

Erin Benton

Training in Scandinavian manuscript studies at the University of Iceland

I recently received funding from the Centre for the North to attend and undertake training at a Summer School in Scandinavian Manuscript studies hosted by the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, at the University of Iceland. The course was said to be intensive, and this was absolutely true. The 10-day schedule was filled from 9am to 4:30pm with courses on palaeography, codicology, manuscript dating, workshops, XML coding, and more.

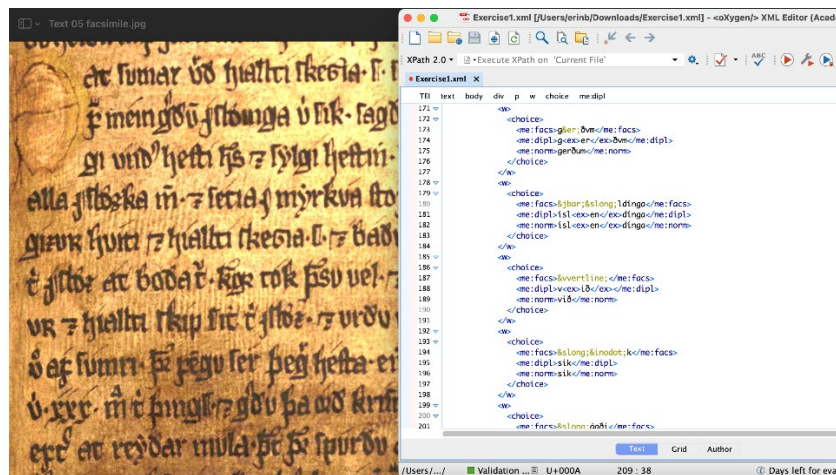
The first day started slightly later than the others, allowing time for registration, and a lecture from Erik Kwakkel on the history of manuscript advertising sheets, giving us an insight into what we may be able to do with what we learn. Soon after that we the first workshop on Medieval Icelandic Scripts and palaeography, learning how to recognise many of the letter forms we can potentially see in these manuscripts, and how they would vary across the span of manuscript production. This continued well into the afternoon when we work on transcribing several texts on our own. A short reception followed, allowing for many fruitful networking opportunities.

On Wednesday, we began with a lecture in the National and University Library of Iceland, where we began a lecture and workshop on codicology and how to study and learn from manuscripts as material objects. As a literary scholar, this was different from the way I usually handle or even think about manuscripts, and very exciting. Following a short coffee break, we were allowed to handle medieval books in pairs, which proved to be a highlight of the week so far. The first book we handled was GKS 3269 a 4to had some lovely illuminations:



GKS 3269 a 4to

The second was a large book bound with wood which was fascinating difference to the other texts. In the afternoon, we worked more on palaeography, especially with abbreviations, as those are quite common in Scandinavian manuscripts, and how to transcribe those. Thursday morning continued with this theme, although it was focused on scribal errors, and different strategies for transcribing these. The latter half of the day was focused on learning XML, a coding language that we can use to transcribe these texts. This brief foray into digital humanities was very outside what I am used to, as I still seem to be stuck before the advent of the printing press, but I am very grateful I was able to gain some training in this.



Excerpt of Njáls saga and its XML transcription

The morning of the Friday, we continued with XML, and creating various types of transcriptions. After lunch, we were back in the library, looking at post-medieval manuscripts, as Iceland's manuscript culture lasted well into the 20th century. While medievalists can sometimes dismiss these manuscripts, they offer some fascinating looks into how language changed, how these stories were transmitted, and how the technology of the time evolved. This collection and presentation also included several letters written by J. R. R. Tolkien himself, to the delight of everyone in the room!



LBS 781 4to and ÍBR 69 4to

The day ended with a look at the First Grammatical Treatise. This led into Saturday, where we began the day on the history of paper, and doing some workshops on this history, before we discussed how to date medieval manuscripts and practiced this in a workshop. This is one of the skills I was most excited to learn about, as I do need to know the timeline when some of the sagas that I work with were produced compared to others. This skill uses a mix of palaeographical and linguistic features, and in the workshop, we put these skills to the test. At the end of the day, several others and I went out for a meal and discussed future projects and collaborations that we wish to undertake, which closed out the first five days.



Reykjavik

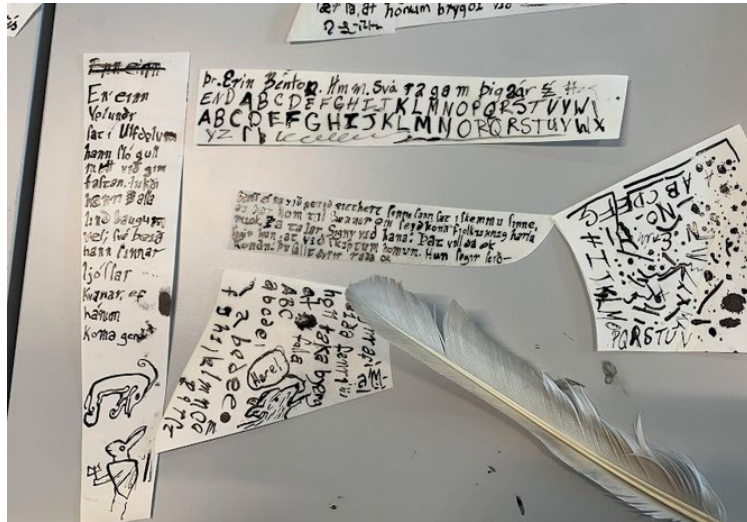
For the second half of our trip, we began with an excursion around the Reykjanes peninsula, seeing several really wonderful sights with a strong folkloric past. The day was one of my favourites on the trip, as I got to speak to some of my peers that I had not been able to before, and seeing the natural beauty of Iceland is always a bonus.





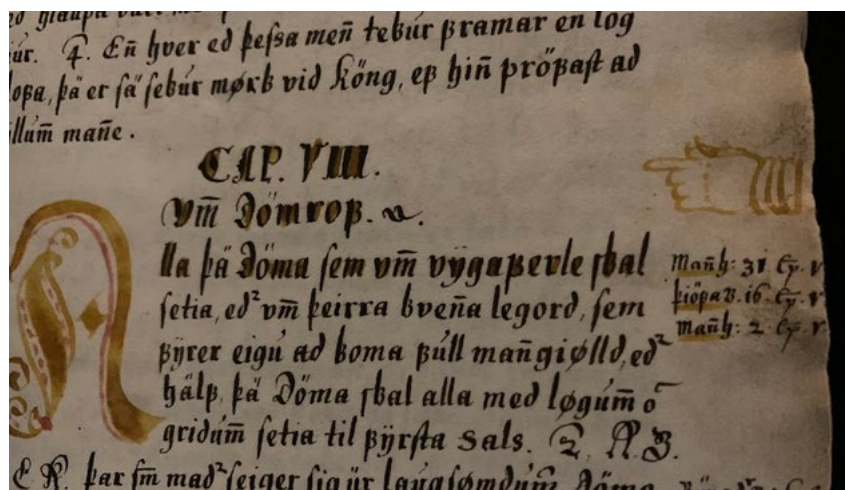
Brimketill/Oddnýjarlaug and Valahnúkur

On Monday, we learned about how to fully utilise the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose. Even though I've been using the ONP for years, there are still functions of it that were completely new to me, and as it's an ongoing project, there is always something new to learn. As someone who deals directly with the texts, this may have been one of the most useful workshops. We also had lectures on digitization and photography, as well as how to use catalogues. Tuesday opened a lecture and workshop on post-medieval scripts. While I have to work with some post-medieval manuscripts to follow transmission of these texts, this was the part of the course I was dreading most, as post-medieval texts can be intimidatingly difficult to read. The training, however, was very good, and while I will still need to do some more work, by the end I was able to transcribe many of the pieces I was handed. We also learned that there had been a new manuscript discovered in Canada and had a chance to transcribe images from it. Tuesday also had a lecture by Seán D. Vrieland on the manuscript tradition in the Faroe Islands. I had very little knowledge of this tradition, and was very interested to learn, especially since some post-medieval variants of texts I look at occurs in the Faroese ballads. The day ended with a quill and ink workshop, where we got to use quills, ink, and parchment. After that I have much more sympathy for the more medieval scribes and their scribal errors.



Quill and Ink Workshop

The next day had us learning about the Old East Norse tradition. While I mainly focus on Icelandic manuscripts and west Norse texts, it is important to remember these texts are a part of a wider literary tradition. I did struggle with this as well, as the grammar and abbreviations are very different than what I am used to. If I am able to return for the Advanced module in Copenhagen next year, I hope to learn even more. We also looked at the history of Arnamagnæan Collection, and had a visit to the workshops, where we saw how they digitised the manuscripts, as well as some of the folklore research happening at the University. The final day had us looking at manuscript decoration and illumination, teaching us how to analyse them from a codicological point of view, again giving us the chance to handle manuscripts. Most of these were early modern, as medieval Icelandic manuscripts not usually highly decorated, but they were all beautiful none the less.



Lbs 1544 4to

In the afternoon, we learned more about the new manuscript that had been discovered through a lecture on the Icelandic Immigrant Literacy Database, learning that it dated to 1693 and that it had arrived safely at the Institute! This was followed by a presentation by the Master class, who presented their original work on the Saga of Mark. There was also a reception, where I got to say goodbye to many of the friends and colleagues that I had met in the past 10 days. We have made several plans to attempt to attend future courses together. I would like to thank the Centre for the North for their generous help in assisting me come to this summer school. The amount of incredibly intensive training and learning in this course, and the connections I have made are invaluable. I feel as if this trip has solidified my place in a wider research community. I am very grateful to the Centre for the North for providing this funding, as my participation in this course would not have been possible without it. I am very excited to take what I have learned and apply it in my own research going forward.