



# SAGAS ON THE WEB: THE USE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY TO INTRODUCE CULTURAL HISTORY

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This paper is a brief summary of the introduction and demonstration of the project *Handritin heima*, a website on Icelandic medieval manuscripts and cultural history, provided at the Sagas and Societies conference. The first part of the website was formally released on October 5<sup>th</sup> 2002 in connection, and as part of, a new manuscript exhibition opened by The Árni Magnússon Institute in The Culture House in Reykjavík. Although part of the project has been published, the website is still in progress, so alternations and changes can be expected. The website will presumably be translated into English and at least one Nordic language.

Once completed, the website will contain both a general historical discussion of the manuscripts and a detailed presentation of matters connected with their production. The website will be ideal teaching-material but can also provide useful information for the general public and tourists. The following points from the introduction summarize what the project is about.

## WHAT IS HANDRITIN HEIMA?

A website on Icelandic medieval manuscripts and cultural history

Teaching material suitable for elementary and secondary schools

Co-operation partners: The Árni Magnússon Institute, Iceland's University of Education, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

## MAIN AIM OF PROJECT

To publish a website with information on the origin, history and preservation of Icelandic manuscripts, and the cultural tradition they represent.



### ADDITIONAL AIMS

To utilize the latest technology as a means of introducing cultural history to those without special knowledge of the field, regardless of their location;

To meet the need for comprehensive educational material on Icelandic cultural history for students and the general public.

### TARGET USERS

Students in Icelandic elementary and secondary schools in several subjects: the Icelandic language, sociology, history, religion, natural science, information technology, handicraft, art, music, as well as historical linguistics, cultural history and old Icelandic literature;

Icelandic children living abroad who have access to educational material on the web.

### THE WEBSITE CAN ALSO BE TRANSLATED AND MODIFIED FOR

Schoolchildren in other Nordic countries;

Students of Icelandic or Old Norse/Icelandic studies;

Cultural tourism;

Distance learning;

Other web projects

### ADVANTAGES

Extensive knowledge concerning Icelandic manuscripts will be available in one place and in a widely accessible media;

Information is presented on book production, the working methods of scribes and reception history, insofar as can be determined from the manuscripts;

Manuscript illuminations will be accessible, demonstrating their role in Icelandic medieval art history.



## CATEGORIES ON THE WEB

The History – Sagan;

The Manuscript – Handritið (first edition now on-line);

The Game – Leikurinn;

The Picture Collection – Myndasafnið (partly on-line);

The Teaching Material – Kennsluefnið.

The categories *The History – Sagan* and *The Manuscript – Handritið*, contain the main discussion on the website. The History deals with traditional historical topics such as the origins of book culture in Iceland, how bookmaking reached its heyday in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and began to decline in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. There will also be information on the collecting of manuscripts, the Icelandic scholar Árni Magnússon and the Renaissance period, and finally the return of the manuscripts from Denmark in the period 1971-1997.

The other main category, *The Manuscript – Handritið*, is the part of the website that has already been opened. It focuses on the social history of the manuscripts and the craft of bookmaking, handwriting, abbreviations, familiar quotations, scribes, marginal notations, illustrations and illuminations.

*The Game*, which is intended for the students, makes it possible to go through the material in game form, with questions and puzzles which can only be answered with some knowledge of the material. It is possible to divide the games into several themes, e.g. one based on events and characters from the sagas, another based on the old mythologies and the third based on Icelandic history, et cetera.

The *Teaching Material* is designed for teachers, with suggestions and approaches of use to teachers and their students. Part of the teaching material will be a discussion of media in the present day and before literacy and printing were introduced to Icelanders and a database on cultural related material, e.g. how sagas and mythology have been used in other art forms.

A small part of *The Picture Collection* has also been published; it will eventually contain a large number of pictures. Icelandic illustrative art is often thought to have originated in the nineteenth century, but such a view overlooks the illustrations found in the initial letters and



the marginal drawings in medieval manuscripts. This artwork has not been very accessible, but this project intends to change that.

The web design is based on characters and letters from the manuscripts. Each category has its own colour, but otherwise the same design. Most of the pictures used in the design are taken from the law codex Heynesbók AM 147 4to, but the initials in the left corner of every page are from the law codex Reykjabók AM 354 fol.

The emphasis is on the visual presentation of the manuscripts themselves, with many colour photographs illustrating the material discussed in the main text. Most of the photos on the website are from Árni Magnússon's collection, but in some cases the photographs are from foreign collections. The National Museum of Iceland has given its kind permission to use several photos of artefacts on the website. All pictures on the website are presented in 3 preset sizes, as it can be very useful to be able to enlarge pictures to reveal small details on the manuscripts.

On each page of the main categories there is a link called *Want to know more?* or *Viltu vita meira?* which offers a further explanation on the main theme of that page. There is also a link called *Fragments of Knowledge* or *Fróðleiksmolar*, which contains anecdotes or items of information that are indirectly related to the subject, e.g. one reads about how vellum was prepared for other purposes such as the making of drums and other instruments and also transparent parchment for lenses and windows.

As the work on the website is still in progress, the most advanced features so far are several pages of exercises in manuscript reading, for example:

<http://am.hi.is/handritinheima/handritid/handritalestur/handritalestur.htm> and

<http://am.hi.is/handritinheima/girls.swf>

Users can try their hand at reading manuscripts, expanding abbreviations and deciphering different scripts. It is possible to expand this collection of samples in order to use it as teaching material in reading manuscripts by providing the student with explanations on the letters and abbreviations used in each text.

There are two versions of reading exercises: 1) A few lines from a manuscript with white circles drawn around certain letters or abbreviations. When clicked on, a window with an



explanation pops up. 2) Verse 44 of the ancient poem of wisdom, Hávamál, from the Codex Regius 2365 4to, a manuscript of the poetic Edda. As the cursor is moved across the words, the modern Icelandic form appears, and by pressing the mouse-button down explanations concerning spelling and abbreviations appear.

A few words on paper can hardly do the website justice, so readers are encouraged to visit the website at <http://am.hi.is/handritinheima/index.html> in order to find out how it works. As mentioned above, the Handritin heima website is far from finished, and the authors would therefore welcome advice, suggestions and remarks about the site.

## **HANDRITIN HEIMA – A WEBSITE ON ICELANDIC MANUSCRIPTS**

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