

Summer School in Scandinavian Manuscript Studies – Mid-Trip Report, Sat 10th Aug 2024

Arriving on Monday, Iceland greeted me with cool rain—something of a relief after 28° C in London the week before—but ever since the weather has been quite lovely. It is almost a shame, therefore, that I have spent most of my time inside.

We have classes from 9am to 4:30pm, most of which have been in the brand-new Edda building. The building features two inscriptions in Old Norse, best visible at night when the building is backlit in gorgeous hues of blue and purple. The inscriptions read: “alls vér erum einnar tungu” (since we are of one tongue) and “orð mér af orði orðs leitaði” (word from word sought a word for me). They are taken from two seminal Old Norse texts, *The First Grammatical Treatise* and the Eddic poem *Hávamál*, respectively.



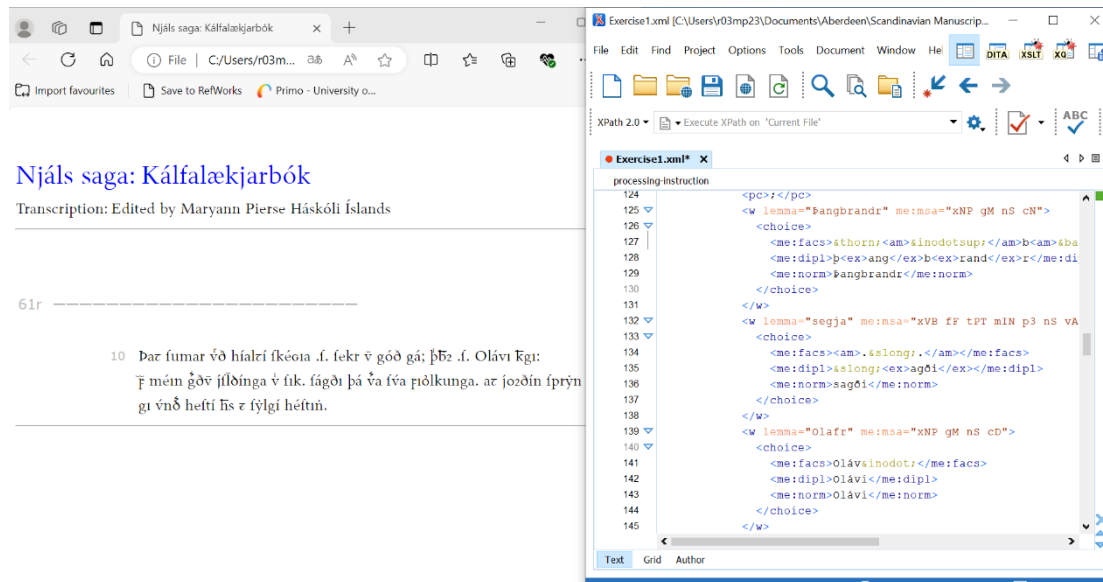
Edda, featuring a line from *Hávamál*.

The First Grammatical Treatise has featured prominently in our lectures with Haraldur Bernarðsson, so it is fitting that the summer school is held in a building with words from *The Treatise* emblazoned on its side. *The Treatise* details Icelandic orthography using the Latin alphabet, as recommended by one twelfth-century orthography. No extant manuscripts actually follow all the rules, but some of the orthographer's ideas do seem to have caught on.

Having studied the codicology and palaeography of medieval English manuscripts, I was keen to learn how the Icelandic tradition differed. One of the biggest surprises—and challenges—was the sheer volume of abbreviations. Icelandic scribes appear to abbreviate at every possible turn, making reading their manuscripts feel like codebreaking. I have learnt a whole new suite of abbreviations, as well as seeing some old friends such as the macron (representing “m” or “n”) and thorn with a bar (representing “that”).

Maryann Pierse

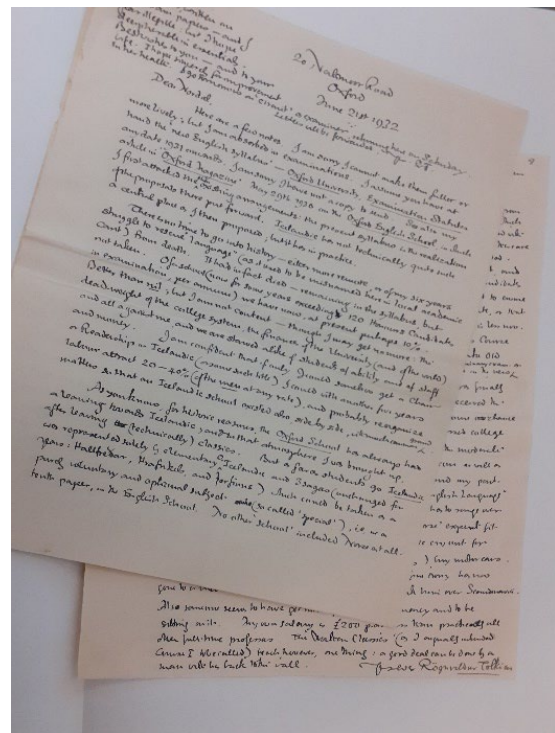
A new concept for many for us was transcribing in XML, taught by Seán Vrieland. This mark-up language can be used to produce fully searchable editions of texts and can encode morphosyntactic analysis of individual words. We spent four sessions, split over two days, working on a ten-line excerpt of *Njalssaga*. I got a nasty surprise on the second day when I discovered my beautiful initial transcription of all ten lines had vanished! Not to be deterred and taking my cue from Seán (who seemed unconcerned), I ploughed on and was not displeased with my efforts.



My salvaged attempt at XML (showing the facsimile transcription).

The hands-on workshops so far have included codicology and the history of paper. Much of these classes were welcome revision of my Masters studies, but there were new tidbits to glean here, too. In the paper class I learnt how to distinguish between the mould-side and felt-side of medieval and early modern paper (roughly equivalent to flesh-side and hair-side in parchment terms). Bragi Ólafsson had a special treat for all us medievalists at the National and University Library: letters from the one and only J.R.R. Tolkien.

One of the highlights of the trip has been making friends with the other scholars on the course. I have met people from across the world, studying linguistics, history, archaeology and more. Already, some of us are thinking of future projects to work on



A letter from J.R.R. Tolkien to Sigurður Nordal.

Maryann Pierse

together, from seminar proposals to reading groups. It is such a joy to be surrounded by like-minded people.

Tomorrow morning, we meet at Edda to set off on “The Excursion”. We know very little, except to bring packed lunches and swimming costumes. How exciting!

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Reykjanes Lighthouse.

The excursion on Sunday was full of surprises. We were guided around the Reykjanes Peninsula, where the recent eruptions have been occurring. Fortunately, or unfortunately (depending on your persuasion) we did not see any eruptions. The folklore of the area was everything you could wish from Iceland: trolls, ghosts and sea storms. We stopped at Brimketill, where a troll-woman used to bathe and wash her clothes; ate lunch in view of the Reykjanes lighthouse; and at the church at Hvalsnes, I was asked to do a reading. Following my reading, we all traipsed down the road to enjoy dried fish with butter and schnapps. Like marmite, the dried fish was loved and hated in equal measure! Our day out wound down with a soak in the geothermal swimming pools in Hafnörður.

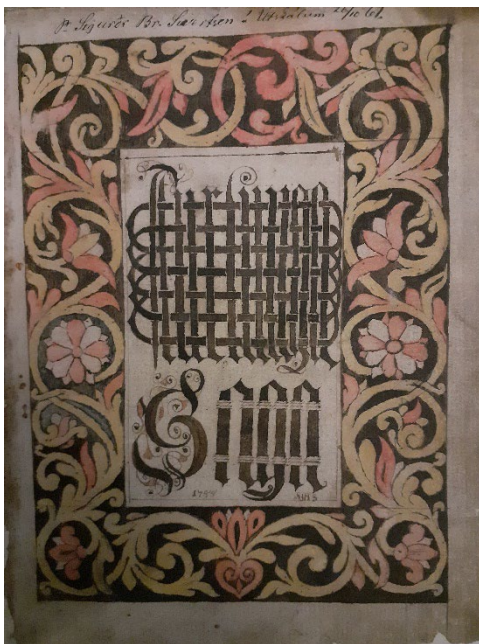
Leaping straight back into class on Monday, Tarin Wills gave us a tour of the Old Norse Prose Dictionary. Although most of us had used the resource before, Tarin’s explanation of the history and development of the project gave us new insights into using it more effectively. Likewise, Katelin Parsons led us through using catalogues and working with early modern manuscripts. As so much of Old Norse material is only preserved in early modern copies of now-lost medieval manuscripts, learning how to read early modern scripts is essential.

On Tuesday afternoon, the session everyone had been looking forward to arrive: hands-on quill and ink. We were given feather quills, ink and as many scraps of vellum as we wanted. Then, the spirit of the scriptorium descended and all you could hear for forty-five minutes was the scratching of quills. I certainly came away with renewed respect for the medieval scribes—writing precisely with those quills was no easy feat.

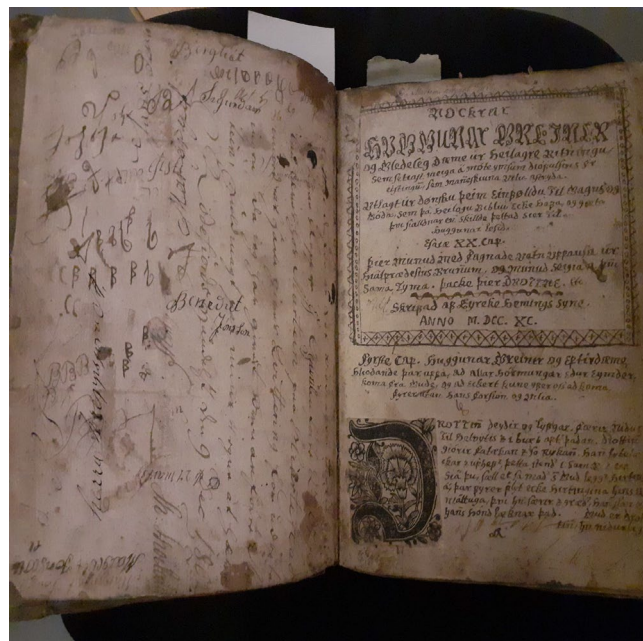
Other lectures in the second week covered Faroese manuscripts, East Norse, and the somewhat chequered history of the Arnarnagnæn Collection. The manuscript collection is split between Reykjavík and Copenhagen; hence the summer school alternates between Iceland and Denmark each year. Many of us in the basic module are keen to attend the advanced module next year in Copenhagen.

We took a break from classroom-based lectures on Wednesday afternoon to visit the old Árni Magnússon Institute. The collections and staff are in the middle of being moved to the new Edda building, so the shelves are looking rather bare. Nevertheless, we saw the set up for digitising manuscripts and learned some tips and tricks for taking better photos of our own when working in libraries. We also got an insight to the Folklore Department and listened to some of the recordings of old tales and songs they have on file. It was delightful to see the continuation of the oral tradition through these recordings, and to see how more recent artists and musicians had used these recordings in their own works.

On the final day, we were back in the National and University Library to analyse manuscript decoration and illumination. Icelandic manuscripts are, as a rule, less sumptuously decorated than their continental counterparts, but we had the opportunity to view and handle some of the more elaborate manuscripts in the collection. My group started off with IB 181 4to, a paper manuscript of *Sturlunga Saga*, and then rotated to IB 123 4to. IB 123 4to not only imitated printed books in its design, it also included woodcut initials and other decorative elements that appeared to be pasted cuttings from a printed book.



Title page of IB 181 4to.



IB 123 4to, showing pasted woodcut initial D.

All of a sudden, the summer school was over. It was intense and exhausting but incredibly stimulating, and I was sad to be leaving Iceland and saying goodbye to new friends. I am very grateful to the Centre for the North's generous funding, which enabled me to participate in the summer school. I hope never to forget this rich experience and I look forward to all the new experiences and opportunities the summer school has opened for me.