produced with empty spaces so that people could simply insert the name of the deceased. In third-century Egypt, scrolls containing scriptural texts were built into walls in order to protect houses. For the Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom (347–407) the presence of the Scriptures in a house saved it from harm (Watson 2007: 481). This practice is still seen today in the Jewish custom of the hanging mezuzah—small, often ornate cases containing verses of the Torah—on the doorposts of homes. Texts did not only "act" to protect but to curse. In ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Graeco-Roman world the practice of *damnatio memoriae*, wherein undesirable people were deleted from social memory by eradicating their names from written documents, scrolls, and inscriptions was quite common. In ancient Judaism, texts were literally consumed. According to the fourth book of the Hebrew Bible, *Numbers*, those women suspected of adultery were forced to go through the ordeal of the bitter water. The ordeal involved drinking the water used to erase the script of a Holy manuscript in order to ingest the biblical words appropriate for salvation (Numbers 5:11-31).

Books have also been used for their talismanic and curative powers. Miniature Gospels were produced and worn around the neck in order to ward off evil. In fifteenth-century England and France, parchments containing biblical references were worn during sexual intercourse, as they guaranteed the conception of a child (Olsan 2003), while other textual charms were used to summon the dead or obtain someone's love. Others still were used to cure ailments, such as headaches and toothaches. The Bible itself was often laid on the head or face of patients, or placed under the pillow in order to induce sleep or fight disease. Such "biblio-medicine" remained popular into modern times, including the extraordinary case of a nineteenth-century English woman who "ate a New Testament, day by day and leaf by

leaf, between two sides of bread and butter, as a remedy for fits” (Cressy 1986: 99). According to Cressy, the act of “ingesting the word of God, and systematically destroying a book in the process, swept aside the need for conventional, and literary, religious practices” (1986: 99). Books were also used for divination, including non-scriptural texts, since the fifth century. Known as bibliomancy, this practice involved selecting a passage at random from the Bible, liturgical books as well as from famous works such as those of Homer and Virgil. The passage was then interpreted as a guide to immediate action or to predict the future (Cressy 1986; Hayes 1997; Jackson 1981; Lewis 1965; Watson 2007). Such practices of bibliomancy have also been observed in Islamic communities with the use of the Quran and other literary compositions.

Given the above examples and the nearly totemic role that the sagas and their derivatives, like the *rímur*, held for common Icelanders as markers of their history, a more visceral relationship between the readers and their books and manuscripts is also a possibility that should not be dismissed. Until now, the use of certain vellum manuscripts to make sieves, shoe soles, vests and sewing patterns have hardly captured the attention of scholars and academics. The explanation often provided for these events is that the old vellum manuscripts had already been transcribed into a newer technology—paper—and thus people did not feel the need to preserve them. This interpretation is sustained by the fact that ancient literature was widely popular. Regarding this popularity, Jón Helgason had spoken of a unique Icelandic scribal culture (1958: 8–9). This involved a thriving enterprise of lay members of society who kept copying the literary material that was unavailable in printed form. The production of such hand-written copies is assumed to have begun with the increased availability of paper some time during the sixteenth century and only became obsolete at the beginning of the twentieth century (Ólafsson 2008: 104). In this context, the eventual destruction of a number of vellum manuscripts has been discussed vis-à-vis the tradition of book making and more specifically within the frames of recycling parchment for the making of new books (Jónsson 2012). There is also a sense in the scholarship that vellum was a precious commodity and thus the reuse of parchment for the binding of new books and other “practical” purposes had been quite unavoidable (Gunnlaugsson 2016, 2017; Óskarsdóttir 2013: 152). The fact that the older vellum documents were written in an ancient dialect and were thus incomprehensible or difficult to read is also thought to have been a crucial factor in rendering the older version of the texts useless.

This interpretation may not be altogether incorrect, but it presupposes a particular appreciation of texts that is disembodied from their physical qualities as books and manuscripts. It takes for granted that readers were merely interested in reading, interpreting, and communicating the semantic meanings and referential messages contained in the texts (Myrvold 2010: 5) and postulates that as soon as these messages became obsolete or transcribed onto a new medium, old books and manuscripts could be used for purposes other than their primary function. These current interpretations on the use of manuscripts for “alternative” purposes create a conceptual dichotomy between text and its material manifestation and assume that ancient manuscripts did not have any intrinsic value as physical objects until the time when antiquarians like Árni Magnússon began to collect and appreciate them as historical artefacts.

Taking into consideration that Icelanders believed both in the historicity of the sagas and the supernatural aspects they often entail, it is nonetheless likely that old books and ancient manuscripts might have elicited an awe in them that might have been expressed in various embodied ways. To that extent, the actions that violently transformed a number of manuscripts may not have necessarily revolved around the material value and functionality of parchment but could have rather been vested with highly-charged symbolic meanings. Choosing to tailor, for example, a vest by using a sewing pattern made out of the parchment of a heroic saga, as in the case of *Sturlunga saga* in *Reykjarfjarðarbók* (AM 122 b fol.), might have protected, transmitted strength, courage, or blessed the wearer (Fig. 5.3). Wearing a shoe or having a shoe-sole made from an old manuscript could have equally had similar effects. At the same time, such vestments might have also had curative powers; and in the spirit of *Orðbragð*, wearing an undergarment made out of a parchment recounting sexual encounters and promiscuity might have improved one’s sexual potency. Sieving through a page of the Icelandic *Physiologus* (AM673a I fol.), as is the case of the punctured page presented in *Orðbragð*, might have been part of a ritual that signalled the blessing of food. What sustains this hypothesis is the fact that the *Physiologus* is a scientific treatise that deals with real and imaginary plants, trees, animals, and stones (Fig. 5.2). Having been translated from the original Latin work, *Physiologus Theobaldi* (AM 673a I 4to and AM 673a II 4to), the Icelandic version of the treatise is one of the oldest extant manuscripts of Old Icelandic, written around 1200, and offers moral and allegorical interpretations of plants, animals and natural phenomena that support Christian moral and religious teachings (Curley 2009: ix; Dolcetti Corazza 2007: 225; Marchand 1976: 501).



Figure 5.2: Physiologus page (AM 673 a I fol.) illustrating a fantastic creature. (Courtesy of the Árni Magnússon Institute)

This shared expression between text and practice suggests a deliberate action; namely, the selection of a specific manuscript, or even a page of a particular manuscript in the case of Icelandic *Physiologus* (AM673a I fol.), for the purpose of sieving foodstuffs. That the food to be consumed literally goes *through* a medium that consecrates it is reminiscent of the digestion of biblical words that occurred when drinking the water used to erase holy scripts. It also echoes the numerous examples whereby other forms of ancient material culture, such as statues, participated in rituals that warranted a good harvest (Hamilakis 2007: 70).



Figure 5.3: A page from Reykjarfjarðarbók (AM 122 b fol.) used as a sewing pattern. (Courtesy of the Árni Magnússon Institute).

Another example that illustrates the significance of the physical medium of a text is the case of *Margrétar saga* (AM 431 12mo, Fig. 5.4, 5.5). The life of St. Margaret of Antioch was “one of the many saints’ lives that came to Iceland with the new Christian faith” (Steffensen 1962–65). Based on the dating of the earliest manuscripts, the legend was likely first translated from its original Latin into Icelandic some time before 1300 (Wolf 2010: 62). According to *The Lives of the Saints in Old Norse Prose: A Hand-list* (1963), texts recounting the lives of virgin Saints were rather plentiful, with nineteen manuscripts dedicated to the life

of the Blessed Virgin, fifteen to St. Margaret, seven to St. Agnes, and seven additional manuscripts recounting the lives of seven others.



Figure 5.4: The story of St Margaret of Antioch in 16th century Icelandic manuscript (AM 431 12mo) (Courtesy of the Árni Magnússon Institute).

Dated between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, the fourteen extant pre-Reformation manuscripts that contain the saga of Margaret do so at times by itself or as part of a collection of Saints' legends, often followed by prayers. Alongside the pre-Reformation copies, twenty-seven manuscript copies exist from 1750–1895. More than half of these post-Reformation manuscripts contain saga fragments, biographies, poems, *rímur*, and hymns; such collections were likely intended for entertainment and didactic purposes. On the other hand, a number of manuscripts are accompanied by other material such as accounts of dreams, dream interpretation, and magic. Among them, two copies contain topics of natural history and medical lore. It is also worth noting that there is a large number of manuscripts dedicated to the life of St Margaret compared to other Saints' lives (Steffensen 1962–65). What also makes this number unusual is the abundance of copies that post-date the

Reformation. Having in mind that the legend of St. Margaret is extant in far more late-medieval and post-Reformation manuscripts than any other legend (Wolf 2010), the saint appears to have been one of the most popular in Iceland. This sense is supported by the fact that *Margrétar saga* is neither linguistically, nor stylistically superior to other sagas, and thus its proliferation must be owed to its popularity than its literary style (Steffensen 1962–65). For Steffensen and Wolf, this popularity is owed to the fact that St. Margaret was associated with safety in childbirth.

The notion that *Margrétar saga* was thought to possess the power to protect a mother and her child in delivery is evident in two pre-Reformation copies that also contain instructions for delivery. The oldest extant manuscript of the saga explicitly makes the promise that no child will be born dead in the house where the story is kept (Steffensen 1962–65). The story itself incorporates a prayer for childbirth. Having preserved her virginity throughout her life, St. Margaret suffered torture, imprisonment, and finally martyrdom for her Christian faith. Before the executioner takes her life, she asks for permission to pray. In doing so, she adds the following prayer:

Hear my prayer. I pray that the sins of the man who reads the story of my passion may be washed away; and whoever brings means of illumination to my church, may his sins be washed away at that time [...] Again I ask you, Lord, the man who writes the story of my passion or buys that book, fill him with your holy spirit. And in that house where that book is to be found, let there be no child born dead or lame. Forgive the sins of that man, Lord, who has my book in his keeping, if he asks you for mercy (translated in Steffensen 1962–1965: 275).

The material efficacy of *Margrétar saga* is also recounted by Reverend Guðmundur Einarsson, dean of Snæfellsnessýsla, who describes the instructions for successful childbirth in his *Hugrás*:

[...] the delivery book with all its figures, rules, medicines and excipitur, especially to bind this to the thigh of a woman in childbirth: *Anna peperit Mariam, Maria Christum, Elizabeth Johannem, Cilicium, Remigium, Eorum dat salutaris et redemptio, quando parias filium hæc fæmina*, and read afterwards *Margrétar saga in nomine Patris, Filii et spiritus sancti* (translated in Steffensen 1962–1965: 277–278).

Taking into consideration the above, Wolf has suggested that the small size of some of these manuscripts was due to the fact that they were placed on the woman's stomach during labour (2010: 62). This hypothesis is supported by the other historical examples of using books in their physical sense as charms to treat ailments and diseases. According to Steffensen (1962–65), this special sanctity of the physical book itself is not found in relation to any other saint. Given the popularity of *Margrétar saga* over the centuries, the belief over the efficacy of the book for childbirth also likely continued.

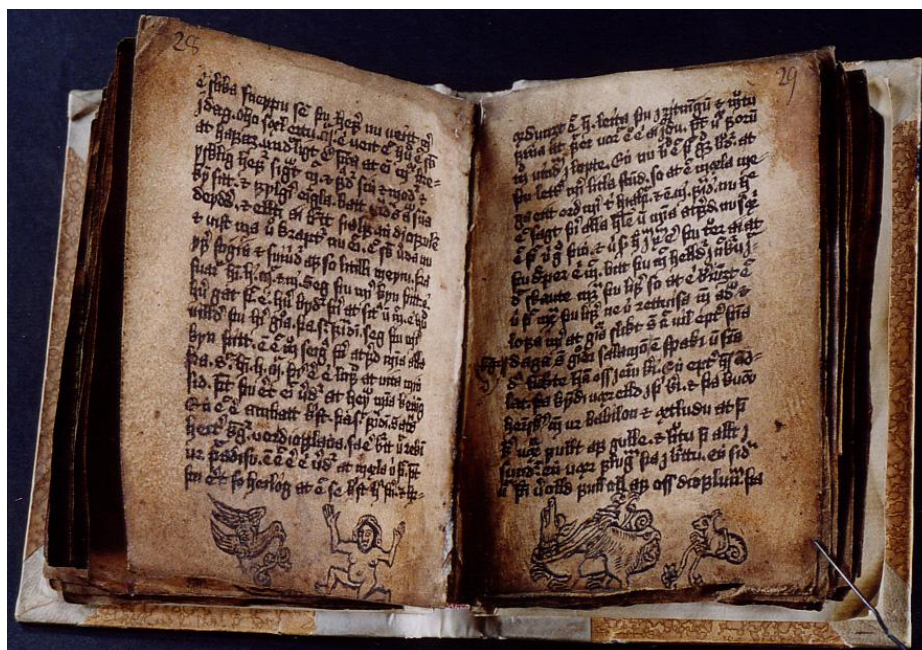


Figure 5.5: 16th century copy of Margrét's saga (AM 431 12mo). (Courtesy of the Árni Magnússon Institute).

The rationale behind these hypotheses about *Margrétar saga* and *Physiologus* opens a much wider range of possibilities than have been discussed before. Significantly, it allows for explanations of the relationship between Icelanders and their literature that move beyond discussions of poverty and functionality, as well as the alleged inability of the poor, uneducated peasants to read material values in a correct, rational, and civilised manner—all ideas that are rooted in the rhetoric of civilisation. These interpretative possibilities gain credibility when the transformative events in the life of Icelandic manuscripts are seen vis-à-vis an array of ethnographic and historical examples that clearly illustrate a more dynamic and embodied engagement of people with texts.

All of these examples attest that books and manuscripts are not just vessels of knowledge but meaningful, multitemporal objects with agency (Hamilakis 2013). Like any

other object, they have social biographies that extend beyond, or even contradict, the purpose of their creation and carry a cultural significance at times greater than its textual content. More importantly, the examples presented here attest to the fact that the complete meaning of texts cannot be fully grasped if they are disengaged from the medium that carries them. Yet, books and manuscripts remain nonetheless quite elusive artefacts. Despite the recent scholarship on the alternative uses of books and manuscripts, our current interpretations are still rooted in the aforementioned western value that is ascribed to books and written culture at large. If the book is central enough to civilisation rhetoric to stand in for the essence of humanity itself, the violent alteration of a book's form and content is not simply an act counter to the purposes of its creation, but also one that aggressively upsets our struggle to understand and construct more comprehensive narratives of the past.

Given also the fact that the alternative use and bodily contact with books and manuscripts as well as any other cultural artefact has long been considered as a clear sign of primitiveness in both colonialist and nationalist contexts, the current interpretations on the "mishandling" of manuscripts may still reflect the perpetual fears, anxieties and ambitions of the early and later Icelandic nationalist elites for a place in the so-called civilised world. It is quite precisely to that extent, that we are also rather sceptical as to whether much of the contemporary saga scholarship and manuscript research speaks of such a colonial-cum-nationalist inheritance. For it is only when we begin to recognise our theoretical influences and predispositions and thus learn how to decolonise our interpretations that we are able to imagine how magnificent it must have felt to wear a vest that recounts the deeds of gods and heroes.

6. Naming Places, Writing History: the role of Place Names in Forging the Icelandic National Identity

In *Önsa*, a short story written in 1998 by Þórarinn Eldjárn, a representative of the Historical Farms Project ventures to the farm of Hlíð in Ódalur in order to document the historic place names of the area. While there, he tries to persuade the farmer to clear away the rubbish that has accumulated on his land. The researcher is confident that the farmer will oblige, as it is not only an environmental concern that needed to be addressed but also a matter of pride and custody towards the farm's cultural heritage. He soon comes to realise though, that the old agricultural tools and the derelict cars and tractors that have been slowly accumulating in the farm were an integral part of the landscape; they were the landmarks that people used to orient themselves on the expanse of the farm.

The farmer and his family had also invested personal stories and memories in objects that the researcher had dismissed as unsightly and historically trivial. But it is not the idea that the “rubbish” has become an integral part of history that becomes troublesome for the researcher; it is because those personal stories and memories that are invested in the landscape differ. He becomes increasingly frustrated and disappointed with the progress of his work, “not because the sources were not sufficient for place names,” but because “they were too numerous and contradictory” (1998: 140). Each time he ventured onto the landscape with a different member of the farmer's extended family, he was presented with a different set of names for the same locations on the farm. His disappointment leads him to abandon his place name project and pioneer a scheme within the tourist industry called, “Save the Classic Icelandic Trash Farm.”

Keeping in mind that Þórarinn Eldjárn is the son of former president and the country's most prized and quoted archaeologist, Kristján Eldjárn, *Önsa* addresses a number of contemporary academic concerns. For archaeologists who have ventured on similar toponymic projects, *Önsa* is a somewhat uncomfortable reminder of a number of methodological issues within the archaeological discourse. First and foremost, it is a reminder of the difficulties faced in the field when trying to collect data that is presumed to be self-evident. It also deals with the treatment of cultural landscapes—landscapes that are not static but are instead part of a cultural process through which personal and group identities are

formed (Mitchell 1994; Robertson & Richards 2003). *Önsa* also reminds us that official histories and personal memories as to what may constitute a cultural landscape often clash.

The choice to use a specific type of evidence—place names—in the narrative is not accidental. In the late nineteenth century, place names came to be regarded as living monuments that illustrated the rich and glorious past of the Saga Age and as evidence for the historical continuity of the Icelandic nation (Sigurðsson 1886). The perception that place names retain historical depth and integrity has largely prevailed since, with a great deal of effort concentrated on collecting and cataloguing them and evaluating their historical importance. In the mid-1940s, the view that place names possessed a historical stability and depth would be echoed in the following words of Þórarinn's father, Kristján Eldjárn (1945: 45): “Place names are inherited from generation to generation and even nation to nation [and] eventually, become remarkable accounts of the life and work of long gone people and nations. This has already been clear to people since the days of Snorri Sturluson, and scholars of all civilised nations in modern times know and understand this. We Icelanders need to get perfect place name registers for all the country, because place names are essential to all national Icelandic studies.”

The long-standing perception that place names are relics with historical value has only recently come under scrutiny. Rose-Redwood et al. (2010) noted that place name studies have long been invested with an antiquarian empiricism and esotericism that has driven critical research to the fringes of the discourse. To that extent, place name research has largely been reduced to an encyclopaedic search for authentic origins of names, focusing on the linguistic aspects of etymology, spelling, pronunciation, and classification. According to Goodchild, (2004: 712) this narrow focus of place name research renders it a “discredited field.” The more critical contemporary stance in toponymy attempts to shift away from this traditional “search for origins” and philological research towards the sense that naming is a contested spatial practice. Rather than seeing place names as “signifiers that designate places as ‘objects’ or ‘artefacts’ within a predefined geographical space” (Rose-Redwood et al. 2010: 455), the naming of places is seen as a performative act used to negotiate geopolitical and socio-spatial tensions and contradictions.

In the Icelandic context, toponymic studies have diversified and most scholars and academics are nowadays suspicious of any alleged historical stability or depth of place names. However, few are the works that have adopted a more “critical appreciation of the power and

ideology” (Myers 1996: 237) that may lie behind the practice of place naming in Iceland. Specifically when it comes to the impact of nationalism on toponymy, most will agree that the initial interest in the field was instigated by nineteenth-century nationalist sentiments, but without considering the ways in which nationalist ideology itself might have been reflected in place naming practices. This chapter aims to unravel the history of entanglement between nationalism and toponymic practices in Iceland in order to demonstrate the ways in which place naming is often a contested cultural act through which national identities are negotiated.

6.1 Nationalism and toponymy

Once a landscape acquires a name, it is immediately distinguished, recognised, and understood. It becomes a reference point upon which our sense of navigation and familiarisation with the natural environment is conducted. Place names also provide symbolic meanings that are essential to people’s sense of belonging and well-being (Zilliacus 1978: 211). For Basso, the necessity of naming places arises from the fact that places have always “served humankind as durable symbols of distant events and as indispensable aids for remembering and imagining them” (Basso 1996: 7). Oral narratives, myths, rituals, and storytelling have always contributed to the formation of a sense of place (Basso 1996; Nas 2002; Santos-Granero 1998; Silko 1996). Places become imbued with collective memories and they become part of a reciprocal process through which the stories and memories themselves are strengthened and perpetuated by the landscape. While memories, events, and experiences tend to accumulate in places and people become familiar with them and develop a sense of rootedness, place names invest landscapes with complex cultural and social meanings (see Casey 1987; de Certeau 1984; Feld & Basso 1996; Relph 1981; Tilley 1994; Tuan 1974, 1977). In this respect, place naming imprints an historical situatedness to an otherwise timeless physical world.

Place names can thus be seen as the verbal signifiers that mediate social realities with the physical one. They can instantly evoke stories that reflect the culture that created them. They act as mnemonic devices for remembering a history that is organised by the physical world. In many respects, naming places is a form of cultural inscription that interpolates meaning into the physical environment (Cresswell 2004; Hoelscher & Alderman 2004; Ingold 1992; Tilley 1994) and embeds a sense of human identity and meaning in the natural world (Alderman 2008; Bird, 2002). The act of toponymic inscription does not simply transform

“space into an object of knowledge” that can be read and explored (Carter 1987: 67); it is also the mechanism that situates people in places. According to Carbaugh and Rudnick (2006), this situatedness entwines places into discourses of morality, memory, as well as history and politics.

Despite the above discourse, toponymic studies have lately come under severe criticism. In the mid-1990s, toponymic researchers have expressed that place name studies have “largely languished in [the] atheoretical caverns of geographical inquiry” (Myers 1996: 238), and that toponymic research “has barely advanced beyond its pioneering phase” (Zelinsky 1997: 465). Others have argued that toponymy has been reduced into an encyclopaedic form of public geography which very often amounts to nothing more than the memorisation of place names and state capitals (Rose-Redwood 2010). Most of this critique was directed towards the way in which traditional toponymic studies have refrained from engaging with the recent theoretical discourse in geography, thus failing to identify the embeddedness of toponymy in power relations. On the contrary, place names have been quite consistently perceived as layers upon layers that contain a set of historical truths awaited to be discovered. To that extent, the belief that “place names [can] remain stable for centuries, sometimes for millennia” (Clark 1992: 485) and are thus able to “provide vital evidence for dating and, indeed, for estimating the mixture of races” (Gelling 1988: book cover) has been rather deeply embedded in toponymic discourse.

The lack of a critical theoretical framework for the traditional approach to toponymy is rooted in its history. The preoccupation on gathering, categorising, and standardising names, along with the search for their original forms and meaning, has its own origins in the cartographers, geographers, linguists, and state technocrats who pioneered the field. Social scientists, by contrast, have mostly been occupied with their own antiquated “historical-culturalist” approaches (Vuolteenaho & Berg 2009: 3) that view place names as supplementary evidence upon which linguistic practices, past migration patterns, and early settlement distributions can be identified. To that extent, philologists, historians, and archaeologists have all focused their efforts on tracing the origins and etymology of toponyms. Each of these disciplines has “typically adopted theoretically (and politically) naive empiricist foci on the nomenclatures of specific localities, provinces, nation-states or other geopolitical units” and together they “have often uncritically supplemented bureaucratic institutional standardization programs with (nationally or otherwise) canonized language,

political aims, and overtones” (Vuolteenaho & Berg 2009: 6). For Vuolteenaho and Berg (2009) such developments in place name research are owed to the fact that toponymic studies have never had a stable institutional home. From cartography, geography, and history to linguistics, philology, and political science, the study of place names has always been scattered amongst a number of different disciplines, unable to fully come into its own.

Over the last two decades, efforts to break away from the traditional methodological scope of gathering and categorising toponyms have borne fruit. Numerous studies have emerged that examine both the significance of naming places and the cultural politics of toponymy. Researchers have noted that cartography, record-keeping, and the gathering of national toponymies have always been integral to the symbolic legitimatisation of modern nation-states and the consolidation of their power and authority (Vuolteenaho & Berg 2009). Cohen and Kliot (1992) have further noted the ways in which specific conceptions of history and national identity are promoted through the adoption and sanction of place names. Following their work, a number of others have put place naming processes within the frames of nation building and state formation in settings of political turmoil (Azaryahu 1992, 1997; Azaryahu & Golan 2001; Faraco & Murphy 1997; Georgiou 2010; Gill 2005; Robinson et al. 2001).

Despite this progress, a number of the above critics tend to agree that there are certain national contexts where toponymic inscriptions remain politically innocent. According to Kearns and Berg for example, the traditional view of place names as reservoirs of historical data “may be understandable in some states where there may be a relatively high level of consensus on issues of national identity” (2010: 285). Given that political toponymy has been examined in the colonial and post-colonial settings of Africa, Asia, South America, Australia, New Zealand, as well the pluralistic context of the United States and the politically turbulent Eastern Europe, the obvious implication is that the places of “political consensus” that Kearns and Berg allude to are the nation-states of Western Europe. In other words, the practice of political toponymy seems only to exist in heavily contested national territories, postcolonial settings, and multi-ethnic communities; it is not to be found in the perceived stability of Western Europe.⁴² This considerable difference between toponymic studies on Western

⁴² Most research on political toponymy has concentrated on national and postcolonial settings where the past is heavily contested by different ethnic and cultural groups (see Bassett 1994 on West Africa; Mbenzi 2009 on

European settings and non-Western and non-European contexts seems to disregard the ways in which the Western European nationalisation projects of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used the processes of place naming in order to legitimise notions of nationhood, define borders, and assert state dominance.

This asymmetry in the application of “critical toponymy” in different parts of the world is not simply the consequence of academic myopia but the outcome of a particular discourse on nationalism that views the Western European context as a socio-politically, historically, and democratically stable environment as opposed to the political instability and at times undemocratic ethos that characterises many other “problematic” contexts around the world. In general terms, there is still a tendency in the academic community to portray the “Western nation” as one inspired by Enlightenment ideas and based on common citizenship, meaning that a national identity is shared by all those who subscribe to a common political creed regardless of race, colour, religion, or language. It is also considered to be a community that extends equal-rights to minority populations, and whose patriotic attachment is based on a democratic pluralism. Non-Western states on the other hand are usually identified with an

Namibia; Yeoh 1996 on Singapore) and on national territories with interchangeable and disputed geographic borders. Within the context of domination and control of national landscapes, the renaming of places in Greece (see the Pandektis database, *Name Changes of Settlements in Greece*), Eastern Europe (Robinson et al. on Bosnia 2001; Gill on Russia 2005; Nicolae 2000 on Romania; Saparov 2003 on Armenia) and South Africa (Guyot 2007) after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Union and the apartheid respectively, and the place naming strategies used in the formation of the Israeli state (Azaryahu & Golan 2001; Azaryahu & Kook 2002; Cohen & Kliot 1981, 1992) have been repeatedly used to demonstrate not only the effects of politics and culture on the landscape, but also the conflicts inherent within the so-called ethno/cultural nationalist politics. On the other hand, research on Western European contexts has largely been examined within the frames of population governance, governmental rationalities and the construction of places, as well as in relation to population censuses, mapping and the partition of geographic spaces (see Braun 2000 on Canada; Curry et al. 2004; Curry 2005; Elden 2001, 2005; Hannah 2000, 2009 on America and Germany; Mayhew 2009; Pickles 2004; Rose-Redwood 2006, 2008a). These works either deal with settings prior to the development of nationalism, or within the context of totalitarian regimes (Beurard-Valdoye 1996 on the Napoleonic era), the post-WWII period (Yoshioka 2007 on Poland; Azaryahu 1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1997 on divided Germany), the postcolonial settings of Great Britain (Berg & Kearns 1996 on New Zealand; Nash 1999 on Ireland; Withers 2000 on Scotland), and in the contexts of minority nationalisms (Alderman 1996, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003 on the black minorities of the United States; Faraco & Murphy 1997 on Andalusia).

often “irrational” nationalism that is defined by strong emotional attachments to ethnic kinship and other cultural characteristics like language, religion, history, and shared traditions.

Quite critical in this wider discourse on nationalism has been the influential work of Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (1944). Kohn created a dichotomy between “Western” and “non-Western” nationalisms in the respective forms of civic and ethnic nationalism that has since then distanced the political affairs of the West from the rest of the world. According to Kohn, the development of these two types of nationalism is owed to the fact that Western nationalism flourished within a pre-existing political sense of statehood whereas Eastern nationalism developed in the absence of a stable political environment. The former was seen as a democratic process which aspired to overthrow the dynastic rule of the *ancien régime* and unify the citizens under the umbrella of national statehood, and the latter as a separatist and inherently violent movement which aimed to dissolve the multi-ethnic empires of the East and divide populations according to their racial/ethnic and cultural characteristics. Even though subsequent work has disputed this geographic division and maintained that ethnic characteristics persist in civic nationalist constructs (Connor 1994; Hutchinson 1987; Smith 1999, 2000), the “Kohn Dichotomy” has since then been widely used as an analytical tool through which nationalisms can be categorised and placed in broader comparable contexts (Smith 1991: 81), and has cast the Western European civic nationalist movements as benign and progressive and non-Western ethnic nationalisms as malign, problematic and reactionary (McCrone 1998: 74).

Keeping that in mind, modern toponymic research still appears to pursue its research agenda according to this conceptual boundary between the “stable” political processes of Western Europe from what become grouped together as the “troubled” socio-political settings of Eastern and Southern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Processes of renaming spaces and of toponymic “cleansing” thus, end up being viewed mostly in relation to such contested settings as those of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East, while the effects of similar developments in Western Europe are sidelined. In these Western European cases, toponymic research operates within a schema of essentialising a sense of national identity (Wodak et al. 1999) that takes relatively little notice of the fact that place names can be highly charged with political, national, religious, and historical concerns (Johnson 2005; Koutsogiannis & Mitsikopoulou 2003; Schieffelin & Doucet 1998; Sebba 2000). In this context, place names are treated more as a corollary to and an allegory of the historical stability of Western Europe.

An understanding of this development of place name research within the persistent dichotomy of Western and non-Western nationalisms is crucial for explaining the Icelandic toponymic research to date. Even if it is generally acknowledged that the initial antiquarian interest in Icelandic place names was instigated by the nationalist fervour of the nineteenth century, the motives behind the collection and preservation of place names, and any possible processes of renaming and reinventing the national landscape of Iceland, have only been partially considered. This lack of critical inroads into the traditional model of collecting and cataloguing place names in Iceland is connected to the received wisdom of Iceland's place in the historical narrative. Iceland is seen both externally and internally as an uncontested space. Externally, the secession of Iceland from the Danish kingdom in the twentieth century was peaceful and did not have a revolutionary component (Hálfðanarson 2001). Internally, the absence of ethnic minorities, the lack of dialects, and the geographic isolation of the country make it an uncontested territory. In an academic understanding where ethnic nationalism or revolutionary regime change drive the politics of place names, the entanglement of nationalism with toponymy in Iceland could only be seen as a marginal topic of enquiry at best.

But nationalist acts of naming or renaming places do not always entail the violent or radical transformation of place names and place naming practices. Through toponymic inscriptions, nationalism strives to construct a frame of reference and an ontological apparatus that shapes the experience of national subjects through cities, towns, buildings, and other landscapes. This invention of national landscapes constructs a symbolic infrastructure for society and introduces “the ideology of the political order into mundane spheres of human experiences” (Rose-Redwood et al. 2010: 460), and it most often comes into being without ethnic conflicts and violent struggles. The processes of naming or renaming may also be employed to strengthen the relationship between a national language and national territory (Azaryahu & Golan 2001). They attempt to transform “otherwise fluid histories into sanitised, concretised myths that anchor the projection of national identity onto physical territory” (Whelan 2005: 62). The fact that these processes may occur in a peaceful or oblique manner does not mean that they are disengaged from the overall scope and aims of nationalism or that they speak of a more sophisticated version of nationalism. Iceland presents an opportunity to see how these “quieter” nationalist naming processes operate in ethnically homogeneous spaces and uncontested territories as well as in small, peripheral European communities. Taking into consideration de Certeau's claim that “every power is toponymical and initiates

its order of places by naming them” (1984: 130), we now turn our attention to the toponymic practices of Iceland and their entanglement with politics.

6.2 The early beginnings of toponymic research in Iceland

Toponymy gained prominence in Scandinavia at the end of the nineteenth century, when Romantic ideas about the past peaked along with the search for “authentic” national cultures, and experienced a rapid rise in popularity among the academic and scholarly circles of the time (Friðriksson & Vésteinsson 1998). Accordingly, the development of toponymy is intrinsically linked with the development of nationalist rhetorics about language and territory. At the time, place names were viewed as cultural artefacts that retained an unusual historical depth, and as part of the national language, they were thought of as linguistic fragments that embodied certain national characteristics. They furnished the landscape with the traditions and myths of the *Volk* and became an apparatus through which the history of the nation could be reconstructed and displayed. Scholarship on toponymy came to regard historic place names as crucial indicators of identity that tied language, culture, and nation to a specific geography. Within the wider scope of the nationalist project, toponymic research acted as a medium that bridged the nationalist rhetorics on language and territory.

The study of toponymy could thus be used to support any nationalist movement in its efforts to intensify and extend the links of a national group with its territorialised homeland, history, vernacularised culture, and demoticised politics (Hutchinson 2004). Based on the premise that place names retain their historical stability, they came to be regarded as *prima facie* evidence to be rigorously collected, catalogued, and displayed. Consequently, the early works of Scandinavian, as well as European, toponymy focused on the collection and cataloguing of place names, often attempting to associate place names with specific historical figures and events. As Wright stated, in the first half of the twentieth century, a “toponym collector draws up lists of place names and garners details regarding the origin and meaning of each” in ways similar to that of a “botanical collector, whose first interest is in gathering and ticketing specimens” (1929: 140).

One of the most influential studies on Scandinavian toponymy is the work of Norwegian archaeologist and historian, Oluf Rygh (1833–1899), *Norske Gaardnavne* (*Norwegian Farm Names*). As chairman of the Norwegian name commission (*Den Norske Historiske Forening*), Rygh was able to gather fifty thousand place names from

historical sources and surveys. The resulting nineteen volumes contain a wealth of information on pronunciation, etymology, and the historical forms of place names in a standardised notation that is still used as reference material by a number of academics and scholars. Following Rygh's example, the first collection of place names in Denmark appeared in 1922 by Gunnar Knudsen (1848–1928), Viggo Brøndal (1887–1942), and Svend Aakjær (1894–1963), while the works of Adolf Noreen (1854–1925), Valter Jansson (1907–1996), and Jöran Sahlgren (1884–1971) brought toponymic research to the forefront of academic interest in Sweden.

It has been argued that toponymy and onomastics never gained as much prominence as a field of study in Iceland as they did in the rest of Scandinavia (Hovdhaugen et al. 2000). In *The History of Linguistics in the Nordic Countries*, Hovdhaugen et al. attribute the limited interest in toponymy to the fact that Icelanders were able to comprehend the meaning and history of place names without considerable effort. From a linguistic perspective, place names in Iceland were seen as having retained a historical integrity and clarity due to the conservatism of the Icelandic language and were therefore not worthy of further study. To that extent, toponymic research was mostly relegated to the frames of history and archaeology (Hovdhaugen et al. 2000: 257).

Even if it lacked the linguistic aspects of Scandinavian toponymics, Icelandic toponymy developed concurrently alongside them during that same nineteenth-century peak of the Romantic nationalist rhetoric. This meant that place name research in Iceland was cultivated alongside an ever-increasing interest in the sagas and antiquity, where it came to complement and enhance the various attempts to survey, describe, and understand the historical landscape of Iceland.⁴³ In this context, place names came to function as reliable sources that corroborated and enhanced the credibility of the sagas as historical accounts (Friðriksson & Vésteinsson 1998: 17, 22).

Even though large-scale studies comparable to Rygh's in Norway were never produced in Iceland, the early works of Björn M. Ólsen on *Undirfell* and Eggert Ó. Brím's monograph on farm names in 1881 and 1893, respectively, attest to the increased scholarly

⁴³ The first collection of relevant essays appears in *Safn til sögu Íslands og Íslenzkra bókmenta að fornu og nýju* (1886).

interest on place names.⁴⁴ Alongside these works, the rigorous gathering of place names had been proposed by Helgi Sigurðsson (1815–1888), the priest of *Melar* in *Melasveit*, as early as 1886. As an avid collector of antiquities, Sigurðsson viewed place names as the living monuments of the Saga Age. Similarly, one of the aims of the newly established Icelandic Archaeological Society (1879), *Hið íslenska fornleifafélag*s, was the collection of place names as part of the society's research on historical places.

The first systematic attempt to gather and catalogue place names came from philologist and literary theorist Finnur Jónsson (1858–1934). In *Bæjarnöfn á Íslandi* (*Farm Names in Iceland*), Jónsson classified place names according to the common landscape features they referred to, motivated by the will to demonstrate the ways in which the national history of Iceland was inscribed on the landscape. Influenced by the work of Oluf Rygh, Jónsson gathered his primary material from the *Landnámabók*, *Sturlunga saga* and the *Íslendingasögur*, as well as from land registers (*Jarðabækur*), and other types of documents and archives. His emphasis was on the categorisation of farm names, where he provided notes on each category and interpreted individual place names. In doing so, he often identified personal names and nicknames in them and tried to attach place names to certain individuals and historical events.

According to Jónsson and others, place names were essential in demonstrating the continuity of the Icelandic national community from the time of the Settlement to the present day and for highlighting the unnatural relationship of the country with its foreign Danish occupiers. Most of the early works on Icelandic toponymy aimed in the same way to strengthen the bond between contemporary place names and saga literature, especially with *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements). Within the frames of identifying the early settlement patterns of Iceland, place names were used to pinpoint the exact locations that the early settlers chose to inhabit, as recorded in the purportedly twelfth-century text. Following in these first footsteps of Jónsson, farm names would become one of the major preoccupations in toponymic studies.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

This importance of place names for Icelandic identity is demonstrated by professor and first rector of the university of Iceland, Björn M. Ólsen when he exclaimed in a 1910 issue of *Skirnir*, the Journal of the Icelandic Literary Society:⁴⁵

But what are we doing, Icelanders? Don't we have any place names? Yes we do, and in no other place as much as in this country where almost every lump on the ground has its own name. So can we not put Icelandic place names to good use for the Icelandic language and ethnicity? Certainly, a lot! Many of them contain old words and personal names, which are otherwise missing from the language; many shed a bright light over the way of life and the traditions of our fathers. Many are admittedly so clear that they require little or no explanation; yet again, some are so dark and some are so garbled in the mouths of men that the right definition is very complex and intertwined with difficulties. These will not be overcome, unless we apply all the weapons that modern science possesses. (Ólsen 1910: 367, my translation).⁴⁶

Quite interestingly, Ólsen's words do not only reveal the assigned importance of place names in the nationalist rhetoric of the time, but also the resonance of the early Icelandic toponymic research with the nineteenth and early twentieth-century rhetoric on the aesthetics and purity of the Icelandic language. Contrary to the view expressed by Hovdhaugen et al. (2000) that the conservatism of the Icelandic language had ensured the historical and linguistic stability of place names, early Icelandic toponymic research was pervaded by a sense that the historical continuity of place names had been distorted by the laziness and apathy of Icelanders (Jónsson 1921). According to Margeir Jónsson (1921: 12), Icelanders were apathetic to their identity as a national group, and he accused the people who could not

⁴⁵ In the Norse mythology, Skírnir was the servant and messenger of the god Freyr. It translates as the "Bright One."

⁴⁶ "Enn hvað gerum við Íslendingar? Eigum við engin örnefni? Jú, hvergi mun um auðugri garð að gresja í því efni enn hjer á landi, þar sem svo að segja hver þúfa á sitt nafn. Er þá ekkert á íslenskum örnefnum að græða fyrir íslenska tungu og íslenskt þjóðerni? Jú, stórmikið! Mörg af þeim hafa að geima eldgömul orð og mannanöfn, sem annars eru tínd úr málinu, mörg varpa skæru ljósi ífir lífnaðarháttu og síðu feðra vorra. Mörg eru að vísu svo ljós, að þau þurfa lítillar eða engrar skíringar við, enn aftur eru sum svo mirk og sum svo afbökuð orðin í munnni manna, að rjett skíring er mjög vandasöm og svo miklum erviðleikum háð, að þeir verða ekki ífir stignir, nema beitt sje öllum þeim vopnum sem vísindi nútímans eiga ífir að ráða" (Ólsen 1910: 367).

pronounce the names of places correctly of being verbally lazy (*latmæli*). This characterisation coincided with the nationalist rhetoric about the Icelandic language that saw those who did not pronounce words in a proper manner as deficient and uncivilised.

This narrative of decay meant that place names would be subjected to “official” corrections and alterations. One of the first works that sought to standardise or correct the spelling of place names and provide an adequate explanation of their origins is the article *Rannsóknir byggðaleifa upp frá Hrunamannahreppi sumarið 1895*, by Brynjúlfur Jónsson. Published in the Yearbook of the Icelandic Archaeological Society in 1896, Brynjúlfur’s work has been criticised for not using appropriate historical sources for the corrections he had made. His approach is nonetheless illustrative of the early attempts of the Icelandic nationalist project to align the names of places according to the prevailing national linguistic standards of the time.

The subsequent work of Margeir Jónsson in the 1920s is also characteristic of the nationalistic scholarship that pervaded the toponymic research of the early twentieth century. Published in a series of books and articles named *Torskilin bæjanöfn (Obscure Farm Names)*, he provided explanations for the names of those farms that were thought of as distorted or corrupted and thus difficult to understand. According to the author, such farm names as *Rass*, *Brók*, *Mígandi*, *Viðbjóður*, *Vitleysa*, and *Geldingur* were offensive, ugly, and immoral.⁴⁷ They were inconsistent with the otherwise historical and noble landscape of Iceland, and they denigrated the Icelandic culture and language. Names like these were in line with neither the nationalist aesthetics of the Icelandic language nor the Romantic Icelandic historical narrative, a stance made clear in Jónsson’s various statements where he characterised such place names as “filth on swan feathers” (“líkt og saur á svanaþjóðrum”) or as dirty spots on a beautiful costume. According to Jónsson, these spots had to be “washed off as soon as possible” (Jónsson 1920: 170).⁴⁸

The discussion of historical and linguistic obscurity of certain place names did not revolve solely around derogatory and offensive names but came to encompass any name that

⁴⁷ Translated as, Rump, Trousers (or Underwear), Pissing (most likely referring to heavy rain), Disgusting Thing, Nonsense, Gelding (referring to the castration of rams).

appeared to have been altered or distorted. The restoration of a grammatical and etymological integrity to place names was one of the major concerns of Icelandic toponymy and often spurred lengthy debates. One such instance involved the work of state archivist, Hannes Þorsteinsson, titled *Rannsókn og leiðrjettingar á nokkrum bæjanöfnum á Íslandi* (*Research and corrections in few place names in Iceland* 1923). Þorsteinsson was criticising state officials for not taking into consideration his recommendations during the compilation of *Fasteignabókin* (book of real estate). He spoke of the role that old documents and records should have in the search for ancient place names and advocated for the restoration of distorted place names to their original state. Even though Þorsteinsson's work largely coincided with the research of Finnur Jónsson, a heated debate ensued between the two scholars regarding the grammar and historical accuracy of place names (Lárusdóttir 2007). Finnur Jónsson criticised the work of Hannes Þorsteinsson for correcting only a limited number of place names and for not providing adequate explanations of their meaning and historical origins, while Þorsteinsson largely doubted the role of grammar in understanding the historical importance of place names.⁴⁹

Given the impetus of the time toward not only linguistic restoration but purity, similar debates on the status of place names of foreign origins also took place. As early as 1930, Ragnar Ásgeirsson pushed for the replacement of foreign place names with Icelandic ones. As he wrote in the journal *Skinfaxi*⁵⁰: “Not so long ago I received an issue of *Skinfaxi*, where Kristján from Garðsstaðir recommends that we should change old place names to their appropriate name (in the Icelandic language). Most will agree that it is wrong to keep the names that foreign authorities chose for our country with very little understanding of the local conditions (meaning the geology of Iceland) and our nation” (Ásgeirsson 1930: 20–21). Seven years later, Magnús Finnbogason projected similar concerns in *Skírnir*: “[...] a considerable amount of place names are of foreign origin, especially the ones from later centuries in towns and villages, i.e., *Sorgenfri* and *Sölyst* in Vestmannaeyjar. It could be very interesting to

⁴⁹ The differences between the two scholars largely arose from the fact that Þorsteinsson did not quote Jónsson in his work. Nonetheless, what truly distinguished the two scholars is that Þorsteinsson saw the distortion of place names as the result of linguistic *deterioration*, while Jónsson viewed their deformation as the consequence of language *development* (Lárusdóttir 2007).

⁵⁰ The journal is named after the horse that pulls *Dagr* (Day) through the sky in Nordic mythology. *Skinfaxi* aimed to culturally cultivate the young Icelandic population on national matters.

research these place names, when they were formed and their origin”⁵¹ (Finnbogason 1937: 191). This departure of Icelandic toponymic research from the vantage point of linguistic purity would signal the development of place name studies within the frames of a nationalistic scholarship on the Icelandic language.

6.3 Later developments

The work of early antiquarians and grammarians on Icelandic toponymy created a strong scholarly tradition that set the agenda for future research. Since the early twentieth century, the study of toponymy in Iceland has primarily focused on the collection, classification, and the historic origins of place names. From the *Bibliographia Onomastica*, published in the journal *Onoma* in the 1960s, to the preparation of a handbook on place names and the Icelandic language (Sigmundsson 2011), Icelandic place name studies have continued to focus on the collection and preservation of names. This documentary sense has meant that place names have been viewed as crucial pieces of information that strengthen historical and archaeological interpretations in ways similar to geology, geography, and cartography.⁵²

While most scholars and academics acknowledge that the roots of modern Icelandic toponymy lie in the nationalist fervour of the nineteenth century there is only minimal scholarly consideration on place names as the products of particular socio-political and economic circumstances, including nationalism. On the contrary, the state’s protectionist attitude towards place names and the conservative course of modern toponymic scholarship have both relied heavily on the alleged historical stability of place names and, in many respects, have reflected the nationalist concerns that pervaded the early Icelandic toponymic

⁵¹ “Loks má geta þess, að talsvert af örnefnum mun vera af útlendum rótum runnið, einkum örnefni frá síðari öldum í kaupstöðum og þorpum; má til dæmis nefna Örnefni eins og Sorgenfri og Sölyst í Vestmannaeyjum. Gæti verið mjög fróðlegt að athuga slík örnefni, svo sem hvenær þau hafi myndast og hvaðan þau sé runnin.” (Magnús Finnbogason. 1937. Um örnefnarannsóknir. *Skírnir. Tímarit hins íslenska bókmenntafélags*. 111. Árgangur. 1. Tlb. Bls. 191. Hið íslenska bókmenntafjelag. Editor, Guðmundur Finnbogason. Reykjavík.)

⁵² Not all Icelandic academic work on place names revolves around the justification of historical and archaeological facts. One of the most controversial and well-known place-name studies was conducted by Þórhallur Vilmundarson. In his *Náttúrunafnakenningin (Nature-Name Theory)*, he postulated that most places bearing the names of historical figures were actually named after natural phenomena. His theory caused uproar in the academic community, as it questioned the historical veracity of the Icelandic medieval literature.

works.

This conservatism of contemporary Icelandic toponymics is reflected in the larger Scandinavian and Western European trends in the twentieth century. In the early 1960s, Krahe's (1964) stance on the stability and old age of place names and Wainwright's (1962: 92, 56) suggestion that place name data constitute direct proof of language patterns and speech habits was the main theoretical trend in Western European toponymy. More than thirty years later, Gelling (1978, 1984, 1988) and Clark (1992) attributed the survival of place names to their internal consistency. They suggested that the key to this consistency is the survival of a place name's "referent," whether it is a geographical feature, a settlement, or an institution. Without any alterations of the referent, they maintain that a place name will remain stable in its original meaning (Gelling 1988: 60; Krahe 1964: 9). The work of Krahe, Wainwright, and others is commonly cited in the works of Icelandic toponymy by several place name specialists and a variety of academics including historians, archaeologists, and geologists.

The historical stability of Icelandic place names is generally supported by grammatical, etymological, and other linguistic evidence, meaning that the perceived historical depth of language itself is conscripted to prove the stability of place names. As an integral part of any given language, the fact that place names can be subject to changes in the language has been tackled in various ways by Icelandic toponymists. Svavar Sigmundsson (1972) suggested, for example, that Icelandic place names change harmoniously with general linguistic trends and thus constitute an important source for understanding the development of the Icelandic language. Alteration and disappearance of place names can also be related to the decline of their functional use, prompted by other social and economic changes like farming practices, the transformation of places into arable land, and the introduction of new technologies (Gísladóttir & Jónsdóttir 2007). For Olsen (1966) and Brink (1983), names that are less prone to be changed or linguistically altered are those that retain a cultural—and by extension, historical—familiarity and those that refer to certain landscape features such as mountains, rivers, glaciers, and isolated areas. More recently, Stefan Brink's analysis of the meaning of words and names has prompted him to state that onomastics and, more specifically, toponymy reflect the history of language. Upon this premise, Brink (1992) and Vésteinnsson (2007) have tried to shed light on the cultural and social history of Iceland with the use of grammatical treatises and other documentation.

It is also noteworthy that a large part of the Icelandic toponymic research has concentrated on the most “significant” category of place names—the names of farms. These are often catalogued in ways that are identical to those of the early antiquarians. Various works have dealt specifically with the compilation of place names in particular regions (Sigmundsson 2000, 2006, 2007; Tetzschner 2006), while other attempts continue to link historical figures to certain locations by the presence of personal names in place names (Sigmundsson 1972, 2002; Sigmundsson, Kvaran & Jónsson 1986). One recent development in the field has been to trace the similarities of place names within Scandinavia and the Celtic world in an effort to reveal patterns of settlements, migration, and cultural contact (Sigmundsson 1998; Waugh 1987). Other works concentrate on those farm and other place names that may reveal different aspects of societal organisation, such as patterns of administration, the Christian faith, and warfare (Sigmundsson 1992, 2009). Based on the premise that place names “can survive very long among the people, even centuries without them being registered” (Gísladóttir & Jónsdóttir 2007: 1), they have come to be perceived as an important source that speaks of the Icelandic culture, history, language and the natural landscape (Brink 1983, 1992, 1999, 2007; Hallgrímsson 1970; Sigmundsson 1972, 1990; Vilmundarson 1969).

Outside of small shifts in the academic focus, the national dialogue on place names is still controlled by a narrative that, without the appropriate care, historic place names will deteriorate and eventually disappear. In the 1950s, this fear had prompted the annual meeting of the Icelandic Archaeology Society to state that “in recent years too many place [and especially farm names] name changes have taken place and they challenge those parties concerned to prevent these changes, unless there are very important reasons at hand”⁵³ (*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags* 1954: 69). This view was reflected in an act of parliament (no. 35/1953) that gave an increased role and responsibility over the place naming process to a place name committee. The committee would be responsible for receiving notifications and proposals of new names and name changes and consider them for approval. It would also rule

⁵³ “Aðalfundur Hins íslenska fornleifafélags, haldinn 30. 12. 1953, ályktar, að á undanförunum árum hafi breytingar á gömlum íslenskum bæjarnöfnum gengið lengra en góðu hófi gegnir, og beinir þeirri áskorun til rétttra hlutaðeigenda, að þeir komi í veg fyrir slíkt, nema mjög mikilvægar ástæður séu fyrir hendi” 1954. *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags. Skýrslur. I. Aðalfundur 1953*. Vol. 53, p. 69. Hið íslenska fornleifafélag, Reykjavík.)

on the names to be placed on the map issued by the National Land Survey of Iceland, make decisions concerning new municipality, farm and street names, and settle any disputes and controversies that might arise during the process. The committee's most important task however, was to ensure that the change of place names and the new proposed ones complied with the traditions of place naming and conformed to the Icelandic grammar and terminology (Arnastofnun, 1999, Regulation no. 136 on place names). From that time onwards, place names could not be changed without the permission of the committee. Farm owners, towns and municipalities would have to explain the reasons for requesting the termination of older names and the motives behind the choice of a new name.

This state concern over naming practices and their relation to the language has not dissipated in the decades since independence. It was reiterated by parliament in a 1998 law (no. 45/1998) which specified the role of the place name committee to collect place-names, study them, publish registers, and create an easily accessible digital inventory that prioritises the listing of farm names. The law also states that any new names must conform to Icelandic language standards and follow place-naming traditions at both the national and local level. As recently as 2013, the topic was taken up again, putting the argument for preservation into the modern idiom of cultural heritage and the effects of globalisation. The proposed bill of 2013 (no. 1076/141) revised the 1953 law in light of "changes in living conditions, a large increase in the number of legal estates and farms outside towns, small towns and villages" (Bill on Place Names 2012-2013, Comments on the Bill, section I). It repeated and expanded upon the historical importance of place names and cited the challenges presented by recent economic developments and technological trends:

Place names are part of the cultural heritage of the Icelandic nation as many of them have been preserved ever since the first decades of residence in the country. The bill provides significant changes aimed primarily at promoting the protection of this heritage and ensuring that it will be delivered intact to future generations. Efforts have been made for a hundred years on collecting and researching names, and place names have been considered as one of the strongest pillars of the Icelandic cultural heritage and national consciousness. The preservation of this kind of cultural heritage by UNESCO is considered as an important driving force of cultural diversity. At the same time, there is a risk that globalization and various social changes in our modern times will cause the loss

of this cultural heritage. Should the bill be passed, it will help promote the preservation of traditional names as much as possible and ensure that new place names will not be introduced in places where historical names are available. It also guarantees that naming traditions will be honoured and the formation of new place names will be in accordance with the Icelandic grammar and language conventions. (Bill on Place Names 2012-2013, Comments on the Bill, section IV).⁵⁴

The goal of the government in this bill and the act on place names two years later (no. 22/2015) is to ensure that historic place names are treated as an indisputable part of an Icelandic national heritage that links the Icelandic language and literary heritage to the geographic boundaries of the country.

This enduring relationship between Icelandic toponymy and the philological discourse on language and literary heritage is sustained by the fact that the Icelandic Place-Name Institute is under the umbrella of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, which recently merged the former Place-Name Institute of the National Museum with the literary and language organisations of the Icelandic Language Institute, the University Dictionary, the Árni Magnússon, and the Sigurður Nordal Institutes. The Árni Magnússon Institute cooperates closely with the Icelandic Language Council, which is responsible for shaping public policy on language and aims for the collection, preservation of, and research on Icelandic manuscripts, ethnological material, documents, place names, and the Icelandic vocabulary (Stefna - Policy of the Árni Magnússon Institute n.d., para 3).

⁵⁴ “Örnefni eru hluti af menningarminjum íslensku þjóðarinnar og hafa mörg hver varðveist frá fyrstu tíð búsetu í landinu. Í frumvarpinu er kveðið á um mikilvægar breytingar sem miða fyrst og fremst að því að stuðla að verndun þessara minja og að þeim verði skilað óspilltum til komandi kynslóða. Unnið hefur verið markvisst í hundrað ár við að safna örnefnum og rannsaka þau hér á landi og örnefni hafa jafnlengi verið talin meðal styrkustu stöða menningararfsins og íslenskrar þjóðarvitundar. Viðhald menningararfða af þessu tagi er af Menningarmálastofnun Sameinuðu þjóðanna (e. UNESCO) talið vera mikilvæg driffjöldur menningarlegrar fjölbreytni. Jafnframt er hætta á að alþjóðavæðing og ýmis félagsleg umbrot í nútímanum verði til þess að menningararfðir glattist. Verði frumvarpið að lögum mun það stuðla að því að hefðbundin örnefni verði varðveitt eftir því sem framast er unnt og að ný örnefni verði ekki innleidd þar sem arfbundin nöfn eru til staðar. Frumvarpið stuðlar jafnframt að því að nafngiftahefðir séu í heiðri hafðar við myndun nýrra örnefna og þau séu í samræmi við íslenska málfræði og málvenju.”

Through the creation of a detailed record of Icelandic linguistic and literary heritage, the Árni Magnússon Institute aims to conduct and promote academic research on Icelandic topics and provide a platform from which to educate the public on issues concerning the Icelandic language, folklore, and written sources. With an ever-expanding list of place names and a research agenda that increasingly intertwines individual place names with national maps, aerial photographs, GIS technology, and other literary and historical sources, the place name division uses toponymy as a linguistic resource that relates individual texts and words with the social, political and historical processes of the nation.

This development testifies to the continued entanglement of Icelandic toponymic research with the discourse on language and ancient literature. In doing so, the scholarly focus on the historical origins of place names has endowed the process of toponymic study with an out-of-date antiquarianism, while place names themselves are often seen as educational tools, a perception that relies heavily on a perceived link between place names and language, tradition, history, and the national landscape. This perpetuates the view that place names are cultural relics and “one of the strongest pillars of the Icelandic cultural heritage and national consciousness” while it also echoes the official rhetoric that perceives changes in the language as corrosive and detrimental.

6.4 Proclaiming the nation

The pervasiveness of this rhetoric and its corollaries means that the academic works that have analysed Icelandic place names as products of particular socio-political circumstances are few and far between. That is not to say that they do not exist. As early as the mid-1960s, the work of Danish historian and archaeologist Olaf Olsen on ancient Scandinavian cult-buildings, *Hørg, hov og kirke*, noted that the number of place names bearing the suffix *-hov* or *-hof*, literally meaning “temple,” had increased considerably during the second half of the nineteenth century. Olsen (1966) explained this as a reflection of the growing interest in antiquities inspired by national Romanticism and the aspiration to establish a narrative of Icelandic history that was able to measure itself against the history of the dominant European states.

More recently, Birna Lárusdóttir’s 2007 article *Bæjanöfn brotin til mergjar: Örnefnaskýringar á fyrri hluta 20. aldar* discusses the problems and debates that followed the first systematic collection of Icelandic place names in the 1920s and makes a number of

associations with those debates and the nationalist discourse of the early twentieth century. In *Að nema land með nafni* (2017), Lárusdóttir also recounts the controversy over naming the new island of *Surtsey* after the volcanic eruption in the Vestmannaeyjar archipelago during the 1960s. The official decision to name the new island after the Norse mythological figure *Surtur* was met with resistance from the local Vestmannaeyjar community. When the proposal of the nearby island community to name the new island *Vesturey* was rejected, several members of the community sailed to the island and walked ashore with signs bearing the name they considered more fit than the official one (Lárusdóttir 2017: 172). According to Lárusdóttir, the controversy over the name was an act of state dominance, where state officials, scholars, and place name committee members inscribed the new landscape with a name derived from Nordic mythology while neglecting the wishes of the local population. On a related note, Jón Karl Helgason's chapter *Njáls saga and urban development* in his *The Rewriting of Njáls Saga: Translation, Ideology and Icelandic Sagas* (1999) addresses the naming of the streets of a Reykjavík neighbourhood after one of the *Íslendingasögur*, and the ways in which that part of the urban landscape becomes infused with a national mythology. In doing so, Helgason discusses the overall discourse and controversies on the Icelandic sagas and the role they played in this set of toponymic inscriptions.

These two works not only capture the political scope of place naming in the making but also attest to the ways in which place naming has been a contested process in Iceland. Both Lárusdóttir and Helgason identify the socio-political agents and ideologies behind these contemporary toponymic inscriptions. Similar tensions between official priorities and local stakeholders are evident in a 1940s public debate waged between two readers of the women's journal *Nýtt kvennablað* and the professor of linguistics Björn Guðfinnsson.⁵⁵ The discussion revolved around the aesthetic qualities of the so-called “ugly” or “inappropriate” place names and whether it was preferable to replace them with ones that were more aesthetically pleasing as well as ones that reflected the contemporary realities of the Icelandic nation.

The correspondence between the three began on November 1, 1942, with an article by Guðrún Stefánsdóttir and concluded on May 5, 1943, with the intervention of Björn

⁵⁵ Professor Björn Guðfinnsson is known for tracing the roots of a linguistic deviation known as *flámæli*, “slanted speech,” and devising a teaching method to eradicate the phenomenon. Through phonetic training, young “children from particular ‘sound-mistake-families’ (*hljóðviltar fjölskyldur*) received special attention” (Pálsson 1995: 131), halting the “disintegration” of their linguistic abilities.

Guðfinnsson. Entitled *Nöfn og ónefni (Names and Ugly Names)*, Guðrún Stefánsdóttir began her page-long article by posing the following questions: “Where does the national story take place? Where do the threads of the nation’s destiny come from?” She answered these questions by first drawing attention to the role of mothers and their duty to teach children how to use language in an appropriate manner. She claims that “mothers do not speak enough to their children,” and protests that they pay too little attention to the language skills of their children. But Stefánsdóttir does not think that mothers are the only ones to blame, putting a fair share of responsibility on the education system. In her view, schools pay too much attention to arranging their classrooms according to age: “This arrangement keeps the best children down, and they become *stupid* because they are bored of the continuous repetition, and all their interest disappears.”

Mothers are, however, solely responsible for giving their children—and especially their daughters—nicknames such as *Gógó* and *Lilla*. For Stefánsdóttir, this is an important source in the deterioration of language: the shortening of names teaches children how to deform language later in life. This becomes apparent in the common practice of shortening words and appending *-ó* or *-i* to them. This bad habit is mostly found in young girls, Stefánsdóttir says, and she quotes a school principal in the town of Akranes, Svafa Þorleifsdóttir, who had previously stated that, “women are more likely than men to use strange language (*málskrípi*), especially when they are young. It seems like young girls, at any time, feel it is important to pick up strange language that’s going around on the street.” An exasperated Stefánsdóttir blames the use of foreign words and derivatives such as “*Esperantó*” and “*Bíó*” (short for cinema) as another source of the habit.

Having laid this groundwork, Stefánsdóttir turns her attention to place names. Her apparent conservatism in matters of language is quickly replaced by a more liberal attitude when it comes to toponymy. “Whilst travelling and reading the news, I have noticed how poor the Icelandic place and town names are,” she states. According to Stefánsdóttir, such names “cast a shadow on the parties [inhabitants] concerned, make a mockery out of them, or cause the feeling that one has to pity them.” Even though “there is some reluctance in changing them,” she recommends that teachers should “investigate their own county and get the parish and rural district councils to change these terrible distasteful names (*ónefni*).” For Stefánsdóttir, these names that allude to peasant farms are also misleading, since most of the occupants are no longer peasants but wealthy and educated. She believes that place names

bearing the suffix *-kot* (cottage) are no longer representative of the Icelandic population. Stefánsdóttir abruptly ends her article by urging the “honoured housewives and farmers – you who live at these farms, teachers and purists” to “work together and eliminate ugly place names.”

Eufemía Waage’s response came in a homonymous article on January 1, 1943. Waage shares Stefánsdóttir’s concern that the Icelandic language has deteriorated but also reflects on the practical difficulties entailed by any solution that would involve rearranging classrooms according to the abilities of the students. While she equally dislikes the shortening of names and the extensive use of nicknames, she is a little more forbearing, noting that it is a very old practice. As she states, “many of these [nicknames] have become proper nouns and some foreign names have been adapted to Icelandic, but I cannot help but say that some of these girl names like *Gó-gó*, *Dídí*, *Stella* and *Lilla* are boring and lack inventiveness. If they are only used amongst family members then they are harmless.” Regarding the common habit of shortened forms and the suffix *-ó*, she also wishes to “enlighten people that it does not come from *Esperantó* or the word *Bíó*, but from a harmless house here in town [Reykjavík], *Iðnó*. People in town thought *Iðnaðarmannahúsið* was too long and therefore cut it down to *Iðnó*.” But “enough of this,” she says, as she wishes to concentrate on the issue upon which she mostly disagrees with Stefánsdóttir—that of place names.

According to Waage, “we would find these names beautiful if their origins and meaning were known to us [...] I also do not think it is right to change the names that our forefathers gave to their childhood farms and regions with love and devotion.” Place names such as “*Pelamörk*, *Kjölur*, *Barðaströnd*, *Sogn* and *Svignaskarð*, which now has been named *Svignaskarð*” reflect this love. At the same time, the fact that some of these place names resemble the names of towns in Norway may mean that they are associated with the first Norwegian settlers of Iceland. “Regarding the discussion about [peasant] cottages,” on the other hand, she feels that “we need to rethink our view on them before erasing this ancient name from the language [...] In English this word, cot or cottage [*kot*], has a nice homely reference but that is exactly what it means, a small farm or a tenancy.” That said, she believes that some of these place names were possibly given to places by wealthy farmers, and that they may be evidence of the ways in which wealthy farmers “look down on the cottage [peasant] farmers and give their farms disdainful names.” She feels that “these names could be changed, but it needs to be someone who has knowledge of history as well as grammar so

that the names will not all be dismissed in thin air.” Waage closes with a personal experience: “I remember from my childhood when a big farmer changed the name of his farm. His name was *Þorlákur* from *Hvammkot* [Grassy hollow cottage]. He used to be a member of parliament. I assume that he found *-kot* not very respectable. He picked up an older name of the farm, *Fífuhvammur* [Cotton grass hollow].” But she has said enough already: “Now I have gone on for too long and for that I apologize,” she says, and closes her article.

The correspondence concluded on June 5, with the intervention of Professor Björn Guðfinnsson in his own article with the same title—*Nöfn og ónefni*. According to Guðfinnsson, Guðrún Stefánsdóttir had requested his response on the subject. He concedes that this is rather hard, since the matter is so extensive, and proceeds to make the following comment:

What drew my attention when reading these articles was not the issue discussed, even though it is important, but that they were written by women. It is not every day that one reads an article on the subject of grammar by a woman. But since both articles are well written and entertaining, this should be celebrated. It would be good if the editors of *Nýtt kvennablað* could have it as a custom to write small articles about the language – and of course most of them should be written by women. It is surely a great necessity these days to inspire women, especially young girls to think about language [*íslenzkt mál*]. What destiny awaits the language when mothers only have coffeehouse lingo and pop songs to offer their young ones? (1943: 10–11).⁵⁶

Following this observation, Guðfinnsson notes that when it comes to naming, Waage is a conservative, while Stefánsdóttir holds rather liberal views. He believes that “conservatism is not good if it leads to a hard-line reactionary conservatism and liberalism is only acceptable when it does not lead to carelessness.” He states that “the middle ground is the best way to go.” With that comment, he dives into the subject of place names.

He begins with the view of the grammarian that “place names are a remarkable part of a nation’s language. A chapter of its history, at times very amusing and educational. You cannot read it like a novel as it requires great thinking and considerable knowledge. A person

⁵⁶ The bold lettering appears in the original.

who does not know the meaning of words can be very puzzled when visiting a beautiful place [...] But another, who is well informed about the origins of words and the history of the nation, will not be as confused.” If someone who has little knowledge of the origins of names comes across the farm *Kurfi* in the county of *Húnavatnssýsla* for example, he might be astonished by the fact that such a beautiful farm bears such a tasteless name. Yet, the one who has knowledge will recognise that the name “is good and old and has its history.” To that extent, the grammarian insists that “people should not judge those place names they do not understand. If they do so, their explanations can be more bizarre than the names themselves. Another way of looking at this: by only using words that are simple and easy to understand will make people stupid. It halts their independent thinking.”

Guðfinnsson then takes a stance on the matter of *-kot* names: “I do think that there are too many *hjáleigur* and *kot* in some parts of the country,”⁵⁷ he states, and provides a list of place names bearing the suffixes *-hjáleiga* and *-kot* in the district of Rangárvallasýsla in order to show that such names are characterless, poor and unnecessary. In conclusion, “there is some need for change.” When choosing a new name however, “one has to do it tastefully if one wants to succeed.” He therefore advises that one should look at the old place names of farms that have already gone through the renaming process as a guide. Guðfinnsson brings his contribution to a close by saying that “these matters need to be studied and we cannot jump into any conclusion. The most important thing is not to let the impulse of a few prude men rule the name-giving.” We have “to do it with sensible consideration and ease.”

The correspondence between the two readers of *Nýtt kvennablað* and the linguist illustrates the entanglement of language politics with place names and the ways in which this was reflected in the public discourse. Despite Guðfinnsson’s portrayal of Stefánsdóttir and Waage as liberal and conservative, they both share the conservative view of language that had been advanced in the early nationalist rhetoric. They both accept the idea that the Icelandic language was deteriorating. But they differ in that Stefánsdóttir embraces the change of place names when this comes with a change of circumstances. Taking into consideration that by the 1940s, Iceland was modernising at a rapid pace, her words reveal a wish to leave behind a grim past of landlords and peasants. For Stefánsdóttir, the disappearance of the landlord-

⁵⁷ The term *hjáleiga* (pl. *-ur*) refers to lower status, small farms carved out of the land of larger farms. The term *kot* refers to small farms.

peasant relationship also meant having to erase it from the landscape. New place names should coincide with the status and aesthetics of a growing educated and wealthy middle class. Even though Waage finds Stefánsdóttir's suggestions quite bold, she nonetheless attributes the place names bearing the suffix *-kot* to wealthy landowners and the ways they denigrated their peasant tenants, finding that same penury and inequality in the landscape.

Beyond the discussion of place names themselves, Guðfinnsson's patronising tone should not pass without mention. If the language "deteriorates" further he states, Icelandic mothers will only have the lingo of the coffeehouse and the cinema theatre to pass on to their children (1943: 11). And even though he finds it encouraging that some women can discuss such intellectual subjects as grammar and history, he casts the "conservatism" of Waage on the one hand, and the "liberalism" of Stefánsdóttir on the other as qualities that may get out of hand. Guðfinnsson agrees that renaming may be merited, but only in certain cases and always according to rational thought and a "lack of zealotry" (1943: 11). Guðfinnsson represents himself as the rational, male voice of the state. He is, after all, the state's arbitrator. He is not only the one who decides which aspects of language should be consecrated and canonised but also the one who determines what the public will assimilate and reproduce in all aspects of life by defining the "legitimate" version of the national language.

6.5 Frames of Reference

Traditional toponymic research views place names as cultural relics of historical and linguistic significance. In doing so, the fact that place naming is a social act that is intimately involved in power relations has been largely neglected. But critical works that have challenged traditional place-name research have their own shortcomings. In its attempts to illustrate the entanglement of nationalism with place naming, "critical toponymy" has addressed a number of clear-cut case studies in some of the most politically troubled areas in the world. At the same time, it has largely neglected the ways in which Western European nationalisation projects used toponymy to define their own national geographies and identities. Unless place names and naming practices are dramatically contested in a manner that challenges the physical reality of populations and unsettles the socio-political organisation of places, toponymic inscriptions are usually understood as historically intact, or as having grown organically alongside language in a way that smoothly mediated popular sentiments and political desires. The resistance to challenging this view is related to the ways in which nationalism itself has been approached. The paradigm of civic and ethnic

nationalisms still holds an academic currency that influences the scholarly choices, quality, and general flow of toponymic research.

Proclaiming the nation through toponymy however, does not always involve a radical or violent transformation of place names. Critical toponymy can also be applied in contexts that appear to have retained historically intact toponymic practices or place names that allegedly carry a historical and linguistic depth and integrity. One obvious manifestation of this entanglement between nationalism and toponymy in Iceland is the fact that the early interest in place names was largely driven by nineteenth-century nationalist sentiments. Later developments in toponymic research and the legal restrictions on place names also bear the marks of the same underlying nationalist discourse. In this context, the endurance of the nationalist rhetoric in Iceland and the larger Eurocentric discourse of stability serve to discourage critical toponymy from examining Icelandic place-naming practices.

The fact that the entanglement of nationalism and toponymy in allegedly uncontested settings such as Iceland is not overt does not necessarily mean that it is not present. Nationalism does not always rewrite histories and invest landscapes with new meanings in radical ways. As landscapes have traditionally been a medium through which mythology, personal or collective memories, and oral histories have passed down from generation to generation, nationalism simply has to mobilise those toponymic inscriptions, traditions, and practices in service of the idea it wishes to materialise. Both the idea of the nation and the landscape provide frames of reference through which people can navigate their memories and experiences, as well as their political and social existence, making toponymy a political practice par excellence for the nation (Pinchevski & Torgovnik 2002).

The issue in Iceland is not how place names may reflect an official national program of renaming, as might be the case in politically unstable regions, but instead how place names have been conscripted to the Icelandic nationalist discourse. Iceland has never gone through a drastic process of renaming similar to the nationalising projects of Eastern Europe and the Balkans or any other contested territories in the world. Place name “corrections,” and changes, or the choice of new “appropriate” names for places in line with a national history and mythology have taken place, but such processes are usually considered innocent and inconspicuous. This does not mean that there has not been a discourse and anxiety around place names. Rather, that discourse and anxiety about place name preservation, purification, and other changes have been strongly regulated by a nationalist agenda.

This point of convergence between nationalism and toponymy is manifested in the correspondence between Stefánsdóttir, Waage, and Guðfinnsson in *Nýtt kvennablað*. Despite their disagreements, the larger understanding of historicity of the so-called inappropriate place names as well as those which denoted peasant farms was not contested. These place names were nonetheless deemed irrelevant to the contemporary needs, outlook, prestige, and aesthetics of “modern” Icelanders. They represented a past that did not reflect the contemporary state of affairs of Icelandic society. Suggestions to “correct” or “alter” these place names speak of the desire to break away from this past and look at the Icelandic national identity afresh and in relation to current social formations. But any of these corrections had to be done without causing any inconsistencies between the traditional toponymic practices and the needs of the modern nation. As Björn Guðfinnsson (1943: 11) claimed, changes in place names may be needed but only with “sensible consideration and ease.” This “careful consideration” had to revolve around finding a way in which the modern Icelandic nation and the toponymic traditions of a bygone era could coexist.

7. Memories of a Nation: Icelandic exceptionalism and the Second World War

It was on an otherwise unremarkable Icelandic winter evening some years back when my father-in-law dropped a rather heavy book onto my lap. Since we did not share a language at the time, he excitedly uttered in broken English that the book was a birthday present from his brother. Part of a three-volume publication entitled *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld* (From Turf Houses into the Technological Age), the glossy pages were filled with hundreds of photographs. Together, the three volumes document the transition of Icelandic society from pre-industrial times to modernity through a vast collection of photographs and other visual aids. This visual record was accompanied by the diaries and recollections of three German scholars, Hans Kuhn (1899–1988), Bruno Schweizer (1897–1958) and Reinhardt Prinz (1901–1945), who had visited Iceland during the interwar years and had amassed most of the impressive record. As I leafed through the pages, the purpose of my father-in-law's gesture became clear. As an archaeologist, I was supposed to leaf through the enormous archive of the photographs, paintings, and sketches of turf houses, old tools, furniture, landscapes, and the Icelandic people. By way of my profession and his interest in history and folklore, we could form a relationship without the “burden” of words.

The ability of those images to create a shared understanding that night and to strengthen the relationship between two individuals who struggled to communicate made me reflect on the fact that photographic documentation has always been at the heart of archaeological practice. We see photography as an immediate, transparent, and superior means of recording and representing archaeological stratigraphy, artefacts, and landscapes, and thus as an essential scientific tool (Bohrer 2005: 183). Similarly, we view historical photographs as repositories of archaeological knowledge (Smiles 2005: 136) and treat them as an invaluable archive that provides a unique window into the past. Through the photographs, I could indicate to my father-in-law the turf structures, tools, and other artefacts that looked very similar to those I had unearthed in numerous sites, connecting both with him and with the material in the book.

While I cannot recall if such a bond was established, I do vividly remember how the excitement prompted by the potential archaeological and ethnographic value of this photographic record was later dispelled by learning more about the men who produced the majority of the images. Hans Kuhn was a member of the Nazi Party and had signed the

infamous vow of allegiance by academics to Hitler and the nationalist party. Bruno Schweizer was directly involved with Himmler's research institute, Ahnenerbe. Notorious for its human experimentation and its contribution to the Final Solution, Ahnenerbe was initially conceived of as a centre for conducting research—primarily archaeological—to justify Nazi ideology. Last but not least, Reinhard Prinz was a lieutenant in the German reserve army and served in the Eastern Front. What was perhaps more disconcerting was the fact that the ideological affiliations of the three German scholars were not fully accounted for in the 2003 publication. Quite the contrary they were presented as “apolitical” scholars whose work was motivated by their love and passion for Iceland. Sitting prominently amongst poetry books, photo-albums, decks of playing cards, DVDs, and other, more intimate, family memorabilia, their affiliations with the Nazi regime were further normalised.

Learning the backgrounds of the images and their creators was a jarring reminder that photographic and ethnographic archives are situated in specific contexts and are entangled in popular narratives, perceptions, and interpretations, as much as anything else. Consumed by their documentary value, it is easy to forget that such records are cultural products that do not objectively reflect the realities of an era but play a more dynamic role in the production and reproduction of the past. This chapter contextualises the historical record presented in *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld* and examines its relevance in present-day historical, political, and cultural formations. The publication is treated as a cultural artefact that is entangled in the Icelandic grand narratives, dichotomies, dilemmas, and popular perceptions of the interwar period and World War II.

7.1 From Turf Houses into the Technological Age

The 2003 work entitled *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld* (From Turf Houses into the Technological Age), published by Örn og Örygur (Reykjavík), recounts the entry of Icelandic society into modernity through the personal records of three German scholars: Hans Kuhn, Reinhard Prinz, and Bruno Schweizer. All three scholars had visited Iceland during the 1920s and 1930s and are known in the Icelandic academic world for their scholarly contributions in linguistics, folklore, and antiquarian research. Hans Kuhn is well known for his extensive studies in folklore, place names, skaldic poetry, and sagas (Hofmann et al. 1969–1972). He first came to Iceland in 1922, and in the following years he travelled extensively throughout the country. Over the years, Kuhn occupied positions at some of the most illustrious German universities and tried to obtain a position at the University of Iceland. Kuhn's scholarly work

was officially recognised in Iceland in 1956 when he was awarded the *Order of the Falcon*, and he was later granted an honorary doctorate from the University of Iceland in 1961 (*Árbók Háskóla Íslands* 1961–1962: 71).⁵⁸

Reinhard Prinz is lesser known for his academic contributions and more for his efforts to promote Icelandic culture in Germany. He lectured and authored numerous articles in German newspapers and magazines on a wide variety of subjects, such as mountain climbing, art, culture, and language, as well as literature, trade, economy, and the relations between Iceland and Germany (Vol. II: 25–26). In 1931 he was elected to the board of the Germany-based *Friends of Iceland Society* (*Vereinigung der Islandfreunde*) and the editorial committee of the affiliated journal, *Announcements of the Friends of Iceland* (*Mitteilungen der Islandfreunde*). Prinz arrived in Iceland in 1923 and remained in the country for four years. He too was awarded the Icelandic *Order of the Falcon*—decades before Kuhn—in 1935, in recognition of his various contributions to Icelandic society and culture. Bruno Schweizer is better known in the academic world for his linguistic work on the Cimbrian language (Schweizer 1939, 1948, 1952). But between 1935–1938, Schweizer conducted ethnographic and linguistic research in various parts of Iceland. He gave a number of lectures on Icelandic culture and published on various topics, including linguistics and traditional architecture. Schweizer is also remembered for planning a rather extravagant *Ahnenerbe*-funded expedition to Iceland, through which he hoped to accumulate a wide-range of data on linguistics, archaeology, and folklore (Stummann-Hansen 2003).

The publication of *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld* was not only motivated by the academic contribution of the three scholars: an initial interest in the lives and deeds of the scholars was augmented by the accidental rediscovery of Bruno Schweizer’s photographic record.⁵⁹ Both Hans Kuhn and Bruno Schweizer were enthusiasts of the evolving technology and carried photographic equipment with them during their travels. Kuhn’s photographic

⁵⁸ It is worth noting that Hans Kuhn received his honorary doctorate title on the 50th anniversary of the University of Iceland (*Árbók Háskóla Íslands* 1961–1962: 71).

⁵⁹ The rediscovery of Bruno Schweizer’s photographic record was prompted by the work of Magnús Bjarnfreðsson on the life and memoirs of Schweizer’s wife Þorbjörg Jónsdóttir Schweizer (2010). As soon as the future editor of *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld*, Örylgur Hálfðanarson was informed about the photographic collection of Þorbjörg’s late husband, he took an immediate interest. After meeting Þorbjörg at the Kirkjubæjarklaustur home for the elderly, Örylgur travelled to Innsbruck, Germany where he managed to get hold of the photographic archive.

practice suffered from the technological limitations of the time and the task of producing decent photographs was imbued with technical difficulties. A decade later, Schweizer had a more developed technology and managed to capture more than one thousand photographs. Schweizer was also meticulous with his records. His archive contains information of the locations he photographed, alongside the names of the individuals who crossed his lens. This enormous archive is presented in the sixteen-hundred-page, three volume publication.

With the contribution of ethnologist Árni Björnsson, the first part of volume one gives a broad picture of Iceland during the interwar years and situates the country in the wider historical and political context of the time. The latter part is devoted to Kuhn's ethnographic work and his folklore collection, currently housed at the Ethnographic Museum of Hamburg. Volume two deals almost exclusively with the lives and deeds of Hans Kuhn and Reinhard Prinz. Their records are accompanied by memoirs and photographs of a number of contemporary German travellers and the recollections of their family members and Icelandic acquaintances. Volume three is dedicated to the memoirs and photographic collection of Bruno Schweizer, which are complemented by various other accounts and recollections.

According to the authors and editors of the publication, *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld* aspires to go beyond the lives and concerns of the three individuals in order to document the transition of the largely rural Icelandic society from pre-industrial times to modernity. Taking into consideration that numerous foreign scholars at the time carried photographic equipment, wrote memoirs, and contributed equally to an array of academic disciplines, the editors explain the criteria that led them to choose these three specific German scholars.

While they had all accumulated impressive academic records, Hans Kuhn and Reinhard Prinz also had an excellent command of the Icelandic language, while Kuhn and Bruno Schweizer had Icelandic spouses. All three were fairly popular amongst the Icelandic intellectuals and socialites of the time. Reinhard Prinz, in particular, was an outgoing character, and he included the influential scholar Sigurður Nordal and writers Þórbergur Þórðarson and Halldór Laxness among his acquaintances. The three also shared a rather special way of travelling throughout the country. Kuhn and Prinz usually travelled on foot, wearing Icelandic sheepskin shoes, and even trekked through the highlands at a time when it was quite uncommon to do so. Schweizer, on the other hand, was fascinated by Icelandic horses and often travelled by horse (Fig. 7.1). Unlike many other foreign scholars, the linguistic abilities, familial ties, and modes of travel of the three German scholars are viewed

by the editors as crucial factors that enabled them to understand and *feel* the Icelandic way of living in a manner that others did not.

Aside from these personal qualities, the editors point to the fact that Schweizer, Kuhn, and Prinz arrived in Iceland at a time when modernisation was accelerating rapidly and many traditional practices stood on the cusp of extinction. During the interwar years, Icelandic industrialisation and modernisation projects were already well underway, but these were mostly evident in the capital area of Reykjavík or the few fishing ports and industrial hubs scattered around the country. The Icelandic countryside, by contrast, remained quite uninfluenced by modernity, especially in terms of architecture, infrastructure, transport, and mechanisation, and it was only with the arrival of the British on the eve of WWII that the Icelandic countryside would change radically. The presence of Kuhn, Prinz, and Schweizer during these interwar years is therefore what makes their records invaluable. As the editor, Örlygur Hálfðanarson, says, “the ancient Icelandic national culture stood at the threshold of a new century” and “they [Kuhn, Prinz and Schweizer] sensed immediately that they arrived at a single crossroads and did their utmost to capture the moment” (Hálfðanarson 2003: 20). The German scholars managed to capture the last remnants of an old way of life, visible in local architecture, traditional practices, and habits, providing an expansive, spellbinding, and indelible view of Iceland at the threshold of modernity.

As far as the affiliation of the three German scholars with the Nazi regime is concerned, Örlygur Hálfðanarson points out that the principal aim of the books is to deal with the so-called *humane* aspect of history (Hálfðanarson 2003: 20). To that extent, *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld* is not a dry academic publication that recounts the development of yet another historical period but one that focuses on the *inner* emotional states of the people during the period it describes. It deals with three individuals, Hans Kuhn, Reinhard Prinz, and Bruno Schweizer, who made the lengthy trip because of their alleged apolitical scholarly preoccupations and an untainted love for Iceland (Hálfðanarson & Kristinsson 2003, Vol. II: 13). It also deals with the lives of the simple Icelandic folk whose ways were disappearing under the weight of modernity, and it alludes—at times explicitly—to the emotional states that such drastic changes might have entailed. Readers are then invited to read the memoirs and to gaze at the photographs, presumably satisfied that the three men’s profound interest in Iceland was not politically motivated. After all, “politics is rarely mentioned in their writing,” the editors state, though the text concedes that an association with the overall “cultural interest

and politics in Germany in the 1940s” is to be expected since such connections must exist “in all countries at all times” (Hálfðanarson & Kristinsson 2003, Vol. II: 13).



Figure 7.1: Travelling deep into the Icelandic countryside often necessitated alternative means of transportation. Unlike other foreign travellers, Bruno Schweizer chose to travel on horseback. (Courtesy of Héraðsskjalasafn Skagfirðinga - County of Skagafjörður Archives).

Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld invites its readers to connect with the three scholars and the Icelandic folk by concentrating on the timeless and universal characteristics that tie people together, no matter their language, ethnicity, background, or affiliations. By dealing with subjects who were “above all, human,” the readers are encouraged to become emotionally involved with the narrative and to identify some parts of our modern-day concerns with those that affected both the scholars and the Icelanders of the time, in search of a common humanity. Admittedly, this may come through in the personal worries and anxieties of the scholars’ family members, whose emotional recollections are included in the text. What ties the modern readers to the various protagonists of the publication then is what appear to be our common passions, concerns, worries, and weaknesses. In this spirit, the editors have characterised the volumes as *living books about the past* (Hálfðanarson 2003: 20).

It is quite precisely this assertion of sincere and innocuous scholarly interest by the three scholars that permits the editors to avoid examining the nefarious context that surrounded the scholars and their work. The words *nasismi* (Nazism) and *nasistar* (Nazis) are

studiously avoided and appear only occasionally in the sixteen-hundred pages, while mention of *Anhenerbe*, Himmler's institute, through which the work of Bruno Schweizer was propagated, is found on only four occasions in the five-hundred pages of volume three.⁶⁰ This lack of a proper contextualisation of the three scholars in *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld* is not only due to some particular desire to capture inner historical truths. It can also be traced directly to the ways in which Icelandic historiography in general has approached the interwar period and the years of WWII.

7.2 Icelandic historiography and the legacy of the Second World War

For historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (2011: 79), Icelandic historians have paid too little attention to the Second World War and its effects on Icelandic society. This scholarly indifference towards one of the most dramatic periods of recent history is partly owed to the fact that Icelandic historians did not have the moral incentive to deal with the aftermath of the war. After all, Iceland had neither participated in the conflict, nor was it ever accused of collaborating with the Nazis. On May 10, 1940, a relatively small band of British troops swiftly took control of Iceland and placed the country in the Allied camp. Unable to play any decisive role in international affairs and the theatre of war, the Icelandic state maintained official neutrality and never declared war on the Axis powers. To this day, the Icelandic stance of neutrality during the conflict is presented as the consequence of “small-state realism” or a nationalist-pragmatist politics (Hálfðanarson 2011: 89), and it has been treated as the most sensible and appropriate political gesture.

In that light, the Second World War has been largely appraised in Iceland as a foreign affair. That is not to say that the War left Icelandic society unaffected. The effects of WWII were just as dramatic and life-changing as elsewhere, but in a different way. As tragedy swept the rest of Europe, the war proved to be a somewhat generous and beneficial affair for Icelanders. Having imposed a naval blockade and tight export controls on Icelandic goods to Germany, the British were willing to generously compensate the losses suffered by the Icelandic state from interrupted trade relations (Bittner 1983; Whitehead 1999). Alongside a

⁶⁰ It is worth mentioning here that Þór Whitehead has written extensively on Schweizer and his relations to *Anhenerbe* in *Stríð fyrir ströndum* (1985).

guarantee not to interfere in Icelandic affairs and an assurance that all troops would be withdrawn at the end of the war, the British also agreed to a number of mutually profitable business agreements. The British occupation may have signalled yet another era of foreign occupation, but it also guaranteed a steady influx of capital (Bittner 1983), meaning that the stationing of British (and later, American) troops created unprecedented economic growth. As harbours, roads, and other facilities were built and thousands of jobs were created, the high rate of unemployment that had dogged the Icelandic nation since the advent of modernity was nearly instantaneously eradicated. The rapid development of the country, the improvement of infrastructure, and the decline of poverty in the years following 1940 had led many Icelanders to speak of the Second World War as the *Beloved War* (*Blessað Stríðið*) (Hálfðanarson 2011: 83).

The war years were also significant in Iceland for another reason. In 1944, one year before the final conclusion of the war, Iceland proclaimed its independence from Denmark. At the time, Denmark was still under Nazi military occupation, and Icelandic politicians took advantage of a clause in the Act of 1918 that stated that the relationship between Denmark and Iceland could be re-examined twenty-five years after the agreement. Despite controversy, a referendum was held on May 20–23, 1944, the results of which led to the triumphant declaration of the Icelandic Republic one month later. A new republican constitution was to be signed on the anniversary of the birth of nationalist leader Jón Sigurðsson at the historical site of the *Alþingi* at Þingvellir, popularly perceived as one of the most ancient democratic assemblies, where the Icelandic chieftains and elites had, from the tenth century until 1700, resolved their differences through the rule of law.

As the nation rejoiced in its newfound independence, its path to an equally new economic self-sufficiency largely contradicted some of the basic tenets of the nationalist rhetoric that had led to the moment. The Icelandic call for independence had always been based on the Romantic idea of the nation as an entity whose progress, economic prosperity, and development were organically tied to political sovereignty. The sudden economic prosperity of Iceland under a new foreign occupation was thus a development that contravened this Icelandic nationalist narrative. Taking this discrepancy into consideration, Icelandic politicians and historians alike have, ever since, minimised the effects of the era on Icelandic society and have regarded the war years as a deviation “from the ‘natural’ course of Icelandic history, or simply as an anomaly of limited consequence for the general narrative of the nation” (Hálfðanarson 2011: 95).

This official position towards the war makes an implicit assumption that the ideology of Nazism never took root in Icelandic society. This assumption is substantiated by some of the most typified themes in Icelandic historiography: the geographical distance of Iceland from the core of Europe and the minimal contact between peoples, the absence of major social cleavages within Icelandic society, the apparent ethnic and racial homogeneity of the population, and the historical adherence to a traditional way of life, customs, and beliefs. Each of these has been used both to explain native developments and to detach the remote island of the North Atlantic from a politically problematic Europe. The peaceful and consensual political behaviour that characterised the struggle for independence (Hálfðanarson 2000b, 2001) is also a narrative that speaks to a peaceful Icelandic political landscape far removed from the conflicts of continental Europe. To that extent, the Icelandic polity has historically been envisaged as immune to foreign influence and structured in such a way that any political stance that deviated from the ultimate national goal of independence or threatened the impulse of Icelanders for national unity would be cast aside.

This political attitude was born from the Romantic idea of independence as a natural instinct (Hálfðanarson 2004), which in turn fuelled a belief that national emancipation could be achieved in an organic, rather than interventionist, way. The Icelandic rhetoric of emancipation therefore focused on properly communicating the natural rights of the Icelandic population for national self-determination to the Danish government, and the only types of political expression ever allowed to be infused with passion were the heated political debates concerning the historical continuity of Icelanders as manifested in the Icelandic language, the sagas, and the ancient institution of the *Alþingi*. The fact that the independence movement had adopted a peaceful and consensual tone, whose aim was to communicate the natural rights of the Icelandic population in an appropriate legalist, democratic, and above-all, non-violent manner is, to this day, presented as a sign of the exceptional Icelandic democratic disposition, and as an example of ideal political behaviour.

While this dominant view holds Iceland as politically exceptional and geopolitically disengaged, particularly in the period surrounding the War and independence, it is contradicted by a set of stories that every so often make their appearance in both the public media and academic discourse. The rise of the Nationalist Party, *Flokkur þjóðernissinna*, with its Nazi-inspired paraphernalia and militaristic marches (Fig. 7.2), the admiration for Adolf Hitler expressed by the Icelandic press (Jökulsson & Jökulsson 1988), and the ill-treatment of the limited number of Jewish citizens and war-refugees (see Bergsson 1998; Vilhjálms

2004) speak of a vigorous fascist faction in Icelandic society. Likewise, the “anomaly” of the British invasion, with its influx of foreign ideas, lifestyles, and the English language, was met with dissatisfaction, and the occupation was seen as a primary source of cultural pollution and degeneration. This fear of foreign “pollution” was often expressed in terms that were directly associated with the language used by National Socialists in Germany. The call to protect Icelandic culture and language from foreign influence was at times articulated as the duty one has to their blood and soil (*Blóð sitt og móðurmold*), while the fear of prostitution and intimacy between Icelandic women and British and American soldiers was discussed in terms of the “purity” of the Icelandic nation (Guðmarsson & Jökulsson 1989; Hálfðanarson 2011).

Taking into consideration that some of the basic tenets and language of National Socialism pervaded Icelandic society, it would be no leap of the imagination to acknowledge that German linguists, ethnologists, and folklorists such as Hans Kuhn, Reinhardt Prinz, and Bruno Schweizer had roamed the country during the interwar era in search of their Nordic Aryan roots and in service of a particular worldview. Anxious to be accepted as aristocratic, civilised, and equal to their European counterparts, the Icelandic elite welcomed these scholars with open arms. Icelandic academics themselves were also quite keen to cooperate with German, as well as other foreign, scholars. Most of this foreign research in linguistics, archaeology, and folklore was after all preoccupied with the ancientness of the Icelandic nation, which in turn legitimised the rhetoric of national independence.

Not shy of their Nazi beliefs, some of these German scholars, including Kuhn, Prinz and Schweizer, were also valued for the way they presented Iceland to the wider world. Despite the efforts of some later academics, these scholars have escaped critical scrutiny and are nowadays presented—as in *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld*—as apolitical scholars whose academic preoccupations were driven by their passion and sincere love for Iceland. As the legacy of their work in folkloristics, ethnology, place name research, and archaeology has so far been ignored, this chapter turns its attention to the life and work of one such scholar, Bruno Schweizer and re-examines the ideological tenets behind his scholarship.

7.3 The case of Bruno Schweizer

Bruno Schweizer (1897–1958), a leading expert on dialectology and ethnology, is admittedly one of the lesser-known German scholars whose academic ventures were linked to Himmler’s notorious *Ahnenerbe*. Mostly recognised for his linguistic work on the Cimbrian language in

South Tyrol, and the former German-speaking enclave Gottschee (Kočevje) in present-day Slovenia, Schweizer also conducted ethnographic and linguistic research in Iceland. Over the years, he gave a number of lectures on Icelandic culture and published on different topics, including linguistics and traditional architecture. Schweizer also attempted to organise an *Ahnenerbe*-funded expedition to Iceland, with the scope of accumulating data on linguistics, archaeology, and folklore (Stummann-Hansen 2003).



Figure 7.2: Nazi Parade in Reykjavík in 1935 (Jökulsson & Jökulsson 1988: 177).

Schweizer was largely responsible for bringing Iceland to the attention of his former classmate, Heinrich Himmler. In his extensive research on the linguists of the Third Reich, Gerd Simon (n.d.: 26) stated that Schweizer was “an exuberant and bubbling source of ideas around Himmler.” Linguist Eberhard Bücherl (1994) described the scholar similarly as someone with a “restless energy,” “zeal” and, at times, ruthlessness, and characterised him as

a megalomaniac and a man of “immeasurable hubris.” His greatest ambition was to discover some kind of a Germanic Troy in Iceland, and he often envisaged that people would one day compare his work to that of Schliemann (Bücherl 1994).

Schweizer had studied in some of the most prestigious universities and practised the leading dialectological approaches of his time. His promising career began in 1928 at the University of Marburg, where he worked on a Bavarian Linguistic Atlas. In 1931, he returned to his home in Bavaria and worked as an assistant in the newly established Southeast Institute at the University of Munich, soon becoming the head of regional studies in the area of Lech-Isanland (Bücherl 1994: 261). However, his career experienced a number of setbacks with the rise of the Nazi regime. He did not wish to become a member of NSDAP—a prerequisite for advancement—and the regime’s promotion of his arch-nemesis, Eberhard Kranzmayer (1897–1975), further isolated him. Schweizer’s romantic, idealist, and purist *völkisch* approach also clashed with the National Socialist ideas of centralism and world-domination (Bücherl 1994). By 1937, Schweizer lost his position at the Southeast Institute, and the Gestapo forbade him from undertaking any kind of local research.

It was under these circumstances that Schweizer decided to organize a two-month excursion to Iceland. By the time he set foot on Icelandic soil in 1935, middle-class Germans had already been flocking to the remote island for some time. Iceland had already been shaped by the language and ideas of the time: a North Germanic outpost that had successfully escaped the corruptive influences of modernity, Catholicism, and Judaism. Devoid of racial mixing and cultural decay, the traveller could experience firsthand the heart of the Germanic spirit found in the Icelandic trinity of sublime landscapes, heroic sagas, and a language tied to the past. In an era defined by cultural pessimism, the “untamed and imaginative life” of the Icelandic rural folk carried the promise of reconnecting with a piece of humanity lost in the decadent and heterogenous industrialised society at home. The sagas were the key to shaping this image for would-be travellers. The stoicism and sense of honour that permeated the world of the sagas provided an alternative vision to what was commonly believed to be a corrupt Christianised modern society.

This fascination with Iceland was certainly not new. Ever since the nineteenth century, the idea that Iceland was the cradle of Germanic culture had gained a considerable foothold in the scholarly circles. Deeply rooted in the works of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and the Grimm Brothers (1785–1863, 1786–1859), the similarity between the Old Norse and

Teutonic mythologies became the link by which the Icelandic literary heritage came to be seen as pan-Germanic (Zernack 2011). Following this early scholarship, Icelandic culture was integrated into German prehistory and the terms *Nordic* and *Germanic* had, by the fin de siècle, become interchangeable (Zernack 2011). During the Wilhelminian Empire (1888–1918), the heroes of the Norse myths came to personify Germanic greatness and acted as unifying role models for the nation’s rejuvenation. Often used in arts and crafts, music, and commercial advertisements, the use of Nordic mythological motifs became part of a “Germanophilia” along with a passion for the Vikings and the Nordic countries.

Iceland also fitted neatly into the racial imagery and ideology that preceded Nazism. The belief that an Aryan, Indo-European race had descended in the Eurasian steppes was first introduced by Max Müller and Arthur de Gobineau, and was widely circulated within the scholarly circles of physical anthropology and scientific racism. It was the work of Karl Penka, *Origines Ariacae* (1883) however, that popularised the idea that an Aryan-Indo-Germanic population had instead emerged in Scandinavia during the Ice Age (Dow 2014). According to Penka, the extreme climatic conditions of the region had supposedly led to a rigorous natural selection that enabled the population to acquire their distinctive Nordic blond hair and blue eyes. Through the work of occultist Rudolf von Sebottendorff (1875–1945) Iceland itself became seen as a Germanic Atlantis and the birthplace of the Aryan race. His assertion was that Iceland corresponded to Pytheas’s fourth century BCE description of Ultima Thule, and its inhabitants were thus the last surviving link to a Germanic ancestral homeland (Barrowclough 2016; Levenda 2002).

Like many of his contemporary travellers, Schweizer strongly believed that Iceland was an essentially Germanic country, and he anticipated an experience of a culture pure and unaffected by modernity. Hence his disappointment when he was confronted with the growing, urban landscape of Reykjavík and the modern ways of the local population: “cars, motors, electricity, phonograph-music, no taste and lack of respect are the signs of modernity,” he wrote in his diary (Hálfðanarson & Kristinsson 2003, 3:67). For Schweizer, Icelanders were so deeply immersed in consumerism and an imported, corrupt culture that there was no hope in preserving the old one. Convinced that Icelandic culture was on the brink of extinction, he travelled to the most remote parts of the country in search of the true Icelandic *völkisch* character. He was nonetheless beaten by modernity; modern manners appeared to pervade the whole county. The contrast between the corrupted, modern man and

the pure, sempiternal earth that the scholar experienced in rural Iceland led him to describe Icelanders as *feeble* and *spineless* (Hálfðanarson & Kristinsson 2003, 3:60).

Despite his disappointment, Schweizer visited Iceland again in 1936 and 1938. Armed with a camera, he managed to capture more than a thousand photographs of Iceland and its people, also producing a number of accurate drawings and sketches of remote old farmsteads. His 1938 trip, however, had an additional purpose. The reformation of Ahnenerbe in 1938 permitted Schweizer to gain a position at the institute, and having acquired Himmler's permission, he began to design an Icelandic expedition as part of the officially sanctioned search for cultural affinities outside the borders of Nazi Germany.

7.4 An Icelandic expedition

“From year to year it becomes more difficult to meet living witnesses of Germanic cultural feelings and Germanic soul attitudes on the classical Icelandic soil uninfluenced by the overpowerful grasp of western civilisation. (...)

...the people forget such ancient techniques as ... the forge- and woodworker's art, the methods of grass- and milk cultivation, spinning, weaving, dyeing; they forget the old legends and myths that were once narrated on long winter evenings, the songs and the art of the old verses; they lost the belief in a transcendent nature ... Their innate Germanic sobriety becomes cold calculation; pure material interests then step to the foreground; the intelligentsia migrates to the capital and from there swiftly assimilates international tendencies. Genuine Germanic vigor in Iceland is also often transformed into speculation and not all through real trade; excessive pride of homeland drives them to want to be 150% more modern and progressive than the rest of Europe. This then often permits the present-day Icelander to appear in an unfavourable light and thus cannot usually avoid giving a good German visitor a bad first impression.

These situations determine our research plan.

Every year that we wait quietly means damage to a number of objects, and other objects become ruined for camera and film due to newfangled public buildings in the modern style. For the work in question only the summer is appropriate, that is,

the months of June through August. Furthermore, one must reckon that occasionally, several rainy days can occur, delaying thereby certain photographic work. The ship connections are such that it is perhaps only possible to go to and from the Continent once a week.

All this means a minimum period of from 5-6 weeks from the framework of the trip.

The possible tasks of an Iceland research trip with a cultural knowledge mission are greatly variegated. Therefore it remains for us to select only the most immediate and most realizable. A variety of other tasks...should be considered as additional assignments.

Thus the recording of human images (race-measurements) and the investigation of museum treasures are considered to be additional requirements” (Schweizer in Levenda 2002: 190-191).

Given the alleged ideological friction between Bruno Schweizer and the Nazis, his involvement with Ahnenerbe may sound peculiar. By 1938 however, the institute was undergoing a rapid expansion and reorganisation. Following the increased influence of Ahnenerbe over both the German Research Foundation and the Research Division of the Education Ministry (Mees 2008: 200), a considerable attempt was made to transform the institute from a largely amateurish society into a more credible professional academic institution. Having begun as an institute of prehistoric research, Ahnenerbe had attracted amateur *völkisch* antiquarians, fantasists, and other enthusiasts whose half-lettered and speculative approaches to the study of Germanic antiquity carried no academic credibility. Accordingly, some of the lay researchers and fantasists, including the former head of the institute, Herman Wirth, were sidelined. Their pseudo-scientific preoccupations with earth's mysteries, the magical properties of ancient artefacts, and runic mysticism might have found a receptive audience amongst the SS, but they were ignored by the academic mainstream. On more than one occasion, such spurious research had caused international embarrassment that reflected back to Heinrich Himmler and, by extension, to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime. A new administration, led by Indo-Germanist Walther Wüst and Wolfram Sievers, attempted to improve the quality of research by sponsoring a number of respectable and experienced

scholars. In doing so, they also tried to keep Himmler's own often extravagant and pseudo-scientific fantasies at bay.

It was this reformation of Ahnenerbe that allowed Schweizer to obtain employment at the institute in 1938. He was set up with his own department, the Division of Locating and Landscape Ideographs, alongside Otto Plaßmann, and by December 1, 1938, he became the head of Ahnenerbe's Dialectology Department. It was soon after that Schweizer put together a proposal for an expedition to Iceland. Convinced from his previous travels that Icelandic society was rapidly degenerating under the pressures of cosmopolitanism and modernisation, Schweizer presented his research plan as an urgent rescue operation. Following the pessimistic description of Icelandic society quoted above, he set out a number of rather optimistic and all-encompassing objectives in the proposal. For Schweizer, the most pressing projects were: an extensive survey for shrines, assemblies, and sacrificial sites; an investigation of traditional architecture, furniture, and the documentation of runic designs and ideographs; and the recording of folkways, such as traditional techniques, unknown stories, myths, and legends, dying customs, and other so-called linguistic antiquities. All of the projects outlined were to be accompanied by photographs, recordings, sketches, drawings, and a documentary film. A dictionary of the Icelandic language was also to be compiled and used by future researchers.

Having gained approval, Schweizer swiftly returned to Iceland and, in addition to marrying his Icelandic fiancée, spent time preparing and compiling dossiers with relevant information including the names of those Icelanders who would be willing to support the research.⁶¹ As with any other Ahnenerbe project, the Icelandic expedition was to remain confidential. The scholarly infighting both within Ahnenerbe as well as between Ahnenerbe and the rival institute of Amt Rosenberg in Germany, matched with a fear of criticism by the foreign press, had made Himmler rather cautious. Common public places and attractions were usually avoided on the expedition, while information regarding the project's details was trivialized and documents were not to disclose or clarify any of the objectives of the expedition (Simon 1986a).

⁶¹ His list as presented to us by Simon Gerd (n.d.) is comprised of fourteen names. Amongst them is the name Prof. Níels P. Dungal, rector of the University of Iceland, and Matthías Þórðarson, state antiquarian, museum director and Chairman of the Archaeological Society. Regarding Matthías Þórðarson, Schweizer describes the

Despite precautions, the expedition experienced a number of setbacks. By February 1939, news of a similar research trip, organised by historian Walter Gehl and prehistorian Kurt Tackenberg at Ahnenerbe, collided with Schweizer's plans. A pupil of the famous archaeologist Gustav Kossina (1858–1931), Tackenberg intended to locate and excavate Nordic temples and according to many of his contemporaries, he was the better candidate to become a leading figure within the institute. Internal antagonisms were not the biggest concern, however. Around the same time, news about the project leaked and received considerable attention by the foreign press. On February 22, 1939, the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, soon followed by the Icelandic *Morgunblaðið*, published an article entitled “*Himmler seeks ancestors in Iceland: Is it possible to trace the Third Reich to the Icelandic Vikings?*” (Stummann-Hansen 2003). Known abroad for his fixation with quasi-philosophical concepts and scholarly fantasies, Himmler was ridiculed, and the idea of an Ahnenerbe expedition was met with sarcasm and contempt. These articles infuriated Himmler and, following the turmoil within the Ahnenerbe regarding responsibility for the leak, the project was suspended.

It was only after Himmler's rage subsided that a new plan was devised. A close confidant of Himmler, the archaeologist Herbert Jankuhn, replaced Tackenberg, and the two projects were merged under a more focused research agenda. As soon as everything seemed settled, another leak scuttled the plans. This time it was rumours of an Icelandic expedition by Amt Rosenberg that discouraged Himmler. Even though the two institutes were bitter rivals, he considered the idea of two similar projects in Iceland to be a waste of valuable resources. An alleged unwillingness of Icelandic officials to cooperate and certain problems regarding the lack of Icelandic currency had also delayed the project and soon proved to be insurmountable. By September 1939, World War Two had begun. All research trips, including those to Iceland, South America, Iran, and the Canary Islands were postponed, and

antiquarian as “a staunch friend of the Germans and [...] of a genuine Icelandic courtesy” as well as, “the most important of [the] authoritative state officials” who does not “belong to the ruling, ‘reddish’ Progressive Party” (Gerd n.d.: 13 my translation). Other notable names include professor of medicine with a keen interest in anthropology, folklore and archaeology, Jón Steffensen and medical doctor Karl Sigurður Jónasson; cashier and bookkeeper at the Reykjavik Police and later Office Director of the Attorney General in Reykjavik, Baldur Steingrímsson, composer Árni Björnsson and Deputy Director of Education, Helgi Elíasson. Whether the above were sympathetic towards the Nazi regime and embraced the Nazi ideology is not known. It appears nonetheless that Bruno Schweizer searched for rather influential figures that could support and promote his research.

Ahnenerbe was to concentrate its efforts on the “Final Victory.” During the war, the institute was radicalised and shifted its focus toward medical investigations and human experiments. As far as the humanities are concerned, many of the institute’s researchers were dispatched to the front lines, while any remaining projects concentrated only on the immediate war zones as part of an effort to Germanise newly annexed territories. As the rumours of an imminent Nazi invasion of Iceland intensified, Operation Fork commenced in the early hours of May 10, 1940, and British forces swiftly took control of the island. All German residents were arrested and sent to the Mooragh internment camp on the Isle of Man. With thousands of Allied troops stationed there within the year, Iceland was conclusively placed outside the Nazi sphere of influence.

7.5 Legacies

Linguist Rainald Bücherl (1994) argued in the early nineties that Schweizer had largely escaped the attention of historical research due to the fact that his work had lain dormant since his sudden death in 1958. Unpublished and inaccessible, his work could not be properly appraised. Bücherl (1994) had also previously concluded that Schweizer had remained historically obscure because of his bitter scholarly rivalry with dialectologist Eberhard Kranzmayer, who was regarded as the guiding light in the field. As the tide of war turned against the Axis powers, most of the Ahnenerbe scholars had also refrained from sending their files to Berlin, and kept them instead in the safety of their personal cabinets. As the researchers published the material from their collections during the postwar years, most concealed the fact that their work was conducted under the auspices of Himmler’s *Ahnenerbe* (Dow 2014).

Schweizer’s work has only recently resurfaced and it has gained considerable praise in the academic world. His eight-hundred-page manuscript on the Cimbrian linguistic enclave in the Veneto and Trentino provinces of northeast Italy was rediscovered and received considerable interest after the sociolinguistic revival of the early 2000s (see Bidese 2004; Bidese et al. 2005; Dow 2004; Dow cf. Schweizer 2008; Putnam et al. 2011). Since then contemporary scholars have admired Schweizer’s academic erudition, his interest in synchronic linguistics, and the overall interdisciplinary manner in which he sought to conduct his research, while his Cimbrian Grammar has been described as the most accurate and complete study of the Cimbrian language and its varieties (Bidese 2011: 348). A volume

recounting Schweizer's legacy in linguistics was published in 2008 (Schweizer 2008), which received a twelve-page positive review in one of the most prestigious German linguistics journals (Abraham 2009). Alongside Schweizer's diverse research on linguistics, religious practices, traditions, popular beliefs, music, and arts and crafts, the entire Ahnenerbe archive of photographs, sound recordings, silent movies, and various other scholarly documents is nowadays regarded as a monument to the Cimbrian language and culture.

By contrast, despite some academic interest by Icelandic historian Þór Whitehead (1985), German historian Gerd Simon (1986a, n.d.), and linguist Eberhard Bücherl (1994), Schweizer's association with Iceland had been largely unstudied until even more recently. Considerable scholarly and public attention to Schweizer's relations with Iceland came only after the rediscovery of his photographic record and the subsequent publication of *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld*. As mentioned above, this photographic record, alongside those of Kuhn and Prinz, is considered invaluable for how it documents Iceland on the threshold of modernity and captures the last remnants of an old way of life.

It was of course not only the fortuitous timing of Schweizer's travels that is considered important, but also the fact that his interests took him away from the capital area and deep into the Icelandic countryside. Unlike other local and foreign antiquarians Bruno Schweizer, as well as Hans Kuhn, opted to travel to and conducted research in the north and west of the country. In doing so, the German scholars paid full scholarly attention to certain types of material culture and traditional practices that were otherwise largely ignored. Their interest in Icelandic vernacular architecture led them to produce photographs, plans, and drawings of turf houses and farmsteads at a time when the number of people who lived in such structures was decreasing fast (Fig. 7.3). Schweizer's photographs and accurate plans of the *Laufás* farmstead in northern Iceland have since been used as blueprints for the restoration of the farmhouse (Fig. 7.4), and the fact that *Laufás* stands nowadays as a prime example of Icelandic vernacular architecture is largely owed to the work of the German scholar. Likewise, Kuhn's photographs and drawings of Icelandic knit-works, tapestries, furniture, and other household items have given a unique insight of folklore material to numerous specialists. His extensive folklore collection, bestowed to *The Ethnographic Museum of Hamburg* in 1927, still stands as the largest collection of folklore material outside Iceland.

Though Schweizer himself had articulated an ambition to discover an Icelandic Troy, the fact that a few researchers like himself and Kuhn ascribed a great scholarly value to

everyday material culture at a time when others were seeking monuments and pre-Christian sites has largely contributed to the transformation of the archaeological discipline in Iceland from a treasure hunt into an exploration and careful examination of a wider set of data. On the grand scale of things, this synthesis of archaeological, ethnographic, and folkloric research ultimately meant that the identity of the Icelandic nation and its people could be found not only in heroic tales but also in the very materiality of ancient techniques, traditional practices, and, by extension, the archaeological record itself. Given how closely Icelandic archaeology has developed with ethnology and folklore studies, it is this intentionality, as to the areas and materials examined, and the academic curiosity that seemed to pervade Bruno Schweizer and a number of his colleagues that can nowadays be regarded as our rather invaluable archaeological heritage.

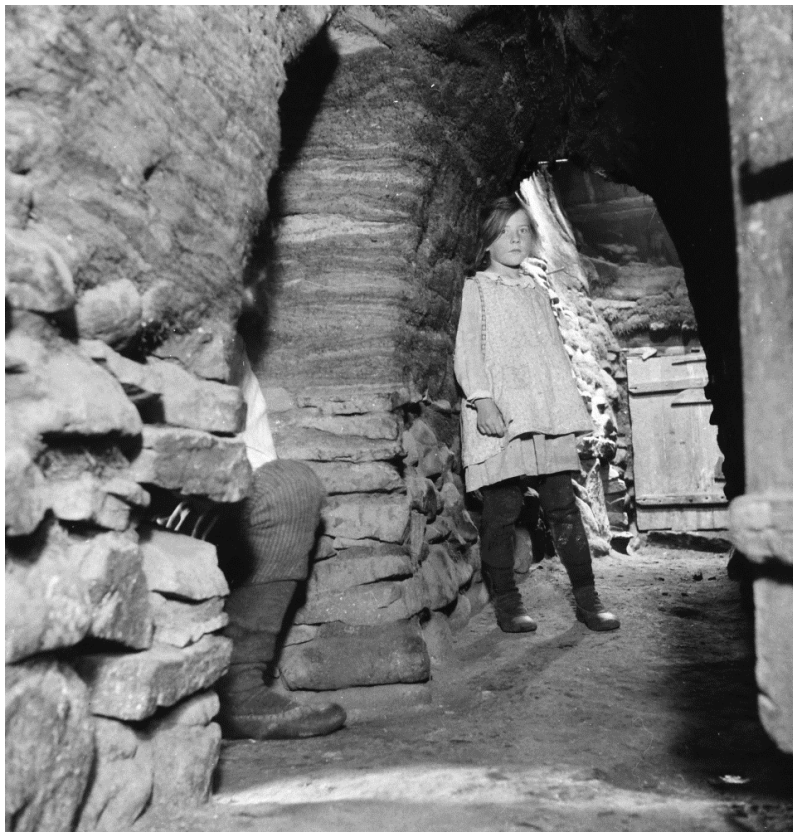


Figure 7.3: Living in a turfhouse. Kristín Halldórsdóttir at her home in Skottastaðir (1935). (Courtesy of Héraðsskjalasafn Skagfirðinga - County of Skagafjörður Archives).

7.6 Fellow travellers and opportunists

In light of the recent discovery of Schweizer's *Cimbrian Grammar* and photographic record, his affiliation with Ahnenerbe has also come under scrutiny. A number of researchers have

expressed the view that Schweizer's commitment to the Nazi cause, vision and ideology are beyond any doubt, although there has been no independent and conclusive scholarly investigation (Simon n.d.; Bidese 2011). On the contrary, others have spoken of Bruno Schweizer as an apolitical scholar and as in the case of *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld* as a tireless advocate of Icelandic culture. The latter view is supported by the fact that Schweizer never became a member of NSDAP. Additionally, his work did not engage in any of the most radical *völkisch* fantasies that characterised much of the Nazi scholarship, and his romantic idealism clashed with the Nazi ideology (Bücherl 1994). Above all, the fact that his major works remained unpublished and never appeared in any propagandistic literature or pseudoscientific journals, or for that matter expressed any overt political views themselves, has led many to believe that his work was politically innocent. Schweizer has been presented by these scholars as an opportunist or a fellow traveller; in other words, one who simply took advantage of the political circumstances of the era to promote his research.

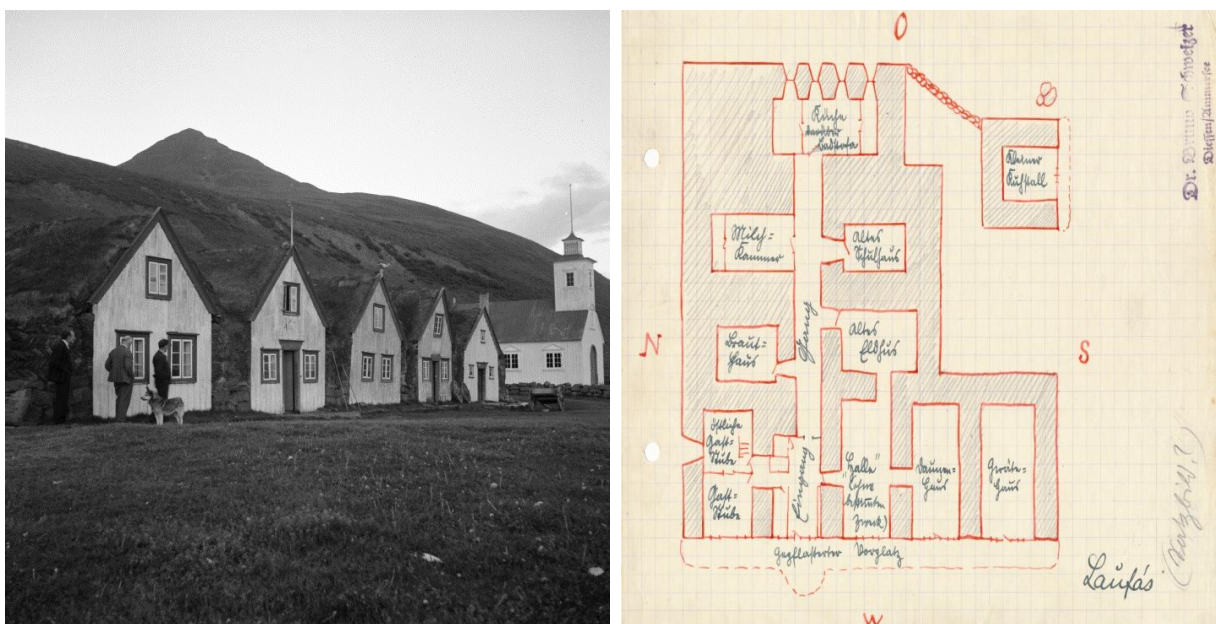


Figure 7.4: The Laufás farmstead in 1936 (left) and Schweizer's plan of the farm drawn in 1935 (right). (Courtesy of Héraðsskjalasafn Skagfirðinga - County of Skagafjörður Archives).

However, this tendency to distinguish between party-affiliated scholars and non-party-affiliated scholars in the Nazi era, with the implication that some of the research of the time was politically tainted while other work was legitimate, does not reflect the historical realities of the era. Despite the outward absolutism of the *Führerprinzip* and the overall aim to forge a total culture, it has been suggested that National Socialism was never a consistent doctrine but

a cultural synthesis of a pre-existing, polyvalent, and at times contradictory discourse. Questions of race, culture, and nation were on the academic agenda long before Hitler's ascendance to power, and they adhered to a long tradition of German national-conservative rhetoric (Bialas & Rabinbach 2007). To that extent, National Socialism had not caused a major schism in German academia. Political coordination regarding matters of race was only sporadically asserted and scholars were arguably given intellectual autonomy to conduct their own research projects. At the same time, measures of loyalty to the National Socialist cause or ideals were never dependent on one's ideological consistency (Bialas & Rabinbach 2007) or on an official enlistment to the National Socialist Party or any other Nazi organisation. What the Nazi regime offered was a political platform to which a large and diverse group of people could attach a number of well known and established ideologies that were rather indistinct, inconclusive, and even contradictory (Sluga 1993). Rather than exerting a total control over academia, the Nazis merely fuelled the academic discourse with their own scholarly considerations and directed parts of its agenda towards political implementation.

The corollary to this understanding of the lack of direct political interference in the academy and the alleged perseverance of intellectual autonomy is that there was already an ideological closeness between the Nazis and mainstream academics (Bialas & Rabinbach 2007; Hutton, 1999). Most scholars at the time strongly adhered to a conservative-*völkisch* ideology which was more often than not inseparable from the Nazi beliefs (Simon 1986a), while some of the most radical forms of *völkisch* antiquarianism that had steadily crept into the academic discourse were, to varying degrees, shared by both the hardcore Nazi ideologue and the alleged non-Nazi scholar. Any tension between scholars over these matters did not necessarily signify major disagreement over the ideology of National Socialism itself.

Any controversies that might have otherwise pervaded the academic community were largely put aside during the war years, and the scholars were extensively mobilised to provide legitimacy for the conquest of Eastern Europe. The administrative director of Ahnenerbe, Wolfgang Sievers, felt that the institute had an important role to play in the war effort and expressed the need for the development of a "science of colonisation" to facilitate the Germanisation of the newly annexed territories. The main ambition behind this mobilisation of the humanities was to investigate the history and nature of the numerous German ethnic

communities scattered throughout Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.⁶² Often referred to as “living cultural museums,” these Germanic enclaves had allegedly remained racially and culturally intact for centuries. Isolated, and thus free from the corruptive influences of modernity, urbanisation, and Judaism, it was believed that these communities had not only retained characteristics of the true German Völk but also demonstrated a stronger survival instinct than the territorial German citizens of the Third Reich.

The study of Germans outside the Reich was part and parcel of Hitler’s plan to restructure the geographical boundaries between national groups and political states in an effort to remove one of the main sources of conflicts within Europe (Hutton 1999). German emigrants from the enclaves were to be relocated along the newly established borders of what was fast becoming the Great German Reich. Most German scholars hurriedly adopted these Nazi priorities in order to promote the “new European spiritual order” of an expanded German Empire (Bialas & Rabinbach 2007: xxx). As Burleigh writes, “no one asked these scholars to put their knowledge at the service of the government: they did so willingly and enthusiastically. There was virtually no ‘resistance’” (1988: 9-10). One of these enthusiastic scholars was Bruno Schweizer. Even though his Ahnenerbe-sponsored expedition to Iceland failed to materialise, Schweizer wrote, rather exuberantly, to his colleague I. O. Plaßmann that he was inspired by the new larger duty engendered by the annexation of new territories, “to acquire, what *we* have conquered” (Simon n.d.: 23, my emphasis). He was given this opportunity in the area of Gottschee in present-day Slovenia.

Operating under the impression that the Gottschee community was under threat from emigration, a falling birth-rate, and poverty, Schweizer offered to set up and lead an Ahnenerbe expedition to the territory (Hutton 1999). As Head of the Department of Dialectology and Linguistic Geography in a newly founded Cultural Commission of Gottschee, he proposed an optimistic research plan that encompassed a dictionary of the local dialect, the distribution of a dialectological questionnaire to 160 Gottschee locations, onomastics research, and the collection of folk songs, proverbs, traditions, and customs. Whatever its results, the project is not remembered for its academic merit but for having been one of the main drivers behind the forced resettlement of 167 Gottschee communities into the Reich. The roughly forty thousand inhabitants of Gottschee might have fought passionately

⁶² For the general wartime mobilisation of humanities see Bialas and Rabinbach (2007).

for their rights as a German minority but had shown little or no interest in resettling back to Germany (Oesterle 1994). The expulsion of this otherwise peaceful, bilingual population that engaged in intermarriages and other intercultural practices was implemented under false promises, threats, and violence (Mitja 1993, 2001). In the meantime, the “Cultural Commission” looted the Gottschee libraries and homeland museum, ransacked properties in search of art and cultural treasures, and even disassembled old farm houses with the intention of rebuilding them in an open-air museum back in Germany (Oesterle 1994). Whether it was the case of outright Nazis or mere fellow travellers, the “salvage” of folklore, language, and cultural artefacts did not necessarily mean—as it arguably does nowadays—the protection of the studied communities. “For once the academics had noted the special features and built their ethnographic museums, they would have no further use for the special ‘culture’ they were studying” (Hutton 1999: 152). As soon as the “unique” cultural characteristics of these communities provided the means for professional advancement and justification for the creation of a Great German Reich, they could be dismantled and reunited with their paternal state.

7.7 Postscript

The proposed Ahnenerbe expedition to Iceland might not have carried the dire consequences that a number of other Nazi projects had in the war zones. Yet, the potential outcome of such a project, had it not been for the British invasion at the beginning of the war, should not be underestimated. As Gerd Simon stated, Schweizer’s involvement with Ahnenerbe was far from coincidental and it was only due to the fortunate circumstances that led to the British invasion that any major damages from his research and ideas were avoided in Iceland (n.d.: 26). Given the disastrous effects of the Gottschee project, one wonders what the effects would have been had the Icelandic expedition materialised. Icelanders could have experienced the ransacking of their properties and cultural artefacts, while the scholarly evaluation of the idea that Iceland was a North Germanic outpost and an “Aryan race” could have had a major ideological impact on the population.

Even if there is a certain validity to terms such as “fellow travellers” and “opportunists” to describe those non-Nazi scholars who nevertheless participated in Nazi projects thus, these terms are far from flattering or honorary—or even exculpatory. As the theologian Karl Barth, who was stripped from his position at Bonn University position

following the purge of universities in 1933, stated: “You saw all the academic glory of these professors, and their professional ethical code to boot, collapse like a house of cards before the onrush of unmistakable evil. You saw, with a few honourable exceptions, they all changed their colours; they readjusted themselves and began to pipe loudly or softly, as the case might be, their modulation of the latest tune” (quoted in Pascal 1947: 142–3). Given the increasing influence of such Nazi institutions as Ahnenerbe and Amt Rosenberg on academia, most scholars went in search of a power centre that would back their research. In doing so, the majority of these scholars made ideological concessions and they were slowly radicalised under the leadership of Himmler and the SS.

Yet, the question of whether Hans Kuhn, Bruno Schweizer, and Reinhardt Prinz fully adhered to the Nazi cause may never have a straightforward answer. They were, after all, relatively minor scholars and so have remained somewhat historically obscure. Many of the scholars and academics who operated under the auspices of Himmler’s Ahnenerbe, or for that matter any other Nazi institution, had also refrained from publishing their work when it became clear that the Axis powers would lose the war. It is also quite possible that much of the material that was finally published during the postwar years largely omitted the most explicit racial and *völkisch* theories that typified the Nazi dogma. In some other cases, as the one of Bruno Schweizer, their work was never published.

The same may be said for the photographic record nowadays presented in *Úr torfbæjum inn í tæknöld*. Bruno Schweizer’s images of Iceland had been lain undisturbed for decades and never appeared in any propagandistic literature or academic publication that promoted pseudoscience or the Nazi cause. As the record consists of hundreds of photographs of family members, landscapes, buildings, and portraits, it resembles any other documentary photographic practices and has thus been deemed as politically neutral. Taking into consideration however that fellow travellers and opportunists took advantage of the political circumstances of the era to promote their careers, it is very likely that this photographic record would have been used in propagandistic literature if the Icelandic expedition had taken place. This stance can further be sustained by Bücherl’s (1994) assessment of Schweizer’s character as a ruthless megalomaniac with an “immeasurable hubris,” as well as the effects of his Nazi mega-project in the Gottschee communities.

For Iceland itself, the popular image of the country as an uncorrupted and anti-modern place that fuelled Victorian fantasies, the Wilhelminian Germanomania, and Nazi infatuations

held immeasurable value. Portrayed as the cradle of the Nordic, and by extension Germanic, civilisation, and as a “Hellas of the North,” Icelanders used this image of their country to refine the nationalist rhetoric of independence and to demand national emancipation. Flattered by the international attention, Icelandic elites were prepared to accept any type of doctrine that benefitted their image as civilised and equal to their European counterparts. This led to a rather dangerous flirtation with Nazism. The 1930s Icelandic Nazi Party might have not received broad popular support, but a comfort with fascist ideals in Icelandic society was clearly illustrated elsewhere. Icelandic historians, with a few notable exceptions (see Whitehead 1985), have preferred to avoid dealing with this issue. As a result of the entrenched historical perspective of the nationalist-pragmatist politics of impartiality during the War and the period leading up to it, fellow travellers and opportunists as Bruno Schweizer have been treated with a certain leniency.

Úr torfbæjum inn í tæknöld is certainly not the only publication that exhibits this leniency. What makes it unique however, is how it exists beyond the realm of scholarship and historiography. The three attractive volumes of *Úr torfbæjum inn í tæknöld* are not only found on the dusty bookshelves of scholars and academics, classrooms, and libraries but in domestic environments. Resting on coffee tables and amongst family photo-albums, memorabilia, and other personal and cherished objects, the memories of three Nazi opportunists manage to inconspicuously and innocently occupy our intimate spaces. By participating in an intimate household economy, the volumes become cultural artefacts and physical objects that normalise a highly political discourse. That is not to say that this impressive record of memories and images has no intrinsic value. But if we truly want to privilege such records as tools of truth, we must seek an understanding that also takes into account the larger set of political and moral values that surrounded their production.

8. A Place in the World

While it is generally accepted that nationalism has played a role in the development of archaeology in Iceland, there are few academic works that have dealt with the matter in an explicit, methodical manner. In part, this is because the general scholarly discourse on nationalism and archaeology tends to concentrate on the most overt cases, a tendency that encourages the belief that it is only under authoritarian regimes, dictatorships, or other politically contested national contexts that the past is used for political purposes. In that light, the fact that Iceland is a geographically isolated, insular, and culturally homogeneous society, along with the history of its peaceful transition to national independence in the twentieth century, lends itself to a belief that Icelandic archaeology has remained comfortably clear of the influence of nationalism. A corresponding sense that archaeology only played a minor role in the creation of an Icelandic nationalist discourse has further marginalised any rigorous discussion of the subject. The enduring perception of Icelandic archaeological remains as humble and unimpressive has sidelined any scholarly consideration regarding the entanglement of nationalism with archaeology.

Archaeological remains, historical records, and ethnographic evidence, namely the material that archaeologists in Iceland engage with, have nonetheless been continually conscripted to a discourse of civilisation that is deeply tied to nationalism. Icelandic archaeology, history, and ethnography have all remained entangled in a nineteenth-century narrative that spoke of the ancientness and historical continuity of the island nation. Icelandic antiquarians used the sagas to locate archaeological sites; they collected place names and assessed them according to their historical depth and origins, while they appraised architectural remains for their potential monumental significance. These archaeological or archaeology-adjacent discourses were used to attest to the ancientness of the Icelandic people and a degree of civilisation comparable to the rest of the “civilised” world. The Icelandic nationalist movement used antiquities, literature, historical records, and other ethnographic material to show that Icelanders were worthy of an independent national state.

When nationalism is understood as a dynamic and complex cultural system, it becomes clear that fragments of these discourses have survived to this day and continue to exert influence on contemporary scholarly concerns and considerations, as well as on official positions and public debates. Icelandic archaeological material nowadays contributes to the creation of a narrative that speaks of an ancient-yet-modern Icelandic nation. This narrative

rests on a belief that the Icelandic nation has survived through the perseverance of traditions and language, and that antiquity can be a perpetual source of inspiration, having guided the modern Icelandic nation to achieve independence, progress, and prosperity.

This seeming nationalist paradox, that a state can be both ancient and modern, is not unique to Iceland. According to Bhabha (1990: 1), the vision of a modern future that is simultaneously progressive and regressive, traditional and modern is illustrative of an ambivalence inherently embedded in nationalist ideologies. Similarly, political theorist Tom Nairn (1977, 1997) sees the retrospective look at the past as forming an integral part of national ideologies, without which nations might have never materialised. Keeping in mind that nations at large proved to be successful at realising the project of modernity, Nairn suggests that the nationalist preoccupation with a seemingly anachronistic past “must have a functionality in modern development” (1977: 342). If anything, nationalism is a Janus-faced ideology that constantly forces the nation to negotiate the drastic changes brought by modernity with the traditional ways of life that it elevates.

But the paradoxes of nationalism do not lie in this bi-directionality. There was nothing particularly unmodern or irrational in looking to the past for the future’s sake. According to the nineteenth-century romantics, there was something inherently modern in the cultural achievements of the distant past. Monumental architecture, ancient inscriptions, coins, and literature were not simply relics of a past that spoke of the nation’s greatness in antiquity; they also manifested a degree of modernity upon which national progress and development could be built. Ancient literature in particular, was reserved a special place in the rhetoric of modernity. It represented the “intermediary stage of historical development in which society has developed beyond its infancy but has not yet attained the full maturity of modernity” (Bauman & Briggs 2003: 160). Standing in between primitiveness and civilisation, the literary achievements of the distant past were seen as the product of societies that embraced and combined the best characteristics of two contrasting worlds: the world of senses, passion, and irrationality embedded in the emotional side of humanity and the world of rationality and cultural refinement evident in progressive societies. Having become part of a historical ideology of progress, these literary societies were envisioned as being on the brink of achieving modernity.

This romantic vision of a modernity that was founded not only on the impersonal realities of technology and science but also on emotions was a reflection of the tensions

produced by the rapid changes and social transformations of the nineteenth century. Ancient literature could infuse the cold-steel modernity of the nineteenth century with some sort of warmer, essential humanity, remnants of which could still be seen in those parts of society that were nonetheless thought of as backwards and underdeveloped. When these remnants were collected, regulated and cultivated in an appropriate manner they could inspire modern developments. This understanding of the role of the past for the future's sake was also in accord with the nineteenth-century social evolutionary theory that claimed that superior civilisations are characterised by their ability to persevere while resisting change (Hawkins 1995). In this paradoxical appropriation of Darwinism, the notion of historical continuity and perseverance could be used to argue for a nation's strength to face the challenges of modern society. The references to ancestry and a common past for the nation and its subjects thus did not only serve to legitimise the nation's creation; antiquity and continuity came to be seen as indicative of nations that not only survive but also prosper. Hence, the call of intellectual elites to preserve and recreate an ancient yet modern culture was not only a means of asserting a national continuity and identity but also a way of developing and progressing.

This discovery of the modern in ancient times is one of the most novel inventions of nationalism, one that rests on the perception that those civilisations destined to become nations have, in fact, always been rather modern. To that extent, the evocation of the past in the nationalist rhetoric of the nineteenth century had just as much to do with modernity as it had to do with the creation of national identities themselves. The image of a Janus-faced nationalism that looks both to the past and to the future is therefore only a paradox if there is a clear dichotomy between the past and present. It juxtaposes a past that is inherently primitive, *unmodern* and static with a present that is essentially modern, progressive, and transformative. But the reality is that the rhetoric of nationalism employed the past as an indicator of an inevitable modernity or to predict the nation's fitness for modernity.

This is not to say that nationalism is not entangled in paradoxes. One of the ambiguities that nationalism embraces is the way in which, as an ideology, it is not always a product of the national scene. As Anne-Marie Thiesse (1999: 1) has stated, there is "nothing more international than the construction of national identities." In the case of Iceland, Hálfðanarson (1995: 767) noted that Icelandic nationalism is the product of imported nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideologies. Icelandic nationalism was first cultivated in the metropolitan environment of Copenhagen, where Icelandic students first encountered the

basic tenets of Fichte's national philosophy and Herder's concept of the *Volksgeist*. This urban, modern, and cosmopolitan environment was one of the hubs of an international network of scholars, philosophers, writers, and artists who were crucial in the dissemination of Romantic nationalism. It is not accidental that the likes of Rasmus Rask and Konrad Maurer were pivotal in introducing some of the basic tenets of Romantic ideals to Icelandic intellectuals. Nationalism might have conceptualised the ancient medieval literature of the sagas as an inextricable part of the Icelandic identity, but the heritage of the Icelandic sagas only gained national significance through a scholarly discourse that was largely imported.

There is also a paradox in the fact that essentialising notions of national continuity, purity, and authenticity are substantiated by a forceful combination of past and present discourses. Like any other national narrative, the Icelandic national story anchors discourses that may be otherwise irrelevant to the nation and tailors them to fit its ideological outlook. The paradigm of an ancient-yet-modern nation, as exemplified in the Icelandic language discourse and, as of late, in turf architecture, employs a pastiche of disparate ideas and philosophies to sustain the image of an uninterrupted and inherently modern Icelandic nation. It draws on the inclusive human need to communicate, socialise, and forge relations through language and posits this communicative ability as an exclusive ethnic characteristic to be interpreted vis-à-vis the nation. It selects a set of anachronistic discourses in popular psychology, environmental determinism, and literary interpretations to construct a grand narrative of continuity, and presents it as a definitive national characteristic. It similarly blends Romantic ideas of a pure and authentic agrarian life with contemporary environmental concerns to create a modern-yet-ancient image of the nation. In short, it draws on elements from highly incompatible worldviews to create a sense of inevitability of the Icelandic nation. Any ambiguities that arise from this synthesis of disparate discourses and worldviews are settled by cultivating an ideal that speaks of a perpetual and transcendental national spirit that is not bound to history and its limits. This sort of a national narrative does not necessarily invest the past with new meaning. Nor does it have to rewrite and reinterpret history in a drastic manner. It simply has to discover ways through which the nation as an idea can still be relevant to the world.

One of the clearest examples of this is the case of turf architecture. Synonymous with poverty and primitiveness, the turf house had long stood as a symbol of the inability of Icelanders to progress. Though at times generously glossed as a manifestation of the humility

of the Icelandic way of life, it nonetheless spoke of the primitiveness of Icelanders and, by the nineteenth century, it had become a definitive cultural marker that played its own significant part in excluding Iceland from the civilised world. It is only when Iceland began to participate in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century environmental discourses that turf architecture came to signify a degree of modernity and civilisation, reshaping it from a sign of primitiveness and national shame into a symbol of a new modernity. This newly established cultural capital that emerged from introducing turf architecture to modern environmental discourses and the associated search for ecological solutions and green architecture has no doubt played a role in what the former president of Iceland Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson (2009: 22) has called the “historic transformation of the North,” which has accompanied the increasing role of Iceland in the novel political geography of Arctic nations and beyond. Similarly, the efforts to inscribe turf architecture onto the UNESCO World Heritage List are another manifestation of Iceland’s efforts to recast its cultural history, elevating parts of its material heritage that in the past would not have been considered cultural achievements.

The discourse that has surrounded the Icelandic sagas is another clear manifestation of the nationalist aspiration to create an image of Iceland as an inherently civilised and, in many respects, modern nation. The entanglement of the Icelandic language and the saga genre with modernity is a staple of the Icelandic nationalist rhetoric. The fact that the Icelandic struggle for independence had, from its early beginnings, grounded its demands for national emancipation on the basis that Icelanders speak a common, ancient, and uncorrupted language is, on the one hand, quite rightly understood as an effort to dislodge the hegemonic status of Denmark over Iceland and prove that the Icelandic community was worthy of running its own affairs as an independent state. However, the desire to link the Icelandic national identity to a language and an ancient and traditional literature was also about Icelanders themselves. As Hálfðanarson (2007 [2001]: 133-134) has suggested, Icelanders had to learn in some respects how to become Icelanders. This is evident in the efforts to canonise the language, elevate the status of the Icelandic sagas into literary masterpieces, and to educate Icelanders to identify themselves with their national culture in certain ways.

Nowadays, the literary heritage and literate practices of Icelanders are perceived as the core of the Icelandic national identity and the most important part of its cultural history. The alleged contemporary enthusiasm for reading the sagas and other literary works, as well as the fact that Icelanders publish more books per capita in the world, sustains the perception that

Icelanders have somehow been historically endowed with a will for intellectual wellness. This image of an inherently scholarly, bookish, and literary Icelandic nation is nowadays stronger than ever, and it is quite intimately associated with the perception that Icelandic is an ancient yet modern language, as well as with the concept that the Icelandic saga genre is not only a unique historical achievement but one that embodies the inherently modern character of the Icelandic nation.

Icelandic nationalist elites have continually sought to appropriate and colonise the discourses and practices that surround the saga manuscripts. They asserted an ideological hegemony over the Icelandic sagas and manuscripts by subscribing to standards of academic legitimacy and views of the past that were more acceptable to the eyes of “civilised world.” The fact that once upon a time such cultural treasures as the Icelandic manuscripts might have been laid on the dirt floors of turf houses and handled by uneducated and ignorant peasants did not conform to the more civilised code of contact with antiquities practised by the Western world. The narrative of a perceived misuse of manuscripts outside of controlled scholarly environments is a by-product of a colonial-cum-nationalist mentality that perceived the use and meaning of ancient objects in the daily lives of indigenous populations in colonies and peasant communities of national states—or states to be—as a direct sign of backwardness, ignorance, and barbarity. This anxiety of the nationalist elites for a place in the civilised world may still influence the ways in which we limit our research agendas.

Likewise, toponymic research appears to follow a political geography that alludes to an anachronistic dichotomy in the discourse of nationalism: the civilised, inclusive, and progressive version of “civic nationalism” and the more conservative, exclusive, and often violent “ethnic nationalism.” In this imaginary political geography, place names in the “civic” Western world appear to be historically stable, while those in the more “ethnic” Eastern Europe, former colonies, Middle East, and other turbulent national settings, are perceived as contested and unstable. The absence of any major works on the relationship between nationalism and toponymy in Iceland is informative on its own in the way that it suggests that the matter is not relevant. But the fact that a discourse on changing place names did exist, preoccupying scholars, authorities and institutions, as well as segments of the Icelandic population is a telltale sign of the efforts, or simply the desire, to appropriate the Icelandic landscape toward nationalist aesthetics and views of the past. Such a discourse manifests the need to look at the Icelandic national identity afresh without any clear affiliations to moments

of history that one would prefer to forget, which in turn spurred debates over the relevance of certain place names to the contemporary needs, prestige and aesthetics of modern Iceland.

The impulse to appropriate moments of history is still seen today in cultural products that employ mnemonic records in order to legitimise certain political ideologies and beliefs. The photographic archive of three German scholars, as presented in the volumes of *Úr torfbæjum inn í tækniöld*, has nowadays become an inextricable part of a political economy on memory that attempts to disengage Iceland from the influence of the Nazi dogma and fascist beliefs. Through such cultural artefacts attempts are made to reproduce the rather popular perception that the Icelandic nation was immune to the fascist rhetoric in such a way as to cast aside any political stance that might have deviated from the democratic ethos that has allegedly pervaded the Icelandic polity and the aim of national independence.

Together, the use of these cultural objects speaks to the deeply embedded desire of Icelandic nationalists to place the country in the league of civilised nations. One of the anxieties of the Icelandic nationalist elites was for Iceland to be perceived as a civilised nation. This has generally been attributed to the fact that Iceland was always the subject of a rather mixed European discourse since the time of Saxo Grammaticus and Adam of Bremen in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Despite the fact that modern Icelanders possessed the ability to read and write, recite the sagas, and compose poetry, they were also parsed as childlike, lazy, and primitive. The Icelandic predisposition toward the world of letters, its heroic Nordic mythology, and its ancient language might have pointed toward a past that suited the Western norms of civilisation, but these were largely counterbalanced by the lack of monuments or other notable antiquities as well as the poverty and unhygienic habits of the population which signified a cultural stagnation or decay and the inability to progress.

This ambiguity has had a great impact on the development of Icelandic nationalism. Icelandic nationalist elites were often quick to react when Icelanders were measured against those indigenous colonial populations that appeared to be explicitly “uncivilised” and “barbaric.” Any suggestion that Icelanders resembled “uncultured savage ethnicities” was often taken as a deliberate effort to belittle Icelanders and disgrace them “in the eyes of the cultivated world” (Gísli Sveinsson, in Loftsdóttir 2008: 183). In this context, the Icelandic nationalist movement largely aspired to show to the world that Icelanders were as civilised as the other European nation and thus worthy of running their own independent state.

The production of an Icelandic national culture was nonetheless fashioned to suit a model of civilisation and modernity that was deeply rooted in the colonial rhetoric. Nationalist elites imposed a set of external and alien values on the general population. It involved efforts at identifying monuments and landmarks, the naming or renaming of the land, and the purification of the language, including the creation of new native terms. These undertakings were accompanied by the creation of new educational standards and acceptable views of the past. Through these processes, the Icelandic population was made to adopt certain behaviours, aesthetics, and understandings of their newly emerging nation. It goes without saying that, through the nationalising process, the Icelandic nationalist elites assumed a hegemonic role in matters of finance, education, administration, and culture that kept them at the forefront of Icelandic society. This suggests that, even as it was a struggle against a colonial power, the production of the Icelandic state as a modern nation was itself a form of colonisation. The adoption of a Western European discourse that positions the nation as the culturally and morally superior form of societal organization along with its pronouncements on language, race, religion, history, and culture reveals this entanglement of the nationalist elites with the colonial rhetoric of civilisation.

The assumption that archaeology did not play a crucial role in this Icelandic national story is not necessarily flawed. Even though archaeology is a discipline that nourishes national history and national identity, it does not always assume centre stage. National narratives also feed off of other disciplines such as history, philology, and anthropology (Díaz-Andreu 2014). Depending on how the nation and national identity are conceived, a number of these disciplines will assume a more central role. In the case of Iceland, the fact that the national language is seen as key to identity has brought philology to the forefront. Archaeology, on the other hand, holds a higher status in countries where archaeologists can provide data that verifies the existence of a Golden Age and substantiates the idea of national greatness. The Parthenon in Greece, the Colosseum in Italy, and the Gyza Pyramids in Egypt, are in this instance some examples that attest to the significance of archaeology.

The fact that archaeology cannot provide such compelling narratives in certain national contexts does not mean that the discipline is not entangled with nationalism. Nationalism is not simply a political programme, but a cultural system, ideology, and ontology that defines people's place in society and organises their daily routines, bodily social existence, imagination, and dreams (Anderson 1991 [1983]; Gourgouris 1996; Herzfeld

1992). It is an organising frame of reference that guides the meaning of the nation—a dynamic process that reconstructs itself and its social agents. In this dynamic process, as Díaz-Andreu (2014: 5145) has argued, the role of archaeologists “as data providers for writing the record of the national past is still needed, as national history is not a static narrative, but one that needs to be continuously negotiated and recreated.”

By paying an increased attention to the materials that constitute the nation and the discourses about them, this work has sought to shed further light on the dynamic, ontological understanding of nationalism. The materials with which archaeologists work with have always been entangled in colonialist-nationalist rhetorics of civilisation and very particular visions of modernity. The effects of this entanglement are still felt in a wide array of disciplines, not only archaeology. The binary tensions between cultural greatness and savagery, and modernity and primitiveness that emerge from the ambiguous political status of Iceland are still carried, often unremarked, in terminologies, research questions, and interpretations. By not examining them critically, we inadvertently participate in a discourse of civilisation that has long been integral to both the nationalist and colonialist rhetorics, one that aims to differentiate the nations of the world according to various degrees of civilisation. An archaeological sensitivity towards materiality and material culture is in this instance crucial in recognising the influences that have shaped nationalist discourses and views of the past and disentangling them from the political agenda of nationalism.

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