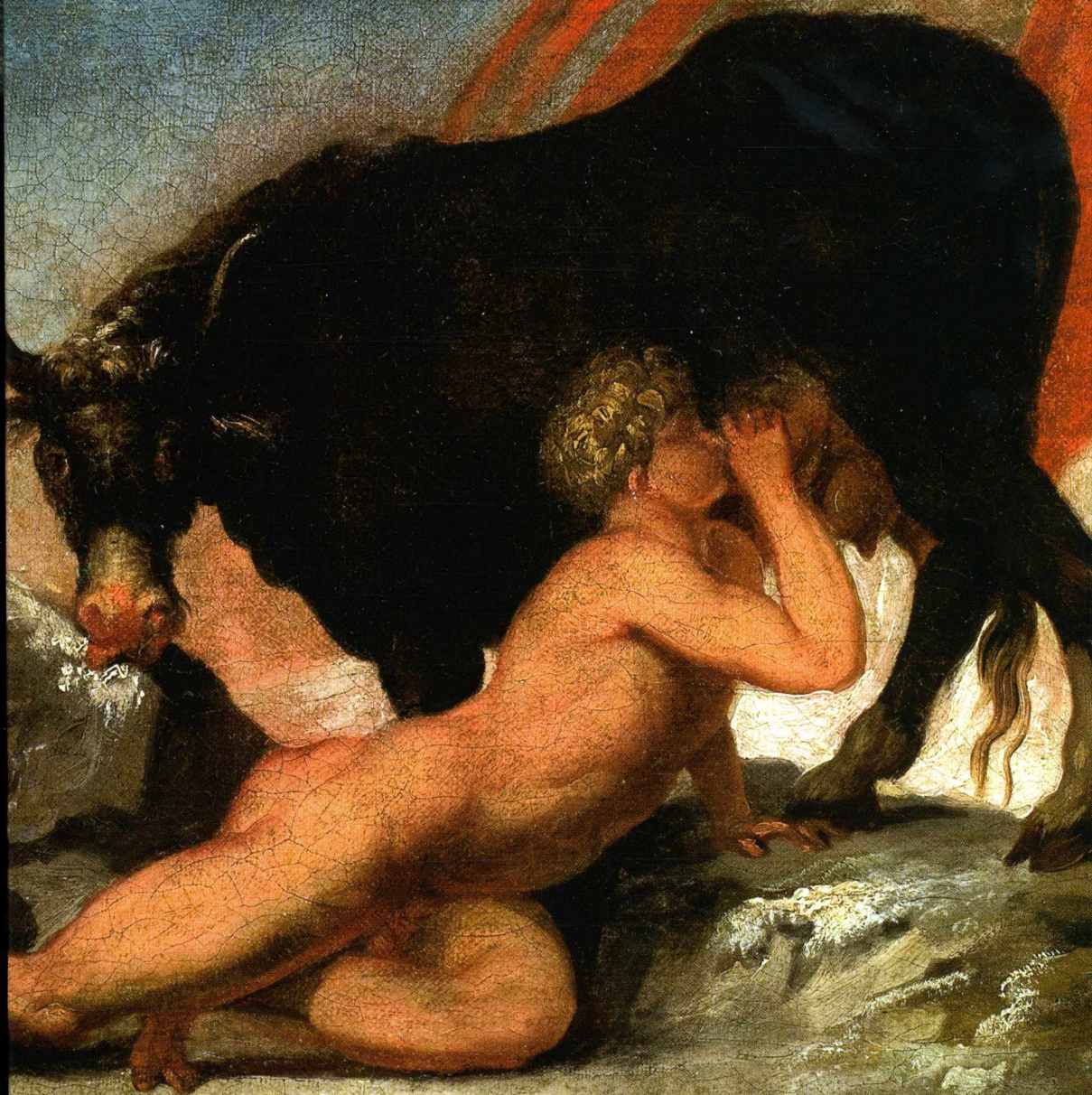


# Det norrøne og det nationale



Redigeret af Annette Lassen



# Det norrøne og det nationale

Studier i brugen af Islands gamle litteratur i  
nationale sammenhænge i Norge, Sverige,  
Island, Storbritannien, Tyskland og Danmark

Redigeret af Annette Lassen



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Bók þessa má ekki afrita með neinum hætti,  
svo sem ljósmyndun, prentun, hljóðritun,  
eða á annan sambærilegan hátt, að hluta  
eða í heild, án skriflegs leyfis höfundar og útgefanda.

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## *Beowulf* and the Icelandic Conquest of England

Of the two poles of colonialism, the Centre and the Periphery, Iceland has usually been associated, if at all, with the latter.<sup>1</sup> And yet deep in the Icelandic psyche there surely lurks a dream of dominion. The poet and statesman Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940) was eloquent about the five centuries of Icelandic colonization of Greenland,<sup>2</sup> and his 'imperialistic designs on ... Greenland' (to quote Stefán Einarsson 1957, 268) were echoed widely. In 1931, the Icelandic *Alþingi* (parliament) unanimously passed a declaration asserting Iceland's rights and interests in Greenland, and such claims were still being voiced as late as the middle of the century (Jón Dúason 1953, 3; see also 1949). Many Icelanders today see the present *útrás* or 'excursion' of Icelandic business concerns into the trans-national financial sector as a revitalization of the old Viking expansive genius.

I shall not address these latest Icelandic ventures in this paper: we are too close to them, and variously too delighted or too dismayed to understand their significance – or insignificance.

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks are due to Helga Kress and Sverrir Tómasson for providing me with essential leads in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Einar Benediktsson 1924. His attitude demonstrates a total disregard for indigenous rights typical of the colonialism of his day: 'uncivilised Eskimos have no territorial rights (*landsréttur*) according to international law (*þjóðalög*) and recognized procedures for establishing judicial practice (*réttarskipulag*) in territories inhabited by savages' [*ósiðaðir Eskímóar eiga engan landsrétt samkvæmt þjóðalögum og viðurkenndum venjum um stofnun réttarskipulags í bygðum villimanna*] (51).

Although I shall return briefly to the modern era towards the end of the paper, I shall spend most of my time in medieval Iceland, with its poignant awareness of both the peripheral nature of its society and its (perhaps concomitant) role as custodian of an older, and more central, cultural heritage. In particular, I shall consider the recurrent medieval Icelandic assumption of a widespread monoglot community in the North Atlantic, whereby the Norse tongue, *norrena* or *dönsk tunga*, is represented as being spoken and understood not only throughout the mainland Nordic counties and the North Atlantic islands, but also throughout England – while the rest of the British Isles is left to the Irish.

Although modern scholarship has not generally endorsed this vision, my contention is that the notion of a widespread north Germanic linguistic community in the North Atlantic at a certain period in the Middle Ages can be taken – in several very clear senses – to be accurate. In the first place, we may not lightly dismiss the fact that Icelandic audiences and readers of the sagas accepted this pan-Scandinavian vision all the way up to the time when the historicity of the sagas themselves began to fall into disrepute towards the middle of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup> To ignore these earlier readings would be to beg all the questions raised by twentieth-century literary theory concerning the readerly text, concerning whose fact and whose fiction we are addressing. But this is not to be the drift of my argument here: instead I wish to examine the medieval view and speculate a little on its provenance.

The *Beowulf* scholar John D. Niles alludes to the oral-formulaic theory of Old English poetry with the comment that “A hypothetical Icelandic or Norwegian poet setting out to retell the Old English story of *Beowulf* could probably have done so without overwhelming difficulty” (Niles 1983, 142). Niles is referring to the idea that formulaic oral composition in Old Icelandic would be similar in form and function to that in Old English – that the shift

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<sup>3</sup> Sigurður Nordal’s essay on Hrafnkels saga (Sigurður Nordal 1940) is generally accepted as marking the turning-point in this development.



of language would be a cosmetic affair of little importance. This is, if you like, the ‘hard’ version of the hypothesis that Andrew Wawn invokes when he refers to the “stylistic contiguities” between Old English verse and Old Icelandic *fornyrðislag*. Of Jón Espólin’s early 19th-century translation of *Brunanburh*, Wawn says: “Here was someone to relish the parallels of alliteration, compound vocabulary, and formulaic phrase between the poetic languages of two north Atlantic Islands” (Wawn 2006). We could also comfortably apply this description to Benedikt Gröndal’s rendering of *Brunanburh* (Sverrir Tómasson 2003); and in the twentieth-century to Stefán Einarsson with his translation of *Widsið* (Stefán Einarsson 1936), Jón Helgason with his fragments of *Déor* (Jón Helgason 1962), and, in a slightly different mode, as we shall see, Halldóra B. Björnsson with her *Beowulf* (*Bjólfskviða*, 1983). I for one feel rather more comfortable with Andrew Wawn’s formulation than with John Niles’s concept of an Icelandic oral-formulaic skáld, although as we shall see Halldóra B. Björnsson has some surprises in store for us.

But let us first deal with the Anglo-Norse scenario of the sagas, not only the explicit understanding that Icelanders and Londoners spoke the same tongue, but the notable lack of a linguistic problematic between English and Norse. The Irish princess and slave Melkorka, in *Laxdæla saga*, teaches her son Ólafr pá Irish ‘so that it will not matter to you where you make land in Ireland’.<sup>4</sup> The significance of this passage rests in the fact that nowhere else in the sagas do we read of any linguistic preparations for journeys abroad, and here the assumption seems to be that if Ólafr makes land in England he will be able to use his native Icelandic brand of Norse. A succession of Icelandic poets and warriors, from Egill Skallagrímsson himself to that dubious character Sneglu-Halli,<sup>5</sup> get

<sup>4</sup> “Heiman hef ég þig búið svo sem ég kann best ok kennt þér frsku að mæla, svo að þig mun það eigi skipta hvar þig ber að Írlandi” (*Laxdæla saga* Chap. 20; *ÍS* III, 1560).

<sup>5</sup> Sneglu-Halla þáttur, *ÍS* III, 2206-2231. Magnús Fjalldal (1993, 606) lists the Icelandic visits to the English court; see also Magnús Fjalldal 2005.

on famously with English kings, reciting Icelandic poetry for them and even, in Egill's case, commanding their armies and winning their battles. And it's a pity the charlatan Sneglu-Halli didn't follow this example, for the king he is supposed to have visited and fooled into believing he was a great skáld was none other than Harold son of Godwin – if Sneglu-Halli had stayed to fight with him at Hastings, he would surely have changed the course of European history.

The explicit idea of Anglo-Norse linguistic unity surfaces in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, the Saga of Gunnlaugr 'serpent-tongue', written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. According to the saga, Gunnlaugr visits the court of Ethelred in London shortly after the turn of the millennium and recites a poem in his honour. Ethelred, who ruled c. 979-1016, surnamed 'the Unready' (i.e. 'the ill-advised') in English sources because of his incompetent defence against Scandinavian encroachment, is portrayed in the Icelandic sagas as a great monarch – *Gunnlaugs saga* calls him *góður höfðingi*, 'a good prince'. According to the saga, 'At that time there was one and the same language in England, Norway and Denmark; but when William the Bastard conquered England there was a change of language; from then on French was current in England, for William was of French stock.'<sup>6</sup> This may be read as articulating an Icelandic understanding of the changes wrought in English by the Norman Conquest, after which the vocabularies of Icelandic and English, with their common Germanic origins, began to diverge as English absorbed French loanwords. More probably, however, the focus of this passage is the change of language at the English court. The Danish Swein Forkbeard had gained the English throne in 1014, and his son Cnut and Cnut's sons had ruled from 1016 to 1042; it seems to be this Scandinavian or semi-Scandinavian court that the saga-writer sees as being replaced by the Normans. From an Icelandic point of view the greatest change

<sup>6</sup> "Ein var þá tunga á Englandi sem í Noregi og í Danmörku, en þá skiptust tungur í Englandi er Vilhjálmur bastardur vann England; gekk þaðan af í Englandi valska, en hann var þaðan ættaður" (*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ÍS II, 1175).

after the Norman Conquest was that Icelandic *dróttkvætt* poetry lost all currency, as it were overnight.

Magnús Fjalldal points out the doubtful historicity of the story of Gunnlaugr at the court of Ethelred, noting amongst other things that it seems to coincide nicely with the St. Brice's Day massacre of all Danes (i.e. people of Nordic countries) in England on November 13, 1002, by royal decree, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Magnús Fjalldal 1993, 602-3; 2005, 5). But the credibility of the details of *Gunnlaugs saga* has little bearing on the status of the Norse tongue in England. The final years of Ethelred's reign saw the bloody struggle between the English and Scandinavian kings for supremacy in England which was to result in three decades of Scandinavian rule, and in fact the St. Brice's day massacre is a clear indication of a significant Scandinavian presence, for the *Chronicle* attributes the massacre to Ethelred's belief that they wished to ensnare him (*besyrwan*) and take the throne. Magnús Fjalldal suggests (1993, 602-3; 2005, 7) that it is "curious to note that scholars have tended to avoid considering the plainest reading of the 'language passage', namely that Old Norse was spoken in all of England at the time of Ethelred". But this is only "the plainest reading" if we assume that the writer of *Gunnlaugs saga* used terms such as *tunga* and *norrena* with the meanings they have in modern Icelandic – and this, as we shall see, is hardly the case. Of course the Old English and Old Norse texts that have come down to us are clearly written in very different languages, and on that count it is difficult for us to conceive of any viable level of comprehension between eleventh-century English and Norse speakers. It seems, too, if we trace the traditional family tree of Indo-European languages, that Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse are rather too distant cousins to be called 'dialects' of each other. August Schleicher's *Stammbaum* of Indo-European languages (1860) remains the popular view of language change to this day, in spite of early objections,<sup>7</sup> and in spite of a general agreement

<sup>7</sup> Schleicher's model and Johannes Schmidt's (1782) rival wave theory are summarized in Nielsen 1989, 109-116.



amongst philologists that the actual processes of language change are far more complex than simple movements of disintegration and bifurcation. The tangle of English and Norse dialects spoken during the years of maximum contact in London and the Danelaw in the early eleventh century was surely far too promiscuous for tidy genealogy,<sup>8</sup> and must have been very different from the classical language of the Icelandic texts, written some three or four hundred years later and read by us today in standardized orthography, punctuation and layout.

It is important to bear in mind that the medieval Icelandic term *tunga*, as far as it applies to the vernacular tongues of Europe, simply does not translate into our 'language' – or *langue*, *Sprache* or *jazyk*. These modern terms refer to standardized, élite, written, national idioms, each of which possesses grammars, dictionaries, and strict rules of spelling, and prevails over a wide and well-defined geographical area; its out- and inlying dialects are largely conceived by its users as substandard embarrassments, and have no public voice. Apart from Latin (which was not a national tongue either), such conglomerations did not exist in the 14th century at the time of the writing of *Gunnlaugs saga*, any more than in the 11th. The statement that the same *tunga* was spoken in England, Norway and Denmark has little to do with 'language' in the modern sense.

It is safe to argue that for most European speakers at the turn of the millennium, apart from the few who lived in large towns,<sup>9</sup> any stranger, anyone whose face or name was unknown, would speak a different dialect, one which rendered normal communication more or less problematic. This becomes clear if we plot what we know of medieval dialect geography against estimates of contemporary pop-

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<sup>8</sup> For a recent discussion of the close relationship between Northern and Western Germanic, and a survey of the main trends of scholarly opinion, see Townend (2002, 21-26).

<sup>9</sup> Loyn (1971, 116) quotes the figure of some 10 % of the population living in towns, according to *Doomsday Book*; perhaps we can hazard a guess of 1 % for the large towns, where townfolk might be strangers to each other.

ulation sizes. Among the wealth of later medieval English manuscripts, many can be assigned exact or close geographical locations according to their material. Following this, other manuscripts can be geographically located by comparing them linguistically with the localised ones, "in favourable circumstances (where there is good backing of localised material) perhaps even to within a few miles" (Macintosh 1989, 27). Thus the manuscript of the late 14th-century *Gawain and the Green Knight* "can only fit with reasonable propriety in a very small area either in SE Cheshire or just over the border in NE Staffordshire. That is to say, its dialectal characteristics in their totality are reconcilable with those of other (localised) texts in this and only this area" (op. cit. 25). If we project these "few miles" of local dialect on to estimates of population densities of the time we should have a rough estimate of the number of people speaking that particular dialect. The poll tax of 1377 shows an English population of about 2.2 millions; "from 1377 the population continued to decline until it reached a bottom of not much above 2 million at the end of the century" (Russel 1958, 118-119). This would indicate that the speakers of the *Gawain* dialect at the end of the 14th century were no more than a few hundred: there were no strangers in the group.

There is little to suggest that this dialectal abundance was any greater in the fourteenth century than in the eleventh. There is of course a startling contrast between the degree of standardization apparent in the extant Old English manuscripts on the one hand, and the exuberant range of widely differing Middle English dialects on the other; but it does not reflect linguistic reality. The early movement towards a national linguistic identity apparent in the Old English manuscripts, a movement nipped in the bud by the Norman Conquest, was not echoed on the streets of London or in the countryside. People must have been, by our standards, highly tolerant of strange ways of speaking, used to having to adjust to semi-systematic differences of pronunciation, grammar and meaning in a way most modern English speakers would find quite impossible. Exchange of information, trade, banter and argument

were bound to occur in market places and seaports throughout Scandinavia, Britain and the Germanic mainland between strangers speaking dialects so unlike each other that the modern European, accustomed to a relatively gentle linguistic terrain broken only at national borders, would experience them as mutually incomprehensible languages.

This is surely the reason for the relative silence of the sources concerning linguistic diversity in the middle ages: it was an inevitable logistic of any mobility, like providing fodder for the horses – too commonplace for comment. Thus Boethius mentions difficulties of travel, differences of language and insecure trade in the same breath: *tum difficultate itinerum tum loquendi diversitate tum commercii insolentia* (Cons. Phil. II.vi) – these are factors adduced by Philosophia as hampering the spread of individual fame. For Boethius's readers they would be familiar as the woes of travel.

In England, difficulties of communication with people across the seas were in many cases no greater than with speakers of other varieties of English within the British Isles, and in some cases they would actually be less. Nielsen (1989, 116-120) gives modern examples of relative dialectal uniformity across the sea-straits of southern Scandinavia and large waterways such as the Rhine,<sup>10</sup> and points out that such waterways have in the past facilitated rather than hindered communication. Linguistic contiguity with Germanic peoples across the Channel and the North Sea was in many cases closer than with the dialects divided by the forests and fens of England or the Continent. Waterways were also channels of population movement, and the fact that extensive areas of England at the turn of the millennium had mixed Norse and English populations would simply add to existing dialectal diversity. In the Danelaw in the north and east of England skirting on London, this mixture was to result in a dialect which served as a major component in the development of modern Standard English.

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<sup>10</sup> More exactly, he cites a significant lack of dialectal isoglosses coinciding with these waterways.



There is thus little doubt that an Icelander would have been able to make himself understood in eleventh-century London in a way that he could not have done in Rome. In London, his dialect would simply have been yet another variety of that which many people necessarily spoke. Matthew Townend's (2002) meticulous analysis of the state and status of the Scandinavian language in England during the Middle Ages makes clear the high degree of mutual intelligibility that must have obtained between English and Norse speakers of the time; Townend invokes Hockett's (1987) concept of a 'switching code', and Milliken and Milliken's (1993) concept of 'dialect congruity', to indicate that speakers of phonemically congruous language varieties apply systematic decoding techniques to understand each other's speech (Townend 2002, 44-5). What I feel is missing, however, in Townend's account is a recognition of the universal and unremarkable nature of such communication: it was not confined to Norse and English, but must also have been common practice between the various English dialects themselves. If we bear in mind that variations *within the English language* of the time were comparable with the differences between the varieties of English and Norse that were rubbing shoulders in London, then it becomes clear that our modern understanding of what constitutes a national language will not help us to clarify the medieval situation. Townend's demonstration of the mutual intelligibility of Norse and English should awaken us to the inadequacy of our modern terminology, which leads us to assume greater differences between the two different 'languages', Norse and English, than between the varying 'dialects' of English. Townend assumes that the Old Norse term *dönsk tunga* implies that "the language spoken in Scandinavia throughout the Middle Ages [...] was a unitary one, with only minor dialectal variations" (2002, 139). My contention however is that the term *tunga* itself must necessarily have embraced a far wider range of dialects than we today are prepared to tolerate, and that there is scant evidence for any less dialectal diversity in Scandinavia in the Middle Ages than today. As we shall see shortly, the term *dönsk tunga* was used in various medieval

Icelandic sources to refer to a language continuum which included Old English. Old English writers, on the other hand, show no lack of political and religious motivation for emphasising their distance from the heathen Nordic invaders (Townend 2002, 171-179); but the evidence for mutual intelligibility is at the same time overwhelming. We need not look very far in modern Europe for examples of this same phenomenon: the Scandinavian 'languages' are hardly more than dialects, while the two opposing national tongues, Croatian and Serbian, are almost identical. *Language*, as most dialectologists agree, is a socio-political rather than a linguistic concept (cf. Chambers and Trudgill 1994, 3-15).

Of course the concept of a standard, 'correct' language was not foreign to medieval Europe, although only three of them were recognized as having existed since the beginning of the world: Hebrew, Greek and Latin – Arabic, through which so much passed from Greek into Latin, is largely ignored. Other 'languages' were fluid and indistinct: the German peoples, says Isidor, are *dissonant* in their languages (*linguis dissonae*); by which (another mistake of translation) we assume him to mean that their languages are dissonant, discordant, harsh, oafish. And so he may also imply; but the adjective *dissonus* means primarily 'having different sounds' and by extension 'variable, in disagreement, unstable'. Isidor speaks in one breath of the Germans as having non-standard weapons, multicoloured clothes, and *dissonant* languages; their dissonance being evident in their variability, their lack of standardization, the 'uncertain origin of their words'.<sup>11</sup> They have no grammar, since only the classical languages have rules of grammar. The mediaeval romance vernaculars are manifestly corruptions of Latin; in Isidor's terms they are solecisms. The Germanic lan-

<sup>11</sup> "Germanicae gentes dictae, quod sint inmania corpora inmanesque nationes saevissimis duratae frigoribus; qui mores ex ipso caeli rigore traxerunt, ferocis animi et semper indomiti, raptu venatuque viventes. Horum plurimae gentes variae armis, discoloribus habitu, linguis dissonae, et origine vocabulorum incertae" (Isidor, *Etymologiarum Lib. IX. ii*).

guages, on the other hand, have no classical norm to fall back on. One German says *Beowulf is mín nama* and the other says *Nafn mitt er Bjólfr*, and although these are manifestly aberrations each of the other, there is no correct form to measure them by. This is what Isidor means by dissonance. In the civilized world, where one says *mi chiamo Giovanni* and another *me llamo Juan*, they are clearly both using lamentably provincial pronunciations of the 'correct' form *me clamo Ioannes*, which is vulgar Latin for the classical formula: *est mihi nomen Ioannes*.<sup>12</sup> In the Latin world, these are solecisms. Dissonances on the other hand have no classical foundation: they are solecisms without a Centre.

The 'language passage' in *Gunnlaugs saga* exemplifies the desire to rise above the charge of instability, to evoke another Centre at the heart of northern civilization. Norway and Denmark are yoked to England, the fount of Christianity in northern Europe, seat of the 'great' English King Ethelred and his Danish successors. It is significant that the saga speaks of the same tongue in Norway, Denmark and England, but does not include Iceland, which is the focus of the story. Iceland necessarily retains its peripheral status: the idiom requires that even native Icelanders returning home 'come out' (*koma út*) to Iceland; and movement from Iceland to the mainland, be it Norway or the British Isles, is 'from the outside' (*utan*). This prefigures a later theme of colonial movement, the integrity of a people who have moved to the Periphery, who can survey the Centre from a distance and see it for what it is. Robert Graves encapsulates this colonial vision:

We, not the City, are the Empire's soul:  
A rotten tree lives only in its rind.  
("The Cuirassiers of the Frontier")

<sup>12</sup> The modern Italian and Spanish forms of 'My name is John' which I offer here are of course wild anachronisms; but my point is that the unwritten varieties of Vulgar Latin spoken in the streets of Rome and Seville in Isidor's time (560-636) would have been hardly less different from each other than the "dissonant" Germanic dialects.

This desire for identity, for belonging to a Centre, is a characteristic of Icelandic writing from the earliest beginnings. The epic poetry of the *Edda* speaks of it in much the same nostalgic tones as those we find in the earlier Old English preoccupation with the epics of the Germanic homelands – the English, too, were well aware of their migrant origins. *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* archive the details of the Icelandic migrations, and establish the venerable continuity of their people. The anonymous First Grammarian, who writes in Iceland in the 12th century, was of course mindful of the Roman Centre and his<sup>13</sup> distance from it. Sverrir Tómasson (1988, 76) shows that the *First Grammatical Treatise* is written in strict accordance with the conventions of medieval Latin rhetoric, and it is clear that the author was a man schooled in the learning of the Centre. But the treatise is an Icelandic departure, a movement towards a vernacular self-identity which defies the Isidorian norm. It is an explicit move towards codification, an endeavour to transcend the mark of *dissonance*; its importance lies not only in the welcome light it sheds on the phonology of 12th-century Icelandic, but also in its significance as a cultural and political statement, the articulation of another linguistic Centre on the fringe of the Empire.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Arguably, anonymity is a characteristic feature of women's writing. But the First Grammarian has been masculine for so long now that I have no power to question his sex in a single sentence.

<sup>14</sup> The standard editions are by Einar Haugen (1972) and Hreinn Benediktsson 1972. The *Treatise* is preserved in the Codex Wormianus AM 242 fol., which also contains Snorri Sturluson's study of Icelandic metrics and classical poetry known as The Prose Edda or *Snorra Edda*, and three other grammatical tracts. One of them, a treatise on rhetoric by Ólafur hvítaskáld Þórðarsson (d.1259), applies the traditional Latin rhetorical terms to Icelandic poetry, adding Icelandic translations for each – a feat which English writers would not emulate for at least three centuries. Most significantly, Ólafur applies the Latin concepts of barbarismus, the barbarian corruption of Latin, and solecismus, the transgression of the rules of grammar, to Icelandic and Old Norse poetry (Sverrir Tómasson 1998, 295-297). Snorri and his nephew Ólafur are thus marking out a poetic and linguistic standard, the Icelandic *dróttkvætt* poetry which the Icelandic sagas portray as flourishing in royal courts throughout the Nordic world, including the British Isles.

According to the First Grammarian, ‘we are of one tongue [with the English], even though one of the two has changed greatly, or both somewhat’ –

allz ver erum æinnar tungu þo at giorz hafi miok onnur tveggia eða nakkvað báðar (*First Grammatical Treatise*, ed. Hreinn Benediktsson, 1972, 208)<sup>15</sup>

Although as Benediktsson points out in his edition (1972, 195) there are no clear indications in the *Treatise* as to the author’s knowledge of English, I join Gunnar Harðarson (1999) in questioning Benediktsson’s view that this passage ‘cannot be taken to show any insight by the F[irst]G[ramm]arian into the historical relationship, in the modern sense, of Icelandic and English’ (1972, 196) but is rather an expression of the biblical explanation for the multiplicity of tongues in the destruction of the Tower of Babel, where God confounded the original single language – *ecce genus unum et labium unum omnium* (Gen.11.6) – once and for all. Of course the First Grammarian would not have recognized the full systematic nature of the relationships between English and Icelandic, and he may well have accepted Babel as a crucial linguistic juncture;<sup>16</sup> but he clearly entertains linguistic change without Babel. His views appear in the second sentence of the *Treatise*:

Enn af því at tungurnar eru ulikar hverr annarri. þær þegar er ór æinni ok hinn somu tungu hafa gengiðz eða greinz ... (*First Grammatical Treatise*, ed. Hreinn Benediktsson, 1972, 206)

<sup>15</sup> I have slightly modified Hreinn Benediktsson’s diplomatic spelling. For the full context of this crucial text, here is his translation (1972, 209), with the sentence I quote given in italics: “Now following their [the English] example – *since we are of the same tongue (with them), even though one of the two (tongues) has changed greatly, or both somewhat* – in order that it may become easier to read and write, as is now customary in this country as well, [...] I have composed an alphabet for us Icelanders ...”.

<sup>16</sup> But see note 21 below.



It is remarkable how often crucial passages in old and fragmentary corpora, pivotal passages on which our understanding of the spirit of the times depends, turn out to be obscure or even corrupt. The question of whether Alcaeus and Sappho were lovers hangs on a single uncertain word-division in a fragment of a lyric attributed to Alcaeus; that of whether God grants peace to everybody or just to some people depends on the debated existence of a single Greek sigma.<sup>17</sup> And in the First Grammarian's case these crucial remarks on the relationship between English and Icelandic come down to us in a text which is obscure exactly at that point. Is the relative clause which begins *þær þegar er* restrictive or not? Haugen (*First Grammatical Treatise*, 1972, 13) reads it as non-restrictive:

But because languages are all unlike one another, ever since they parted or branched off from one and the same language....

which implies the Genesis account of Babel. However the word-order of *þær þegar* is unusual, and Hreinn Benediktsson questions earlier assumptions that the relative particle *er* relates to *þegar*, giving the equivalent of *þegar er* 'as soon as'. Instead he suggests that *þær er* go together, giving 'those which' and implying a restrictive clause; and yet he inexplicably goes on to support the Babel reading with his translation:

But because languages differ from each other – which previously parted or branched off from the same tongue –

interpreting "the same tongue" to mean the original pre-Babelian Hebrew. It seems clear to me however that the relationship between *tungurnar ... þær ... er* can only signal a restrictive clause: 'those lan-

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<sup>17</sup> For Alcaeus and Sappho, see fragment 384 and textual variants in Campbell (1990, 404-5): does the text read *mellikhomeide sapphoi* 'sweetly-smiling Sappho' or *mellikhomeides apphoi* 'my sweetly-smiling darling'? The missing sigma is in Luke 2.14: either *kai epi ges eirene en anthropois eudokias* 'and peace on earth to men of goodwill', or ... *en anthropois eudokia* 'peace on earth, goodwill to men'.

languages which differ from each other in that they had previously (*þegar*) parted or branched off from the same tongue' – not all languages, the descendents of Babel, but those that had undergone later developments. Gunnar Harðason (1999, 22 fn.) mentions the possibility that *þegar* is a dittographic scribal error which may be ignored – not a necessary emendation, but one which would clinch the restrictive relative clause. Gunnar Harðason's main argument against the Babel reading is that it introduces an internal contradiction into the text: the phrase *alls vér erum æinnar tungu* 'since we are of one tongue' is the reason given why Icelandic should follow English in its use of an alphabet. But if this 'one tongue' is the pre-Babelian Hebrew, there is no reason to follow English rather than Hebrew (1999, 24). To this I would add that the statement that 'either *or both* of them have changed somewhat' rules out the possibility that one of them is Hebrew, which was seen as the original unchanged language.

It is a mistake to assume that the medieval Church taught unequivocally that the confounding of languages at Babel was the only linguistic change in the world, although this pedestrian interpretation was of course also in evidence.<sup>18</sup> Clear references to language development are not hard to find: Augustine speaks of how some of the descendants of Heber, whose tribe was the only one to retain Hebrew after Babel, 'gradually drifted away to other languages and other nations'<sup>19</sup> and an understanding of language development and change is implicit in the etymology of the *Cratylus* inherited by the Middle Ages. Gunnar Harðason (1999) gives a number of examples of medieval acceptance of diachronic language change, particularly Roger Bacon on the different dialects of French, and Dante's vision of the confusion of tongues at Babel

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Gunnar Harðason (1999, 18) and Hreinn Benediktsson (*First Grammatical Treatise*, 1972, 195) for references to *Veraldarsaga*, with its strict Biblical interpretation of the Babel story.

<sup>19</sup> "ceteris ex progenie illius Heber in linguas paulatim alias et in nationes alias defluentibus" (Aug. Civ. Dei XVI.xii; Augustine 1988, 70-71).

resulting in languages which later further diverged.<sup>20</sup> Gunnar Harðason convincingly assigns this understanding to the First Grammarian, and his view is consonant with my suspicion that we tend to underestimate the medieval capacity for common-sense: many travelled Europeans must have taken the most obvious reason for language diversity – diachronic development – for granted. Changes in language (almost always seen as being for the worse) are a recurrent theme in literatures of all ages. The assumption that language change was not noticed until the eighteenth century is similar to the belief that the evolution of species was unknown before Darwin, in spite of the fact that selective breeding of animals and plants has been a key aspect of human civilisation from earliest times.

My reading, then, is that the First Grammarian saw two closely related dialect continua, Norse and English, as having branched off from one and the same original *tunga*, a (possibly post-Babelian)<sup>21</sup> tongue which was certainly not Hebrew. He is in fact invoking a distinct totality, the larger common identity of those vernaculars which preserve a body of heroic tales, in similar metres and poetic dictions, joined together in Andrew Wawn's 'contiguity'. This tongue, as Gunnar Harðason points out (1999, 25-6), may be associated with that of the 'men of Asia', the *Æsir* or *Asslumenn*, whose language, according to the Prologue of *Snorra Edda*, was spoken 'in Norway and in Sweden, Denmark and Saxony', while in England 'there are ancient place names which appear to belong to another language.'<sup>22</sup> This last state-

<sup>20</sup> Dante's concept of language change as being consonant with the mutability of the heavens (*Paradiso* xxvi.124ff.) is also mentioned by Lass (1997, 358), along with Caxton: "For we englysshe men ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone" (Prologue to *Eneydos*). Lass also quotes Chaucer: "Ye knowen eke that in forme of speche is chaunge / Withinne a thousand yeer" (*Troilus and Criseyde* II, 22-3).

<sup>21</sup> The First Grammarian does not mention Babel, and may not have it in mind at all; as Gunnar Harðason remarks (1999, 20), the Prologue to *Snorra Edda* does not mention Babel either, but sees the *Æsir*'s tongue as post-Diluvian.

<sup>22</sup> "... þeir *Æsir* hafá haft tunguna norður hingat í heim, í Nóreg ok í Svíþjóð, í Danmörk ok í Saxland; ok í Englandi eru forn lands heiti eða staða heiti þau er skilja má at af annarri tungu eru gefin en þessi" (Snorri Sturluson, 1962, 6).

ment seems to imply that the language of the *Æsir* was also current in England, since the accurate observation concerning the Celtic place-name substratum would otherwise be a *non sequitur*. The observation is probably derived from the opening of *Skjöldunga saga* (noted by Anthony Faulkes in Snorri Sturluson 1982, 6n, and Magnús Fjalldal, 2005, 9) which says that the *Æsir* ‘brought with them here to the north the tongue we call *Norræna*, which became current in Saxony, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and in part of England’.<sup>23</sup> Here we must remember again that the tongue called *Norræna* is not conceived by these writers as an integral, standardized ‘language’ as we understand the term, but rather as a group of dialects. In fact the medieval term comes much closer to the understanding of modern historical linguistics than does the popular concept of Old Norse as a ‘language’. Even if we hesitate (as I do not) to suggest that the First Grammarian invokes this full Germanic totality and includes the Germanic mainland, it is clear that the Anglo-Norse domain was enough for his purposes; and thus also for this paper.

The early 13th-century Icelandic Homily Book makes a clear distinction between language and dialect:

... how unprepared we are [i.e. I am] to serve God in that language [*tunga*] and in that dialect [*mállýska*] which you understand and speak as well as we [i.e. I]<sup>24</sup>

This may of course be read as the mere stylistic apposition of two terms for ‘language’ with essentially the same meaning, particularly if we believe that medieval scholars were generally less astute than we are. I would prefer however to read this passage as echoing the informed 13th-century view of language. Roger Bacon (1964,

<sup>23</sup> “tungan kom með þeim norðr higat, er vér köllum norrœnu, ok gekk sú tunga um Saxland, Danmörk ok Svíþjóð, Noreg ok um nokkurn hluta Englands (*Dana-konungasögur*, ed. Bjarni Guðnason, 1982, 39).

<sup>24</sup> “...hve mjök vér erum vanbúnir við því es vér skulum guði þjóna á þá tungu ok á þá mállýsku es ér kunnuð iamt skilja og umb at mæla sem vér” (Leew van Weenen 1993, lv, quoted in Sverrir Tómasson 1998, 294).

III.iii) discusses a passage in Jeremiah (10.11) which is in Aramaic (Bacon's 'Chaldean') and not Hebrew. He illustrates the close relationship of Hebrew and Chaldean by quoting cognate words in both languages, and concludes that 'It is certain that the Chaldean and the Hebrew have the same tongue but different dialects, like the Gaul and the Picard; *for dialect is a peculiarity of language of a territorially demarcated tribe*' (*apud aliquam nationem determinatam*).<sup>25</sup> Bacon's terms for 'language' and 'dialect' are *lingua* and *idioma*, which Gunnar Harðarson aptly – and in a nice medieval vein – characterizes as referring to the 'nature' (*eðli*) of the language on the one hand and the 'manner' (*háttur*) on the other (1999, 16). This, I suggest, is the same distinction as that made in the Icelandic Homily Book, a distinction between 'language', the family of linguistic varieties known broadly as *norrena* or *dönsk tunga*, and 'dialect', the particular variety current in Iceland. My suggestion is that this is how we should understand the First Grammarian's statement that 'we are of one tongue with the English'.

Where then does Halldóra's *Beowulf* come into the story? Is she Niles's hypothetical Icelandic skáld setting out to retell the story of Beowulf? In many ways she is; my (1983) preface to her translation points out that Old English and Icelandic share many common features of syntax and vocabulary, and closely related poetic traditions, that Halldóra makes full use of these relationships, and that her translation provides the Icelandic reader with a close feeling for the original language, its form and rhythm. I shall return to the romantic sentimentality of the writing (which I am almost too embarrassed to quote) at the end of this paper, where I have a point to make about it which I hope will

<sup>25</sup> My translation. Burke has: "For dialect is a particular form of language determined by a nation" Bacon 1962, I. 82), which seems to misconstrue *determinatam* as agreeing with *proprietas* instead of *nationem* – "Et certum est quod Hebraei et Chaldaei eandem habent linguam. sed diversum idioma, sicut Gallicus et Picardus. Idioma enim est proprietas linguae apud aliquam nationem determinatam, und Hebraeus dicit *Eliou* pro Deo vel Diis; Chaldaeus dicit *Eloa* pro coelo vel coelis. Pro *non*, Hebraeus dicit *lo*, Chaldaeus dicit *la*, et sic in aliis" (Bacon 1964, I.73-74).

justify its inclusion; it was, I enthused, 'as if the long silenced strains of the harp [had] come to life again upon the ale-benches'.<sup>26</sup> It is difficult not to sound parochially nationalistic when talking about the Icelandic language, but I think it is fair to say that translating an Old English poem into Icelandic is a rather special activity: Icelandic is a living language, with living speakers who can comment authoritatively on its idiom; and who may with great care and a lot of respect for the past, be able to interpret, *to enter into*, the idiom of Old English better than speakers of other modern languages.

This said, however, we must not forget that Björnsson's translation is a studied, literary venture, a dedicated and detailed reworking of an inviolate, almost sacrosanct text; she is not an unlettered singer of tales. And yet one important factor supports Niles's reading. Although widely read in Old Icelandic, she was unfamiliar with the Old English corpus; she learnt Old English almost entirely from her copy of Klaeber's *Beowulf* (lent her by Stefán Einarsson) and died shortly after completing her typescript.<sup>27</sup> But now this is where the story becomes interesting. In spite of her ignorance of the Old English corpus her text seems fully to partake in the diction of Old English. Let me offer one short example of many: this is from the beginning of the poem:

hú þá æþelingas ellen fremedon  
'how those princes deeds of valour performed' (line3)

Björnsson translates:

hversu öðlingar örlög drýgðu  
'how the princes [their] fate performed/fulfilled'

<sup>26</sup> "Fornenska og íslenska eru náfrænkur, en líkjast þó meir hvor annari en margar alsystur, sem oft vill vera. Sami svipurinn er með setningaskipan og orðaförða þeirra, og búa þær yfir nauðalíkum skáldskaparhefðum. Halldóra færir sér skyldleika þeirra ríkulega í nyt. Þýðing hennar gefur íslenskum lesanda glögga mynd af máli frumtextans, hljómfalli þess og merkingarviði, það er eins og löngu hljóðnaður hörpusláttur kvikni aftur á ölbekkjum í meðförum hennar" (*Bjólfskviða* 1983, 3).

<sup>27</sup> I should also mention that she worked solely from Klaeber without consulting translations, as she told me herself.



For the formula *ellen fremman* 'perform deeds of valour' Björnsson uses the Eddic formula *örlög drýgja* 'perpetrate fate/doom/war' from *Völundarkviða* (3.10). The interesting point is that the relationship between these two formulae is well attested *within the OE corpus, which she did not know, but not in the Icelandic corpus, which she knew well*. In Old English we have the following set:

ellen fremman	'perform deeds of valour'	Beowulf 4
ellen dugan	'accomplish deeds of valour'	Andreas 460, Genesis 1288
ellen dréogan	'perpetrate deeds of valour'	Riddle 58 1
orleg dréogan	'perpetrate deeds of war'	Judgement Day I 29

(data from Bessinger and Smith 1978)

Thus Björnsson's OE/Icelandic formulaic shift, *ellen fremman* / *örlög drýgja* occurs within the OE corpus as *ellen fremman* / *orleg dréogan*, but not in the Icelandic corpus. And in fact this tallies quite comfortably with Niles's skáld: Björnsson's access to poetic technique may have been confined to Old Icelandic, but this, according to Niles, would also entail access to the Old English domain. This is surely somewhat of a vindication of Niles's thesis.<sup>28</sup>

This then is our modern readerly reality of literary medieval Iceland, a reality concerning Icelanders in England two or three or four hundred years before. But today it is prone to severe mistranslation. No, the Icelanders and English did not speak one and the same language; but yes, they did speak the same *tunga*. If we can make the shift from our tertiary readerliness to the First Grammarian's secondary readerliness, we can accept his/her view

<sup>28</sup> There are however other important aspects which set Halldóra Björnsson apart, and a study of her technique leads to question to what extent, in our analysis of formulaic diction, we have underestimated the roles of metaplasm and paronomasia, of sound- and word-play, in the form of non-etymological, non-systematic, rule-bending textual acrobatics. These occur abundantly in her translation, often functioning as striking intertextualities with other Icelandic themes. – See further Pétur Knútsson (forthcoming).

as an important aspect of our understanding of the Icelandic Middle Ages. And if we presume to primary readerliness and attempt to recreate an approximate picture of the linguistic situation in England and Scandinavia in the early 11th century, it looks very much as if the First Grammarian's view was on the whole correct. When Egill called for ale in the London taverns, he was bound to be understood, whether he pronounced it *calu*, *alu*, *ölu* or *öl*.

But is this then a reality that may serve to feed our dream of dominion? Is Halldóra Björnsson's translation a statement of identity like the First Grammarian's, an affirmation of Icelandic identity on the outskirts of a another Empire? We can hardly deny that Halldóra was taking something of this stance: she chose not to make an idiomatic modern Icelandic translation, a new *Beowulf* to suit the temper of the new age, in a way that would, at the time, have been almost mandatory if she were translating into a mainstream European language. Instead she articulates an empathy towards the poem, even a sense of ownership; she assumes responsibility for the dispossessed Old English tongue. Her translation was finished in 1968, at a time when Iceland was negotiating for the return of its manuscripts from Copenhagen. For many people who were aware of her translation, it was long overdue – why had this poem not been admitted to the Icelandic canon before? Stefán Einarsson in the preface to his 1936 translation of *Widsið* remarks that it is high time that Icelandic poets got down to translating Old English epic poetry, especially *Beowulf* (Stefán Einarsson 1936, 184); and in an undated letter to the American *Beowulf* scholar Marijane Osborn (1968, 21) some time in the early sixties he states his intention to introduce *Beowulf* to Halldóra Björnsson and to suggest that she translate it. Stefán Einarsson's pencilled remarks appear here and there on Halldóra Björnsson's typescript, and his own translation of the first 63 lines of the poem is to be found in his papers (uncatalogued) in the National Archive; it sets the tone for Halldóra's translation, although Halldóra was unquestionably the better poet. The romantic sentimentality of my 1983 preface to

the poem, I see now, is simply another minor articulation of this latter-day vision of pan-Germanicism: the music of *Beowulf* comes to life again in Iceland – and we should note the location of this revival: ‘on the ale-benches’.

There is a moral lurking here. Beer was illegal in Iceland until 1989, and so there were no Icelandic ale-benches in 1983. But they can hardly be mentioned today without invoking the Viking Tavern, which looms darkly on the esplanade in Hafnarfjörður and is the preferred venue of Nordic males who come to Iceland from mainland Scandinavia to dress up as Vikings and fight each other with wooden swords. Today I think we must be more aware than we might have been in 1983 that these sentiments were perilously nationalistic, even racist. They were saying: What a pity Sneglu-Halli didn't stay on to help Harold at Hastings, and avert the terrible fate that was to befall the English language: the loss of its Germanic identity!

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