

“The author of the present book does not by any means intend to hurl a nihilistic challenge to contemporary Scandinavian studies. Without attempting to strike out the achievements of the twentieth century in the study of the history of Old Scandinavian literature, he has sought, however, by utilizing modern methods of research, to show the significant share folklore has had in the formation of the Old Scandinavian epos, both at the pre-historic stage and later, when folklore was already interacting with literature; and to demonstrate the unbroken and continuous connection of some of the Eddic lays with very old genres that had already taken shape in the clan society. Individual literary creativity apparently remained for a long time within certain limits fixed by folkloric tradition, and did not destroy their genre nature. This was facilitated, of course, by the fact that the folk-poetic form of the epos was preserved side by side with the literary form and interacted with it” (236).

True, the book contains no “nihilistic challenge,” but a challenge nevertheless. It is to be hoped that medievalists in the West will take up the gauntlet, however courteously flung. Such a move would be in the best traditions of mythological and heroic poetry, and not only in Scandinavia.

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Helgi Guðmundsson. *Um haf innan: Vestrænir menn og íslensk menning á miðöldum*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997. 413 pages.

Helgi Guðmundsson, professor of linguistics at the University of Iceland, has written a thick book of ten chapters on cultural contacts between Gaelic and Norse people in the British Isles, knowledge of the British Isles in Old Icelandic sources, ideas about *papar* in Iceland, Irish Christianity, Gaelic loanwords, names, and place-names in Icelandic and other West Nordic languages, as well as a separate discussion of *Orkneyinga saga* and other works and authors which he connects with the subject.

Um haf innan is not, however, as some might think, a thorough treatment of all the sources and problems involved with them, with references to the scholarly work which has been done in the field in the past few decades. Rather, it presents an overall theory, beautiful and ingenious in many respects, about how the apparent cultural contacts between the Gaels and the Icelanders during the settlement period in Iceland can be explained away. Helgi Guðmundsson claims that even though the Gaelic loanwords in Icelandic are more numerous than in the other West Nordic languages, they are not the product of any particular Gaelic influence in Iceland but rather characteristic of the Norse language spoken in the North Atlantic during the Viking Age. Neither do Gaelic names and knowledge about Gaels and the Gaelic world in Icelandic written works derive from the settlement period, about which Icelanders in the thirteenth century knew nothing according to Helgi Guðmundsson—an insight for which he provides no evidence: “Þannig er þess oft getið í Íslendinga sögum, að menn hafi siglt. Höfundar þeirra á 13. öld gátu ekkert vitað um skipaferðir mörg hundruð árum fyrir þann tíma” [Thus it is often mentioned in the sagas of Icelanders that people sailed abroad. Their authors in the thirteenth century could not know anything about sea voyages hundreds of years before that time] (42). In order to explain these illusionary Gaelic contacts,

the author presents his readers with a very secretive trade route between Greenland and Europe which was operated from the west of Iceland. In Iceland, around Breiðafjörður in particular, people took valuable goods from Greenland (not only walrus, white falcons, and polar bears, but most importantly the narwhal tooth, believed to be the horn of the unicorn in the Middle Ages when it arrived on the continent and thus extremely highly prized — as a result its true origin could not be revealed) and unloaded them, only to re-load them onto ships that would sail west around the British Isles, pass Ireland, and continue to the European continent, bringing back wealth and prosperity to the west of Iceland where people became very knowledgeable about the Gaelic part of the British Isles (presumably after having forgotten all about it first). The knowledge was then used to tell and make up stories about people of supposedly Irish and Scottish background during the settlement period. This secret trade ultimately generated enough wealth to produce expensive literature on vellum. Part of the awareness of the British Isles may also have come with several ships from the Hebrides shortly after 1100 as a result of King Magnús Bareleg's sending ships from Norway with people to settle there at that time (41–42).

A beautiful theory indeed. Its only drawback is that it is not confirmed by the sources and contradicts our basic knowledge about the nature and possibility of oral tradition and social memory, which can easily extend two or three hundred years back in time even though it is by no means accurate. It has long been known that Greenland produced valuable trade goods in the Middle Ages which were sold in Europe at a good profit until the walrus ivory market collapsed because of African elephant ivory imported by Portuguese seafarers. But Helgi Guðmundsson adds to that picture by reviving an old idea of Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, the explorer, who argued for a Vinland-Greenland-European trade route which was so secretive that there is no trace of it in the sources. About this we can say that even though this silence may be informative in many instances, it can not always be relied upon in every detail.

One of the most fundamentally false preconceptions in *Um haf innan* is that the people who lived in Iceland in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries could not know anything about the past because of the lack of written documents from that past. The misconceptions based on that major flaw in the argument are so extensive that it is not possible to discuss all of them here. There is plenty of evidence for the vitality of oral tradition and the possibility of an extended social memory far back into the past in oral cultures — which the author shows no sign of the slightest familiarity with. He also states that Icelanders in the Middle Ages could not get rich from the *vaðmál* trade. To become rich, according to Helgi Guðmundsson, they needed something much more fancy and exotic like the narwhal tooth. The reader must accept this statement at face value, as it is not backed up with any reference to recent work on trade in medieval Iceland, for example to Professor Helgi Þorláksson's doctoral thesis, in which he discusses foreign trade in medieval Iceland with special reference to *vaðmál* and draws up a very different picture of the situation from that presented by Helgi Guðmundsson (*Vaðmál og verðlag: Vaðmál í utanlandsviðskiptum og búskap Íslendinga á 13. og 14. öld* [Reykjavík: Fjölföldun Sigurjóns, 1991]). This method of presentation is practiced by Helgi Guðmundsson throughout: the reader is confronted with an assertion which he or she must simply believe as it stands, either because the author says so, or else the Nobel prize-winning writer of fiction, Halldór Kiljan Laxness, says so, or at best: Sveinbjörn Rafnsson says so. It needs hardly to be mentioned, but this method of reasoning is not acceptable in a scholarly context even though it was widely practiced in the Middle Ages. One of many examples of this kind of reasoning can be found on p. 80: "Íslendingar hafa verið efnaðir á miðöldum (Halldór Laxness 1969:113): 'Svo mart sem segja má um uppkomu mentastéttar og fræðiiðkana á Íslandi, þá varðar mestu að gefa því gætur að hér á landi hefur snemma tekið að myndast ótrúlega mikið súrplús, auðmyndun umfram frumstæðar lífsnauðsynjar.' Innlendar atvinnugreinar hafa aðeins að nokkru leyti staðið undir þessari auðmyndun" [Icelanders

were rich in the Middle Ages (Halldór Laxness 1969:113): “As much as can be said about the rise of a class of educated people and scholarly practice in Iceland, it is of the utmost importance to be aware that very early on an unbelievable surplus was created, wealth beyond the primitive basic requirements.” Indigenous sources were only partly responsible for this wealth].

In an extensive discussion, Helgi Guðmundsson attempts to undermine the validity of Ari fróði’s remark about the *papar* in Iceland by first stating that he could not possibly have known anything about the first settlement in the country (“Þá var svo langt um liðið frá fyrstu byggð í landinu, að Ari gat ekkert um hana vitað” [Then (i.e., around 1130) such a long time had passed since the first settlement in the country that Ari could not know anything about it], 81) and then by claiming that Ari had this information from Dicuil’s work *De mensura orbis terrae*. Apart from the fact that Ari does not refer to any written source in this matter (as common medieval practice would have required him to do if he possibly could), Helgi Guðmundsson has to argue for several mistakes, misunderstandings, and misreadings by Ari, who must have been out of his mind to have distorted Dicuil’s information in such a way — not least the confusing of Iceland with the Faroe Islands, which is, to put it mildly, not probable for someone living in Iceland. All in all, Helgi Guðmundsson has no case for his theory here except that Ari uses the word *Norðmenn*, which Helgi Guðmundsson states, without the slightest trace of doubt, can only be derived from Dicuil’s *Normannorum* (“Þarna eru tengsl. Þau er aðeins hægt að skýra á einn veg. Ari hefur þekkt rit Dicuil’s” [There are the links. They can only mean one thing. Ari knew Dicuil’s work], 99). Often in the past, scholars would argue for a written link between two texts (*rittengsl*) without more evidence than perhaps the same or similar names and events. Here we are to believe that one single word, *Norðmenn*, in Ari’s *Íslendingabók* can only be derived from the work of an Irish monk in Latin. Anyone familiar with Old Icelandic/Norse texts will know that the term *Norðmaðr/Norðmenn* is fairly common in these texts and need not be traced back to an Irish-

Latin book from the early ninth century. The same or similar flaw in the author’s argument can be observed in many instances where he argues for a written link between two texts but where living people and the reality out of which the texts grew are more likely mediators of the relevant information than a written text — which may not even have existed (see 33). This line of argument is so consistent because it is part of the preconceptions governing the author’s way of thinking, as can be seen on p. 296: “Bækur voru ritaðar af lærðum mönnum. Þeir kunnu latínu og höfðu lesið bækur á latínu. Í ritum sínum studdust þeir einkum við bækur. Ef eitthvert óskrifað keltneskt efni var til á Íslandi, sem er heldur ósennilegt, eru litlar líkur til, að það hafi komizt á bók” [Books were written by learned men. They knew Latin and had read books in Latin. In their written works they drew mostly on books. If any unwritten Celtic material existed in Iceland, which is rather unlikely, there is little reason to believe that it ever got into books].

The main thesis of *Um haf innan* suffers most from lack of sources to back it up. As a result the most frequent words used in the argument are “it must be,” “perhaps,” “most likely,” “beyond doubt” (see, e.g., 80–81, where the arguments for a lively trade and Icelandic profit from Greenland are summarized). Nevertheless, many interesting observations are made about individual texts and sagas, such as *Orkneyinga saga*, which Helgi Guðmundsson connects with Snorri Sturluson in an ingenious manner. The information he gathers about loanwords and place-names is also useful, even though his references to earlier work in that field might have been broader. When he moves on to more problematic issues, he refrains from mentioning more than one possibility in interpreting the evidence; he does not refer to opposing views on debated topics and seems in general to be unfamiliar with recent scholarship (“recent” here meaning by living and active scholars of our time). As it stands, *Um haf innan* must therefore be classified as a book full of ideas, some brilliant and some less so, but lacking in scholarly grounding and presentation of its material.

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