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The Innovative Character of Late Medieval Icelandic Translations

The Case of *Merlínússpá*

Thirteenth-century Iceland saw great political and social change, which is reflected in the literary developments of that time. Translations mediated novelty (new narratives, genres, discourses) and were used to express reflections on novelty. The translation *Merlínússpá* shows that Icelanders needed a discourse to express their feelings about the new political situation after the end of the Commonwealth (c.1264) that fitted their literary expectations on the level of genre. On a more abstract level this shows that Icelanders were well aware of the potential of the written word, the nuances of different types of discourse, and the power of translation.

Introduction

Thirteenth-century Iceland is characterized by great political and social changes. Literary developments on Iceland reflect an awareness of novelty, and I will argue that translations in particular had an important function in society, as they both mediated novelty (providing new narratives, genres and discourses) and were a medium through which reflections on novelty could be expressed.

As a concept, “novelty” can serve many purposes in different contexts. In this article it is not understood as self-renewal, but rather as change, as something that was not the case before. Change is always embedded in a context that remains more or less similar but that is also affected by the new. The extent to which novelty influences its context, the relation between the new and this context and the way people reflected upon the new, are the

main themes of this article. Novelty will be considered first as political and social change, then the need for innovation expressed in Icelandic literature will be examined, and lastly an example is included of how new translations served as a means of expressing attitudes towards change.

The discussion will revolve around methodological approaches towards the study of novelty in the Late Medieval period. A fertile area to study attitudes to the new is *Cultural Transfer and Transmission Studies*; a field of study which developed during the 1990s and was influenced by Bourdieuan ideas of the field, which can be understood as an “autonomous social universe” with actors that occupy different positions and gain certain power by acquiring economic, cultural or symbolic capital [...].¹ This allows scholars to focus more on socio-cultural aspects of cultural transfer, paying particular attention to actors in this process (translators, issuers, and readers). Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro have recently given an “outline for the sociology of translation” for the modern period, regarding translations as embedded in specific social contexts. Within the framework of the existence of a field and international exchange relations of texts, they look at political, economic and cultural factors that depend on the structure of the receiving space and the way in which mediators create social needs.²

These approaches were designed for research within modern contexts, but their line of questioning can be adapted to medieval contexts. An investigation of the actors within the process of cultural transfer, with particular interest in the task and strategies of mediators, provides an interesting starting point for research on the mediation of (experiences of) novelty as well. The study of translations can offer much evidence on how novelty was understood and perceived, as translations always negotiate between things new and things already existent, between the alien and the familiar. While translations are often overlooked by modern scholars, or found of less literary quality, being regarded as mere derivatives of their supposed “originals”,³ or overshadowed by indigenous literature (as is the case with medieval Icelandic texts), translations were, as Stahuljak puts it, a “crossroads of multilingual and multicultural contacts and encounter”,⁴ and therefore an utterly suitable corpus from which we can unearth attitudes towards the new.

If we address this corpus correctly, it might even be possible for us to connect ideas of, and reflections on, novelty with novel events themselves. If we study translations with a focus on their novel aspect we are forced to

analyze their function, to reconstruct translators' strategies and motives, and to look for evaluations of contemporary political and social events. Thus the encounter between cultures becomes more layered, as it both entails a mediation between cultures (and thus of the new), is in itself a material witness of the encounter with other cultures and more abstractly with the new, and lastly it can serve to interpret novel situations in the receiving culture. To put it differently, it seems that translations were often imported as a means to deal with novelty.⁵ My discussion will thus center on approaches towards translations, and how they can be interpreted as carrying written reflections of Late Medieval attitudes to the new.

Moreover, translations present an interesting case, because medieval translators by nature handle their sources very loosely, that is, compared to modern practice.⁶ This lends to translations a great autonomy, and makes them even more independent from their sources. Translations, thus, have to gain authority and legitimacy on their own in their target culture's narrative system, which leads to their having a very specific role in this system.⁷

Political and Social Change

To understand the function of literature properly as a medium through which society could reflect on and express attitudes about novelty, it is necessary to know something about the cultural and political situation in which this literature came into being. Thirteenth-century Iceland stood under increasing social pressure. In 1220, law-speaker Snorri Sturlason (1179-1241, known as the writer of the *Prose Edda*), became a retainer of King Hákon IV Hákonarson (1204-1263). This started the so called *Age of the Sturlungs* (c.1220 - c.1264), which saw the decline of the old societal structures of the Icelandic Commonwealth, due to ambitious regional chieftains that competed violently for control over the country. Some of them were supported by Hákon as they strove to affiliate Iceland with Norway.⁸ After 42 years of civil strife, the aristocracy is believed to have signed the *Covenant Gissursáttmáli* (or the *Gamli Sáttmáli*, the "Old Covenant"), which meant the end of the Icelandic free-state that had lasted nearly four hundred years, and by which the Icelanders subjected themselves to the Norwegian king and lost their political autonomy.

Although the Covenant was not imposed upon the Icelanders and was meant to stop internal discord and to provide a more stable political and social situation, we may assume that the Icelandic aristocracy by no means

remained unaffected by its loss of autonomy. Whereas in earlier times many Icelanders would visit Norway for a shorter or longer period regularly, after the signing of the Covenant contact between the Icelandic aristocracy and the Norwegian court declined. In literature, this loss of autonomy is reflected as an identity crisis on the side of the Icelandic aristocracy and as a struggle to legitimize its position towards itself, the lower classes and the Norwegian court.

Remarkably, these changes had repercussions on cultural expressions: in historical accounts, but more importantly on the artistic level of interpretation and evaluation of persons, actions and events. For Icelanders conceiving and rethinking their surroundings was one of the stimuli behind the introduction of literary novelties. Explaining how Icelanders negotiated with their past, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson illustrates why the development of the indigenous genre of the *fornaldarsögur* is directly influenced by the political circumstances of the thirteenth century. Through writing these *sögur*, tales of the ancient Scandinavian heroes, the Icelandic aristocracy tried to legitimize its position:

It was through the writing down of the *fornaldarsögur* [...] that the Icelandic aristocracy tried to create a common past for the Nordic countries, thus attempting to negotiate with a new political situation. The political changes that took place in the last decades of the thirteenth century and in the fourteenth century forced the Icelandic aristocracy to evaluate its past and link Icelandic ‘history’ to Scandinavian history, which was done by writing down the *fornaldarsögur*.⁹ [My italics]

Jón Viðar Sigurðsson’s analysis makes clear that one of the functions of literature was to serve as a device to interpret and give meaning to new situations, especially of the unknown future. In this literature, present and future were linked to a (reconstructed) past in order to interpret and shape the present. Moreover, it is important to note that, judging from the high number of manuscripts containing the *fornaldarsögur*, the need for this type of legitimizing literature was quite high.¹⁰ According to Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, “all members of the Icelandic aristocracy in the fourteenth century [...] could trace their origins to the heroes and kings of the *fornaldarsögur*.”¹¹

By creating a literary form of the past, the Icelandic aristocracy tried to recreate its identity and to understand itself within the new, urgent political situation that was caused by changes from within and without Icelandic society, but that affected its core identity. This function of literature as a

medium for self-reflection, interpretation of the changing world, and giving meaning to new events (in political, social and cultural contexts), fits modern functions of literature surprisingly well,¹² although modern societies have even more explicit forms of reflecting on similar issues (e.g. in the media, by public debate and through specific literary discourses).

A Need for Literary Innovation

Before change gave rise to the development of new indigenous genres as the *fornaldarsögur*, it seems to have stimulated the import of new scientific and literary writings on Iceland.¹³ The fact that those translations were made before indigenous literature could adapt to the new political situation, indicates the strong need for literature that could mediate thoughts on the new political situation.¹⁴

The text which will be concentrated on here is *Merlínússpá*, a translation of the *Prophetiae Merlini* preserved in book VII of the highly influential and widely disseminated *Historia Regum Britannie* (1136-1138) by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1100-1154) (these works are commonly abbreviated as respectively *Msp.*, *PM* and *Historia*).

Although the text is at times frustratingly impenetrable, the most recent editor of *Msp.*, Simone Horst, is more nuanced than scholars who dealt with the text earlier. Horst gives the *status quaestionis* of research on Geoffrey, *PM* and *Msp.*, which will be summarized here for readers unfamiliar with them.¹⁵ Geoffrey wrote three works in Latin, of which the *PM* (written before 1135) were later integrated by himself in the *Historia* sometime between 1136 and 1138. His third known work, *Vita Merlini*, was written after 1149, and its subject is a Merlin different from the character in *PM*.¹⁶ The *Historia* describes the history of the British kings, from Brutus (a descendant of Aeneas) until the nephew and son of the last British king Cadwallader, who was defeated by the Saxons during the end of the seventh century. Merlin, the child of a human mother and a demon, acts as counselor of several kings, of whom the most important is Artus, and as such he utters his prophecies.

The *PM* consists of three parts, the first relates to events happening within the temporal space of the *Historia* (from Brutus till the seventh century AD, *PM* 1-7, *Msp.* II 21-43), the second about the time between the *Historia* and Geoffrey's own days (eighth till twelfth centuries: *PM* 8-12. *Msp.* II 44-544). The third part points to events that even for Geoffrey are hidden in the future (*PM* 13-74, *Msp.* II 545-64, II 68-92, I 5-31, I 37-49, I 51-61). The

identification of prophecies with concrete events becomes more difficult as the prophecies proceed, and certainly the third part of *PM* is utterly vague.¹⁷ *PM* and *Msp.* both finish with an apocalyptic vision about the end of the world, warning readers to face the consequences of their bad ways of life.

The Icelandic translation of *PM* is attributed to Gunnlaugr Leiffson (d. 1218/1219), a Benedictine monk from the Monastery of Þingeyrar in Northern Iceland; however, Simone Horst has recently presented a convincing argument why supposedly not all of the text of *Msp.* was translated by Gunnlaugr.¹⁸ Horst indicates the period from 1220 until 1270 as a probable time frame for the translation of *Msp.* part I, interestingly, without providing a historical-political explanation.

The only version of *Msp.* preserved today, is contained in the miscellany called *Hauksbók* (AM 371, 544 and 675; 4°),¹⁹ composed c.1310, roughly a hundred years later than the initial Icelandic translation of Geoffrey's *PM*. The book can be regarded as a diverse high-medieval encyclopedia,²⁰ and in spite of all we do not understand about *Msp.* scholars have not hesitated to explain its presence in *Hauksbók*. There are four texts in *Hauksbók* that are commonly viewed as literary texts, namely *Trójumanna Saga*²¹ (dealing with the matter of Troy), *Breta Sögur* (translation of the *Historia*), *Msp.* and *Völuspá* (*Vsp.*; a mythical poem about the history, present and future of the world in relation to the deeds of Scandinavian gods). Most often, scholars explain the occurrence of *Msp.* in *Hauksbók* by pointing to the fact that *Vsp.* is contained in the same manuscript.²² The first question we could ask is whether it is legitimate to label these four texts as different from the other texts in the manuscript without giving a clear definition of what "literary" texts are as opposed to non-literary texts. There is no clear definition of what "medieval literature" is, and boundaries between literary and non-literary genres are often fluid.²³ It is oversimplifying to classify texts as literary or non-literary only on the grounds of either their form or content. Therefore, it is problematic to regard texts as "literature" only because of their form: medieval scientific texts could be written as poetry. If the contents of a work are too vague to interpret it as either a literary or a non-literary text, its form can never be the only determining factor to classify it as literary. Obvious though this may seem, analyses as Phillip Lavender's,²⁴ while attributing mythical and thus social significance to *Msp.* and *Vsp.*, tend to view these texts primarily as literary products, thus overlooking an aspect of the political function they probably had within society.

Many scholars have pointed out the striking similarities between *Msp.*

and *Vsp.* Most recently, Horst and Lavender individually illustrated that the works overlap regarding their themes, word-choice, use of kennings, imagery, genre (both are prophecies), verse-form (*fornyrðislag* and *kviðuhattr*) and culminating in an apocalyptic vision. But whereas the intended audience of the *Vsp.* might clearly consist of Scandinavians interested in their indigenous myths, it remains difficult to think of an intended audience of *Msp.* Even Lavender struggles with this problem, regarding *Msp.* as a “riddling piece of poetry which is difficult to understand even within its original cultural and literary contexts”.²⁵ About its Icelandic audience, Lavender adds:

It is in many ways difficult to imagine who would have comprised the intended audience of such a work, who would have committed the poem to memory, and for what purpose it was translated. Nevertheless, the long shelf-life of [*Msp.*] attests to the appeal that it had in Scandinavia. [...] [T] he continued practice of copying it in later paper manuscripts suggests that it was not deemed irrelevant or incomprehensible, or, if it was deemed incomprehensible, that this only added to its appeal.²⁶

Lavender does not succeed to give a clear understanding of *Msp.* and has to satisfy himself and his readers by stating that *Msp.* simply was popular, but that we cannot know why. The unsatisfactory element of his analysis is that it cannot explain why one would take the trouble of translating an incomprehensible text, and why people would copy it for centuries to follow. To assume that the text was appealing mainly because it was incomprehensible does not seem likely with respect to either the effort that it must have taken to preserve it or with respect to what we know about why medieval people were interested in texts.

Moreover, there are some discrepancies between the texts that are hard to neglect: *Vsp.* goes back on an ancient Scandinavian tradition, being the account of a Scandinavian prophetess about the mythical past, present and future, culminating in *Ragnarök* (the final apocalyptic fate of the Gods), while with John Lindow, *Vsp.* could be understood as a “synopsis of the mythology, from the creation to the destruction of the cosmos to its rebirth”, or as one of the poems of Odin, the supreme deity.²⁷ Even without knowing exact what kind of text *PM* is, it is in any case a prophecy uttered by Merlin, originating from Welsh tradition, popularized and adapted by an author writing for an insular audience, relating about fighting British kings and their enemies, culminating in the world’s destruction. Whatever the similarities between *Vsp.* and *Msp.*, these differences are too significant to lack an explanation

and it is remarkable that no one has addressed them until now.

New Translations as a Means of Dealing with Change

Viewing *Msp.* as related to *Vsp.* is caused mainly by ascribing both texts to the genre of “prophecy”. *Vsp.*, however, is commonly understood as the echo of an oral tradition, which implies that its contents are inherently variable.²⁸ Textual scholars do not always display awareness of the implications that orality might have for the texts they study, and considerations of this kind are absent in studies comparing *Vsp.* and *Msp.*

As much as Scandinavian prophecy has a mythical bearing, English prophecy is characterized by conveying a political message. Lesley Coote therefore understands *PM* as a political text. Being a discourse rather than a genre, political prophecy is a living, variable language, combining different elements from different texts. As prophetic texts are widely disseminated in low-quality manuscripts (in later medieval England they occur in more than 500 manuscripts), Coote argues that prophecies had to have been understood by more people than only a small initiated audience.²⁹ The most important aspect of political prophecy, Coote points out, is that it always deals with the king, people and nation.³⁰ Thus, its aim is not to predict the future, but to provide a language in which people can express ideas about political situations.

Therefore, all imagery used in prophecy, according to Coote, must have been recognizable for a broad public.³¹ Political discourse was often connected to *origines gentium* myths,³² as Brutus’ myth that is presented in the *Historia*. In this discourse, a king does not fight for the sake of victory, but to gain something concrete, e.g. a land or a people. This object justifies his warfare, and makes the king all-good or all-bad: a good king has no shortcomings. History is presented with a violent vocabulary, as a series of conflicts.³³

Significantly, all these characteristics of political prophecy are featured in *MP* and *Msp.* but are absent from *Vsp.* Thus, from a perspective of cultural transfer and innovation, Coote’s interpretation of political prophecy explains the Icelandic need to import a text as *Msp.* very well: the Icelandic literary system was unfamiliar with political discourse that made it possible to use texts as a means of interpretation of the political situation, and as a reflection of a social group’s position. Simultaneously, political prophetic discourse

is not too different from genres that already existed within the Icelandic literary system, and thus political prophetic texts did not run the risk of being revolted by the Icelanders because they were too exotic. This could also be the reason why *Msp.*'s translators could and did take the opportunity to fit the norms of the receiving Icelandic literary culture: it is telling that they used Eddaic meters, word-choice and battle scenes that were familiar to an Icelandic audience. In this way the translators bridged the gap between source and target culture and extended authority to *Msp.*, clearing the way for the text to become influential in Icelandic literature and society.

Conclusion

In thirteenth-century Iceland, great political and social changes caused an identity crisis among members of the Icelandic aristocracy. This change had to be dealt with on an intellectual level. As Icelanders regarded literature as a medium in which to express feelings about their place in the present, linked to their glorified past and an unknown future, a need for innovation of this medium is reflected in the translations that were made in and just after the period of social disturbance of the *Age of the Sturlungs*. The translation of the *Prophetiae Merlini*, *Merlínússpá*, shows that the Icelanders particularly needed a discourse to express their feelings about the new king, their own people and nation that were after four centuries no longer autonomous, but that fitted their literary expectations on the level of genre. On a more abstract level, such an interpretation of *Merlínússpá* shows that Icelanders were particularly well aware of the potential of the written word, the nuances of even foreign types of discourse, and the power of translation.

Notes

1. Ingeborg Kroon, "Multicultural literature: Exotic or mainstream?" in *Rethinking Cultural Transfer and Transmission: Reflections and New Perspectives*, eds. Petra Broomans, Sandra van Voorst and Karina Smits (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2012), 141-142.
2. Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro, "Outline for a sociology of translation – current issues and future prospects," in *Constructing a Sociology of Translation*, eds. Michaela Wolf and Alexandra Fukari (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins Pub. Co, 2007), 93-107; see for a more recent article on the relation between translation studies and the social sciences Gisèle Sapiro, "The Sociology of Translation: a New Research Domain," in

A Companion to Translation Studies, eds. Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 82-94.

3. Naturally, the term “original” raises many problems, as it is often unclear which texts were used as sources in the process of translating. This only supports an approach that looks at translations as products that function independently within cultures.
4. Zrinka Stahuljak, “Medieval Fixers: Politics of Interpreting in Western Historiography,” in *Rethinking Medieval Translation: Ethics, Politics, Theory*, eds. Emma Campbell and Robert Mills, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012), 148.
5. E.g. the case could be made that translations of courtly epics were made from French to Icelandic (and Swedish) in order to transpose values of courtly society to the north. As will be discussed below, Hauksbók, (including the *Msp.* analyzed here) in particular contains texts that were translated or compiled as a means of dealing or coming in contact with the new.
6. For a more precise analysis of the relation between modern and Medieval perspectives on translation theory and practice, see Ivana Djorđević, “Mapping Medieval Translation,” in *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*, ed. Judith Weiss et al (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 7-23.
7. This “narrative system” is not closed, but has fluid boundaries with regard to genre, language, subjects, stylistic register etc. The discussion on adapting the post-medieval classification of “literature” to medieval texts is too broad to elaborate upon here.
8. Jesse Byock, “The Age of the Sturlungs,” in *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages: a Symposium*, ed. Elisabeth Vestergaard (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 37.
9. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, “Historical Writing and the Political Situation in Iceland 1100-1400,” in *Negotiating Pasts in the Nordic Countries: Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Memory*, eds. Anne Eriksen and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2009), 70.
10. Idem, 68.
11. Idem, 70.
12. One could even presume that, as the *fornaldarsögur* are an adaption of oral tradition, even oral narrative traditions had this function, although there are often no clear cut distinctions between oral and written narrative traditions. See on the Scandinavian tradition esp. Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994 (vol. 1) and 1998 (vol. 2)). The processes through which these developments take place differ of course depending on time and place.
13. I.e. texts that do not have primarily the function of transmitting knowledge, but are devised as incentive to hermeneutic action (interpretation) on the side of the reader. Of course, making a distinction between literary and non-literary texts is problematic, as especially in the Middle Ages knowledge-transmitting texts could be written in a very form-conscious manner, but the point is here to focus on the literary side of the spectrum.
14. Generally speaking, not much is known about the reasons of medieval writers to translate texts. It seems natural to assume, however, that one either would translate

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- because one could be certain that a text would be popular as it could be linked to fashionable literature, or that one would do so because of a lack of certain text types in the indigenous literary system.
15. See for additional information on the topic Simone Horst, *Merlínússþá = Merlins Prophezeiung* (München: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2012), 24-37.
 16. For a discussion of the differences and merging of Merlinus Aurelius (*Historia*) and Merlinus Silvestris (*Vita*), see for example Julia Crick, “Geoffrey and the Prophetic Tradition,” in *The Arthur Of Medieval Latin Literature: The Development And Dissemination Of The Arthurian Legend In Medieval Latin*, ed. Echard, Siân (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 67-82.
 17. For a discussion about the parts of *PM* that are generally viewed as relating to identifiable events, see Horst 2012, 27-34.
 18. Simone Horst, “Die *Merlínússþá* – ein Gedicht von Gunnlaugr Leifsson?,” *Skandinavistik: Zeitschrift Für Sprache, Literatur Und Kultur Der Nordischen Länder* 36 (2006): 31.
 19. For an edition of *Hauksbók*, see *Hauksbók: Udgiven Efter De Arnamagnæanske Handskrifter No. 371, 544 Og 675, (quarter) Samt Forskellige Papirhandskrifter Af Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Shelskab* (Kobenhavn: Thieles, 1892). Manuscripts with the signature “AM” belong to the *Arnamagnæan Manuscript Collection*, preserved partly in the Arnamagnæan Institute in Copenhagen and partly in the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík.
 20. Viðar Sigurðsson 2009, 68.
 21. About the connection between *Trójumanna Saga* and *Breta Sögur*, see Stefanie Gropper, “Breta Sögur and Merlínússþá,” in *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus’ Realms*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 50; Gropper remarks: ‘The impulse for the composition of *Breta Sögur* may have been provided by the information given by Geoffrey in his *Historia* about Icelandic and Scandinavian prehistory. It included the possibility to connect the Norwegian dynasty and thus also the leading Icelandic families to the Trojan dynasty.’
 22. See e.g. Philip Lavender, “Merlin and the Völva,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006): 111-139; Horst, 2012.
 23. See for a comprehensive (though somewhat traditional) introduction to the “Medieval notion of literature”, John A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers and their Work: Middle English Literature 1100-1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. chapter One “The period and the literature”, 1-24.
 24. Lavender 2006.
 25. Idem, 113.
 26. Ibidem.
 27. John Lindow, *Handbook of Norse Mythology* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 317.
 28. See Clunies Ross 1994, esp. chapters One, Two and Three.
 29. Lesley Coote, *Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press in association with Boydell Press, 2000), 6.
 30. Idem, 14-15.

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31. Idem, 35.

32. Idem, 24.

33. Idem, 26-27.