Islands on the Edge: Medieval and Early Modern National Images of Iceland and Greenland[1]

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Abstract – In this article accounts of Iceland and Greenland from the late Middle Ages to the end of the 18th century will be examined with consideration given to the type of national images appearing there. The aim of the article is to explain these images and discuss their development and origin, not least how ideas about islands and the North in general have influenced the descriptions of these two countries. The research is based on two connected research traditions: the field of imagology and postcolonial studies, which means that the sources are studied as representations, as a discourse on islands in the periphery in the far North.

Keywords – National images, islands, far North, periphery, utopia

Introduction

Between the late Middle Ages and the end of the 18th century, two large islands on the European edge—Iceland and Greenland—were subjected to considerable descriptive effort from the outside world. This article argues that there was ambivalence about these islands, an incertitude about whether they were dystopian hell or utopian paradise isles. Although islands in general had a special status that made them suspect—either as wondrous or evil—it is likely that these islands were particularly prone to these two divergent attitudes because they had a peripheral status and were situated in the far North. Writers living in civilized Europe could project a variety of opposites onto the unseen far North: good or bad, rich or poor, civilized or barbarian. The duality of being islands and being in the far

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North put these countries within a complex matrix of otherness that authors during this time period struggled to comprehend. It is especially important to see how standardized and similar these descriptions became through time, considering that the countries and peoples in question are different in many aspects.

This article will examine the accounts of Iceland and Greenland during this 500-year period to show the most important images of each country. It is the aim of this article to explain their development and origins, not least the extent to which ideas about islands and the North have influenced the descriptions of these two countries.

The article is based mainly on two connected research traditions: the field of imagology and postcolonial studies.[2] The sources for the research will therefore be studied as representations, as images, not as texts representing some kind of truth on the situation in these countries. They will instead be treated as a discourse, building on different traditions and ideas about the situation and life in the far North, about islands and about the periphery in general. These traditions were moulded over a long period of time, though new factors were constantly added. An important concept connected with this discourse is the concept of hegemony, as the balance of power between the centre and the periphery is never equal concerning these representations. Representations of these two countries in this period are mainly composed outside these two islands and coloured by the views of the "civilized" world.

Iceland in the Late Middle Ages

The honour of writing the first account of Iceland goes to the German priest Adam of Bremen.[3] In his work *Historia Ecclesiae Hamburgensis* (written between 1070 and 1080), he describes an island lying at the end of the world that very few know of. Unique to the island, in his view, was black ice that was so old it was combustible. He also reports that the inhabitants dressed in skin, since it was very cold, and lived solely off their domestic animals, since no grain grew

[2] See for example Riesz 2007: 400–404; Leerssen 2007: 17–33.

[3] Adam of Bremen 2000: 191–192.

there. Because there were no forests, he says, the Icelanders lived in earthen houses with their domestic animals, sleeping under the same roof and even eating the same as the animals. He states that they treated foreigners exactly the same as locals, and generally expected very little from life. They were perfectly content with their situation and considered all property communal property. The bishop was treated like the king, and everyone obeyed his edicts. Since adopting Christianity, their lifestyles had changed little, as they had also previously lived their lives according to the spirit of Christianity.[4]

The society Adam describes is a strange and very primitive one and the life of the inhabitants might resemble the living habits of animals. But, on closer inspection, we see he is not describing a barbaric society but one of simplicity and virtue, a repudiation of arrogance and pretention, not dissimilar from the vows of monastic orders. According to his description, Icelanders lived an almost holy life, although certainly within extremely unusual circumstances. Compared to life in the cities in Europe, Iceland and the life of its people were certainly anomalous.

About 150 years later, the Dane Saxo Grammaticus took up the subject of Iceland and Icelanders in his prologue to *Gesta Danorum*, an account of the history of Denmark. He states that the lifestyle of Icelanders was unusual, and argues that they worked to write down and assemble the deeds of other peoples. This was done because it was their ardent passion to increase knowledge of other peoples and pass that information on to the next generations. Saxo explains that this obsession with information stemmed from the fact that the country offered no luxury of any kind. The people lived their lives in tempered simplicity, putting their efforts into history and literature instead of pursuing the hedonistic pleasures of life.[5] Saxo also comments on the Icelandic landscape in his prologue, noting in particular those features that make it especially strange, such as volcanoes that were always afire, similar to the volcano on Sicily. He finds it particularly wondrous that such a cold country should have so

[4] Adam of Bremen 2000: 192, 230–231.

[5] Saxo Grammaticus 2000: 15.

much eternally burning fire and that there seemed to always be fuel available to feed such fires.[6]

Although Saxo dwells on the wondrous nature of the country in his description of the volcanoes and hot springs, his account is in many respects similar to Adam of Bremen's. Both put forward Icelandic society as an ideal, though the aspects vary slightly. Saxo in particular seems to be rather describing the learned society of the monastery, where brothers of the order sit continuously at their desks and deny themselves all earthly pleasures. Like Adam of Bremen, Saxo seems to be using Icelandic society as a yardstick for the wider Christian society, an ideal to encourage improvement among others.

In the first half of the 14th century, Ranulph Higden described Iceland in his work *Polychronicon* as an island lying in the frozen northern ocean. The people were taciturn and direct, and they dressed in the skin of wild animals. Due to the harsh climate, they were unable to raise sheep or grow grain, and thus bread was seldom to be found. The people survived on seafood and their priests were their kings.[7] Higden places emphasis squarely on the difficulty of life in the farthest reaches of the northern ocean, an aspect only hinted at in Adam of Bremen's and Saxo's accounts.

These three texts introduce several themes that would later be expounded upon. They set the tone that Icelanders live a life that is quite primitive and modest, and all three agree that the climate and landscape—especially the cold—by no means make for a life of plenty. Two of them—Adam of Bremen and Saxo—suggest that the simplicity of the lifestyle has benefited the people, made them worthy of imitation in fact, just as service in a monastery would, while Higden's descriptions put more emphasis on the barbaric sides of the life of the Icelanders.

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[6] Saxo Grammaticus 2000: 18–20.

[7] Higden 1865: 323, 325.

Early Modern Perspectives on Iceland

Between the 16th century and the early 19th century, descriptions of Iceland increased considerably. Certain trends and themes in the discussions of the land and the people emerged. The most dominant one was to emphasize the negative aspects of the country. The Icelandic landscape and nature were particularly apt to be negatively described. For instance, the German Sebastian Franck, writing in the first half of the 16th century, did so in such a negative manner that one would imagine the country was uninhabitable. The snow and ice was constant, there were entire mountains made only of ice, and the landscape was a barren desert. Though grasslands existed, the grazing animals barely survived due to the bitter cold.[8] Other authors stated that the northern winds were so fierce that they could topple a knight in full armour from his steed. And for eight months of the year, the island was icebound, allowing fearsome bears to come ashore looking for food. Around the island swam whales and ocean monsters, often so huge that the seafarers th ought them to be islands.[9]

The popularity of emphasizing the negative aspects of the nature was a consistent trend until the end of the 18th century. A well-respected account of Iceland from the 18th century states, among other things, that the countryside did not give

> a pleasing view to the eye of the traveller, for it is uneven, covered with rocks and rugged mountains, and continually cloathed with ice and snow, with barren fields between them, destitute of wood, and encrusted with lava for many miles.[10]

In the judgement of these accounts, Iceland is far off the mark as a land suitable for habitation.

This negativity about the climate and landscape was no simple matter; rather, it was considered so unnatural that it was also quite

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[8] Franck 1534: lx.

[9] Olaus Magnus 1964: 8; see also Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. I: 28.

[10] Trusler 1788: 104; see also Guthrie 1782: 61.

common for accounts during this time period to associate both the people and the landscape with the rule of the devil and the realm of death, a depiction that also shows up in a few medieval accounts. Jacob Ziegler, a German author writing in the early 16th century, took up this strand when he described a certain volcanic fissure: he said it was always ablaze, much like Mount Etna, and the spirits of the damned were trapped in its fire. Other spirits of the dead were also to be seen in Iceland, often walking around, acting as if they were alive.[11] Other authors claimed that Icelanders had continual interaction with the dead, and that it was popular to ask them to use their magical abilities, for instance, to control the wind, an ability that was frequently connected to the Sami people.[12] The Dutchman Dithmar Blefken, writing from the perspective of learned European society early in the 17th century, explained the relationship between this magical aspect of Icelandic culture and the climate, temperature, and environment:

> And when almost all Christian people, in that lamentable darknesse and title of a Church, as it were by Whitchcraft deceived, were detayned in most deepe bonds of superstition; it could not bee but they, who were furthest removed from the societie of Learned men, and dwelling under an uncivill and barbarous Climate, should fall into most foule Idolatrie, when sometimes […] they had Devils to serve them, as familiar as domesticall servants.[13]

In short, a common theme in the literature on Iceland in that period was to construct the nature of the country as hostile and evil, even demonic, and the island's volcanoes as doors to hell.

When the discussion turned to the characteristics of the people and their lifestyle, the common practice was to fill the accounts with judgemental statements and unfavourable comparisons. The Englishman Andrew Borde, writing in the mid-16th century, stated

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[11] Ziegler 1878: 9.

[12] See for example Schultesius 1650: 485.

[13] Blefken 1906: 495; Zorgdrager 1723: 86. Cornelius Zorgdrager adds that one can only expect that people who live in such a cold climate would be less civilized than those who live in warmer climes.

that Icelanders are "beastly creatures unmanered and untaughte. They have no houses but yet doth lye in caves altogether like swine […] They do were wylde beastes skinnes & roudges."[14] The German Sebastian Franck claimed that Icelanders lived just like animals, surviving on fish and meat like wild beasts and preferred their food rotten and maggot-infested. The people also looked like wild animals, since all of them wore animal skins, and they were strong and very white.[15] (White is here a sign of the Northern otherness as all wild animals in Arctic climates were supposed to be white.) Still other authors suggested that Icelanders were short in stature, almost dwarf-like; the tallest amongst them were only five feet tall.[16] The view was that this was likely to be symbolic for how little Icelandic society had progressed towards civilization. By definition, therefore, the life of the people in this far-off place, on the edge of the inhabitable world, would bodily bear the marks of their locale: they did not look like people, but rather like dwarfs or wild animals.

How uncivilized the Icelanders were was much discussed, not only in terms of what sorts of houses they built, how they dressed, and how untidy they were, but also in terms of the relationship between the genders. Some authors stated that the men in the countryside had a tradition of lending German traders their daughters:

> If any Virgin have familiaritie with a Germaine, shee is honoured among them, and therefore shee is sought of many Suiters. And the time was before this, that Whoordome, which was without the degrees of Consanguinitie and Aaffinite had no Infamie.[17]

These negative accounts went so far as to not only depict the people who live in the far North as looking like wild animals, but conducting themselves—in terms of food, clothing, and sex—as animals as well.[18]

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[14] Boorde 1870 (no page numbers); see also Mallet 1684: 134.

[15] Franck 1534: lx; de la Croix 1697, vol. IV: 375.

[16] Mallet 1684: 134.

[17] Blefken 1906: 499; see also Schultesius 1650: 485.

[18] See for example Anderson 1746: 136–137.

But other authors chose to pick up on aspects of Iceland that could be seen as positive, and expand upon them, even idealizing the country as a sort of utopia. In the early part of the 16th century, the German Albert Krantz saw Icelanders as a people who desired a holistic life, enjoying all that nature had to offer to the fullest extent. He mentioned, however, that foreign merchants had made inroads into the country, such that people were now drinking beer instead of being content to just drink water. They had also begun to look for gold and silver "wie die unseren."[19]

During the 17th century, this trend continued. Such a positive perspective is clearly articulated by the Englishman Peter Heylin, writing around 1652 about the life of the Icelanders. He stated that the Icelanders "for the most part, are of plain and simple nature, living (as in the *Golden Age*) on that which nature gives them."[20] During the 18th century, there was a more general tendency to describe Icelanders in this way. Authors, such as the Englishman William Guthrie in the late 18th century, emphasized those elements of the Icelandic way of life that suggested primitivity and innocence:

> They are an honest, well intentioned people, moderately industrious, and very faithful and obliging. Theft is seldom heard of among them. They are much inclined to hospitality, and exercise it as far as their poverty will permit.[21]

The aforementioned authors built upon the foundations Adam of Bremen had laid out many centuries earlier: adoration for the primitive, respect for simplicity and a rejection of pretence. There is a suggestion that this simplicity and poverty ensures long life and health, these being qualities also considered most crucial within the teachings of Christianity. From this perspective then, Iceland is basically an ideal land, an exemplar of Christian society.

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[19] Krantz 1558: v.

[20] Heylin 1666: 496; de la Croix 1697, vol. IV: 375.

[21] Guthrie 1782: 59.

Figure 1. Icelanders in the late 18th century.
The simplicity and hospitality of the Icelanders had become so well known by the beginning of the 19th century that a description of it was put to verse, which accompanied this picture: No bellows to blow, no fuel to find,/ No embers to stir, nor poker to mind;/ They yet boil their dinner with comfort and ease,/ And you may dine with them whenever you please. [22]

Several of the authors who discussed Iceland stated that, to a considerable degree, it was possible to have a very good life in Iceland. A sign of this was the extreme old age of the inhabitants, which is basically akin to the age of the patriarchs as described in the Old Testament. [23] Blefken asserted that he met an Icelander who was 200 years old, and stated that, according to the Swedish bishop Olaus Magnus, they could live to be 300 years old.[24] Certainly such old age is an indication that the land provided well for the people and their needs. This motif was also often repeated in many different sources. Ziegler—of the early 16th century—mentioned that abundant and rich grass sprang up in the countryside, such that cows had to be driven away lest they gorged themselves to death on the plenty, a description Ranulph Higden had bestowed upon Ireland two centuries earlier.[25] Not to be outdone, Sebastian Münster claimed that the land was so amazingly abundant in butter and fish that the catch

[22] Taylor 1829: 12.

[23] See Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. IV: 215; de la Peyrère 1732: 54.

[24] Blefken 1906: 498–499. Blefken probably never came to Iceland but built his book on other sources. Olaus Magnus only claimed that Icelanders lived to be 100, so Blefken here is mistaken.

[25] Ziegler 1878: 9; Higden 1865: 333. It is interesting to see how often descriptions of Ireland and Iceland resemble each other in regard to the inhabitants and qualities of the two countries, not least according to utopian descriptions of both countries and the wonders that were to be found there. See Ortelius 1606: xli; Meriton 1679: 339.

was racked up outside the houses in stacks as tall as the houses.[26] Olaus Magnus conjured up the same sort of image in the mid-16th century when he said butter was produced in such quantity that it had to be stored in gigantic chests.[27] Other aspects of this utopian island were also to be envied. For example, quite a few descriptions included statements about how beautiful the women were:[28] "The Womenkinde there are very beautifull, but ornaments are wanting," stated Dithmar Blefken.[29] Curative properties were also assigned to some of the natural elements in Iceland; Blefken said that from one spring "bubbles foorth liquor like Wax, which notably cureth the French disease, which is very common there."[30]

Here we see that the descriptions of Iceland in this period go beyond the position of the medieval period, especially in terms of claiming that Iceland was a very bountiful country. This accords well with the idea that great wealth existed in the North. The idea goes back to the ancient Greeks, who maintained that circumstances of the Hyperborean people in the far North allowed for prosperity and an unsurpassed quality of life.[31] Similar ideas can be found in Tacitus's *Germania*.[32] According to that classical tradition, and the various reports from western Europe from the Middle Ages and the early modern period about the unbelievably abundant fish and whale stocks of the North Atlantic, it was natural to include Iceland in that discourse.[33] A land surrounded by such fecundity could not but also be teeming with abundance that well rewarded those who set their course in that direction. That wonders were also to be found here both in terms of the people and the land corresponded well with this general categorization.[34]

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[26] Münster 1628: 1365.

[27] Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. IV: 214.

[28] Heylin 1666: 496.

[29] Blefken 1906: 497.

[30] Blefken 1906: 502.

[31] Davidson 2005: 23–25; Romm 1994: 60, 64–67.

[32] Tacitus 2001: 123.

[33] See for example de la Croix 1697, vol. IV: 374; Moll 1701: 347.

[34] See for example Adam of Bremen 2000: 234; Blome 1670: 87; Melissantes 1715: 966.

The Dutch cartographer Abraham Ortelius described the resources of Iceland this way in the early 17th century:

Island a famous ile that's farre remote and distant from the Maine,
North west from hence doth lie in frozen sea: The countries chiefest gaine
Is brimstone pale, which heere in mountaines high in plenty great is found;
Or heere and there like sand on shore li'th scattered on the ground.
The goodly pastures passing fatte, the lowly meddowes alwaie green,
Such store of Neat and Kine in vales do feed, as else where may be seen.
The Sea on all sides round about, so many sundrie sorts of Fish
Doth yeeld, that none their names do know, or greater store may wish:
Whereof they daily lade great shippes from hence, and those away do send
To forrein countries euery way: though many things this ile commend,
For fish yet doth it farre excell all kingdomes of the world throughout,
By this the Nation grow'th in wealth, the people lusty strong and stout.[35]

One other virtue that Iceland was said to posses in the early modern period is related to the education and literary taste of the Icelanders, an accolade first assigned in the medieval period, as mentioned above. Jacob Ziegler and other authors in the 16th century stated that Icelanders composed poetry about the deeds of their forebears as a sort of testament for the next generation, so that they too could remember.[36] During the 17th century, tales about the intellectual life of the Icelanders were further elaborated. It was stated that Icelanders used to be the most learned of Northern peoples and had composed poems about the ancient days in their own tongue.[37] In addition to Saxo's statements mentioned above, the book *Crymogaea* by the Icelander Arngrímur Jónsson, which was published in Latin in Copenhagen in 1609, contributed substantially to this

[35] Ortelius 1606: 104. The author also published a Latin version of the poem, which first appeared in the book *De re Nautica*.

[36] Ziegler 1878: 9; Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. I: 83.

[37] Paschoud 1726: 190: "They were formerly the greatest Wits of the North, having preserved their ancient History in Verses."

impression. The French scientist de la Peyrère claimed in the mid-17th century, inspired by Jónsson, that Icelanders had always been recognized and respected by their neighbours for what extraordinary poets they were.[38] The interest of learned men throughout Europe turned more and more to the cultural heritage of the North during the 18th and 19th centuries.[39] It was argued that the origin of this heritage was to be found in Iceland.[40]

With the growth of nationalism in western and northern Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, this trend of the cultural Icelanders gained much more momentum, which will not be discussed here. Learned men in these countries looked to Iceland, this island far off on the edge of the European world, as a sort of wellspring and storehouse for their own culture.

Greenland

There are fewer known descriptions of Greenland from the medieval period than there are of Iceland. Those preserved in the Icelandic Sagas will not be discussed here since they were basically unknown outside Iceland until much later. Adam of Bremen briefly mentioned Greenland and Greenlanders, saying that their skin was of the same green colour as the ocean, and from this derives the name of the country. He also stated that they were similar to Icelanders in lifestyle, though they were fiercer and were pirates.[41]

The medieval Norwegian text *The King's Mirror* (*Konungs skuggsjá*) also discusses Greenland. It states that the country "lies on the outermost edge of the earth toward the north," and that it was greatly covered in ice though the weather was often good as in other places.[42] The inhabitants were said to be Christians, having churches and priests. They would trade with other countries, and the pastureland

[38] de la Peyrère 1732: 45.

[39] See Omberg 1976; see also Gylfi Gunnlaugsson in this volume.

[40] *The European Delineator* 1815: 137.

[41] Adam of Bremen 2000: 231–232. Adam also mentions other peoples of the same colour as the Greenlanders, living on an island high in the Baltic Sea; see page 212.

[42] *The King's Mirror* 1917: 143, 148.

was good. The farms were large and prosperous. The farmers would "raise cattle and sheep in large numbers and make butter and cheese in great quantities."[43] There were also plenty of wild animals: "Hares and wolves are very plentiful and there are multitudes of reindeer." There were also "large hawks," "very precious […] but the inhabitants do not know how to make any use of them." In addition, there was a great quantity of marble to be found in many colours.[44] But the ocean around Greenland was said to be "infested" with sea monsters. Other marvels worthy of mention were the northern lights, which the author of *The King's Mirror* discusses.[45] According to *The King's Mirror,* life was maybe not conventional though it was civilized, and the country is described as a kind of utopia. But, generally speaking, Greenland was not thought of much at all by Europeans during this time.

Images of Greenland had not changed much by the 16th century. Around 1600, explorers—and later fishermen and whale hunters—began to visit these far-off places, and in their wake, a plethora of stories about the lands in the far North began to circulate. Some thought that Greenland was connected to the Scandinavian Peninsula, or to North America, but most argued it was an island. Some accounts stated that there were many other islands around Greenland.[46]

One of the first accounts of Greenland from the 16th century is found in Jacob Ziegler's *Schondia.* He stated that the inhabitants were much inclined towards magic, as were the peoples of Lapland, since in fact the two lands were connected. They could conjure up a storm at sea that would break a ship to bits, and they would do so on purpose in order to steal the cargo onboard. But Ziegler also reiterated a detail first seen in *The Kings's Mirror*—that the land was especially fertile. He reports that the grass grew very well and that there was an amazing amount of cheese and butter to be found. [47]

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[43] *The King's Mirror* 1917: 144–145, 149.

[44] *The King's Mirror* 1917: 143–144.

[45] *The King's Mirror* 1917: 135, 149–150.

[46] See Capel 1678: 174–175.

[47] Ziegler 1878: 5–7.

Olaus Magnus, in his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, did not have much to say about Greenland either. He mentioned though that the Greenlanders travelled in skin boats, and that they were often pirates, as Ziegler had stated. He also mentioned that the houses resembled boats turned upside down, and that sometimes the ribs of whales were used instead of support beams when constructing houses. Especially strange was that the inhabitants were constantly battling with multitudes of cranes who nested there, an account Olaus himself said he would not have believed were it not for similar reports in such well-respected ancient sources as the Roman author and authority Pliny about the trouble people living in northern lands had with cranes at that time.[48]

The oldest reports then about Greenland and the Greenlandic people were rather mixed. *The King's Mirror* describes the land as a place of bounty where Christian people live, a kind of utopia. But later sources were more negative, stressing the primitive and barbarian aspects: the fact that the inhabitants practiced magic and robbery certainly placed them with Satan and other evildoers. The land itself, however, could be put to good use.

But in 1558, the image of Greenland received a dramatic makeover. Letters and a map were published in that year under the name of the Zeno brothers, two Venetians who were said to have written them around 1400. Both had a long-lasting impact on the geographic understanding of the North: the map became the basis for many similar maps and geographies about the North Atlantic, and the descriptions in the letters were often repeated. Today scholars agree that the documents were a 16th-century forgery. [49] According to the letters, the brothers had sailed across the North Atlantic and stopped at many islands, including Greenland (Engroueland in the Italian text) and Iceland. Many of these islands were described in detail, such as

[48] See for example Pliny, who argues that short people in the farthest-off mountains in India—"Pygmies, who do not exceed three spans"—were constantly battling with cranes. Pliny 1942: 523; Olaus Magnus 1976, vol. I: 95–96.

[49] See for example Sigurðsson 1971: 225 and onward.

Estotiland, which was said to have an abundance of gold.[50] But some other nearby islands were said to be populated by cannibals.[51]

The Zeno account of Greenland describes a cold place, where it was winter for eight to nine months out of the year. But there was, however, a remarkable city called Alba, where there was a cloister and a church dedicated to St. Thomas at the base of a volcano. Hot springs and vents around the mountain were used to cook food, bake bread, and heat the buildings. The monks tended gardens inside, which were green all year long, and there was always plenty of fish and birds to eat.[52]

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, many authors repeated these tales or described Greenland along these lines, though sometimes with the caveat that that is how things used to be in Greenland, as opposed to the contemporary situation.[53] Over time, the impression generated by the description of Alba—of a peaceful, plentiful city—by the Zeno brothers and influences from *The King's Mirror* were extended to the whole of Greenland.[54] For instance, Richard Blome stated the following about Greenland in the late 17th century:

> They say that in several parts of Groenlandt there are Lands which bear as good Wheat as any ground in the World; and Chestnuts so large, that their kernels are as big as Apples; that the Mountains yield Marble of all sorts of colours; that the Grass for Pastures is good, and feeds quantities of great and small Cattel, that there are Horses, Stags, Wolves, Foxes, black and white, Rears, Beavers, Martles, &c. That the Sea is full of

[50] Zeno 1904: 455–456.

[51] Zeno 1904: 465.

[52] Zeno 1904: 451–454; Ortelius repeated this in his description of Greenland. He describes the greenhouses thusly: "All the monastery is built of a kind of hollow light stone […] and thus they make a sure worke against the iniury of all weathers, their orchyeards also and gardens watered with this water are alwaies green and do flourish almost all the yeare long, with all maner of flowres, kinds of corne and fruits." Ortelius 1606: 102. See also Heylin 1666: 497.

[53] See for example Münster 1628: 1368; Capel 1678: 174–175.

[54] See for example Schultesius 1650: 491; Heylin 1666: 497. In Heylin's work from 1653 (p. 515) this is also quite clear. There he says among other things that the country is "generally knowne to abound in grasse, which nourisheth great store of cattle."

> great Fishes, as Sea-Wolves, Dogs, and Calves, but above all of Whales […] that their Fish Marhval carrieth a Tooth or Horn so strong and long […] and they assure us that the Horn is of the same greatness, form and matter and hath the same properties as those which we here esteem on the Unicornes.[55]

This representation of Greenland was common until around the middle of the 18th century: a verdant utopia where at least some of the inhabitants lived luxuriously, not unlike the way some authors described Iceland during the same time period. Some of the authors associated this time of plenty with the past, with a bygone golden age in which the land was abundant, the forest teeming with game, and the ocean overflowing with fish and sea mammals.[56] Others were more simply concerned with what the country could offer to meet their own financial or resource needs, as was fairly common in descriptions of the bountiful North: "In this island the Londoners have met with a good trade of fishing," said the Englishman George Meriton in his book from 1679.[57]

But the descriptions of Greenland were not all so uniform. Many of the negative ways Iceland had been described were also applied to descriptions of Greenland. Several authors chose to describe the inhabitants of Greenland as basically "savages," dressed in "skins of wild Beasts, their Shirts of the Entrails of Fish, and their Wastcoats of the skins of Birds with their Feathers."[58] Dithmar Blefken was one such author, turning his attention to the "pygmies" that lived in Greenland:

> The Pigmies represent the most perfect shape of Man, that they are hairy to the uttermost joynts of the fingers, and that the Males have beards downe to the knees. But although they have the shape of men, yet they have little sense or understanding, nor distinct speech, but make shew of a kinde of hissing, after the manner of Geese […] they were

[55] Blome 1670: 5.

[56] Büsching 1754: 266.

[57] Meriton 1679: 348; see also Heylin 1666: 497.

[58] Blome 1670: 5.

> unreasonable Creatures, and live in perpetuall darknesse. That some say that they have warre with the cranes […][59]

Many other authors in the 17th and 18th centuries described Greenland and its inhabitants this manner. It was stated that even though the Greenlanders would have the same sort of food available as mainland Europeans, they would choose instead to eat raw meat and wild animals, that they could drink ocean water without any ill side effects, and that they ate bread made from fish bone.[60] Most were said to live in caves and were "thievish, revengeful and treacherous towards Strangers."[61] They were also even more used to sharing their lives with the walking dead than Icelanders, since they had even less knowledge of God than the Icelanders did.[62]

These descriptions are generally similar to the discourse on Greenland in the first half of the 16th century. According to these sources the Greenlanders were even baser than Icelanders, in comparison with the civilized world: like wild animals in appearance and behaviour.[63]

Johann Anderson, who for a short while was the mayor of Hamburg in the mid-18th century, expanded upon the existing description of Greenland to some extent. He said that the inhabitants were certainly unclean, especially the women who washed themselves "with their own water."[64] They were also thought to be unable to plan long term and were accustomed only to thinking about one day at a time. As the English author and priest John Trusler put it at the end of the 18th century: "When they have plenty, [they] will dance and eat to excess, in hopes that the sea will afford them a fresh supply the next day."[65]

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[59] Blefken 1906: 513.

[60] Mallet 1684: 137–138; de la Croix 1697, vol. IV: 376; see also Melissantes 1715: 965.

[61] Paschoud 1726: 392.

[62] Heylin 1666: 497.

[63] Salmon 1772: 255.

[64] Anderson 1746: 243.

[65] Trusler 1788: 53.

But Anderson, Trusler, and other authors could also see Greenland with positive eyes, much more positive than the judgements passed by the same Anderson on Iceland. Though the land was certainly cold, and the inhabitants were primitive and wild, there were positive aspects to their character: their life was honest and humble and their demands few. They enjoyed good health and the women were even attractive.[66] Some of the Greenlanders, it was said, "might easily pass, undistinguished, among the natives of Switzerland."[67] Anderson even thought that the Greenlandic language had a pleasing sound to it, and he noted how remarkable it was that this might be the case among such base and primitive people.[68] Other authors of the 18th and early 19th centuries continued in this vein, remarking on the many advantages of the Greenlandic

> qualities, that must often put Christians to the blush […] Though the natives of Greenland are a savage people untaught and uncivilized, they are strangers to many vices, which other nations are addicted to. We hear no cursing among them […] no bitter mockery, no filthiness, nor foolery. Lying, cheating, and stealing are seldom heard of; and violent assaults, or highway robberies, never. Drunkenness is unknown in Greenland […][69]

Johann Anderson and John Trusler saw in the Greenlanders many of those admirable qualities they saw most fitting for mankind, just as Adam of Bremen had seen within Icelanders earlier, and as many authors after him reiterated. By the end of the 18th century, Greenlanders had come to represent "the noble savage" to a much greater extent than Icelanders. In fact, by this time, Icelanders had been rather moved to the centre of the scale, and were no longer considered as primitive and uncivilized as they once had been.

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[66] Anderson 1746: 161–162.

[67] Trusler 1788: 44–45, 60–61.

[68] Anderson 1746: 239–241.

[69] Trusler 1788: 70–71.

Conclusion

Armed with this overview of the treatment of Iceland and Greenland from the late Middle Ages onward, it is readily apparent that there were clear similarities, but also important distinctions. Obviously, idealized projections were the norm in descriptions of these far-off lands right from the beginning. When Adam of Bremen wrote his account of society in Iceland, he created an image that was practically the exact opposite of the way of life of civilized Europe. By describing the people as living in caves alongside their animals, and a nation without private ownership, Adam was representing a simple society, where greed and malice were unknown, unspoiled by the sins of mankind. He clearly intended to suggest an ideal, an Arcadia of the North, where primitive but good people could be found. The parameters he set defined the direction for an important tradition in descriptions of Iceland through the centuries. Greenland was also subjected to this idealization of the primitive. By the 18th century, the description of the noble savages of Greenland and the details of their demeanour—their innocence, their generosity, their fellow feeling and caring—echoed the descriptions of Icelanders from Adam of Bremen onward.

For both countries, the descriptions of the land itself as sorts of paradise islands had recurring motifs: butter dripping off each blade of grass, wild animals easily herded up, oceans teeming with fish. In addition, they had springs with especially desirable qualities, even the power to heal and also precious minerals and metals. The wondrous nature of these islands manifested itself in the people themselves, for they lived extremely long lives—up to hundreds of years if not eternally—and the women of Iceland were said to be more beautiful than in other lands.

It is indeed noteworthy that these islands (mainly Iceland), in the northwest corner of the known world, were also all presented as appropriate storehouses for knowledge. The earliest description of this aspect of Icelandic culture was probably generated by the desire to draw parallels with the solitary, studious life of the cloister as the ideal. But from that initial motivation, descriptions of this sort about Icelandic society became a fixture all the way through the medieval

and early modern periods. It reached an apex in the late 18th and 19th centuries when learned men in western Europe sought information about their own roots in the land, language, and Sagas of Iceland—a remarkable story in and of itself that is addressed by Gylfi Gunnlaugsson and Julia Zernack in this book.

But certainly it would be wrong to say that both islands were simply thought of as good places to live filled with warm-hearted and virtuous people. Quite the opposite. They were often described as devil islands where the behaviour of the inhabitants was barbaric and animalistic. In the case of Iceland, the type of housing, the food and drink, how the inhabitants dressed, and how they interacted across genders were all taken as symbolic for the liminal status of the Icelanders: were they in fact human or subhuman beings? At the extreme end of this discourse were attempts to link the inhabitants with black magic, cooperating with the agents of the devil, but even just mentioning the magical abilities of the inhabitants put them outside of the realm of normal people. The Greenlanders, like the Icelanders, were also often described in this vein. It was clearly questionable whether or not Greenlanders should be considered human or animal. They did not talk, but rather made sounds like birds and animals, and their clothing, eating habits, and style of housing were all too raw and unrefined to be civilized. What is particularly interesting about all of these negative descriptions is that they thrived right alongside the more positive descriptions of these islands, sometimes appearing even within the same text.

What emerges in the comparison is a pervasive ambivalence towards these countries. The wondrous aspects of the land were not simply positive, but also engendered a feeling of unfamiliarity and discomfort. What is not least important, though, about the wonders of these islands is the way they served to blur the boundary between the natural and the unnatural. In this, they reinforced the unclear distinction seen above between man and animal, and many descriptions noted that even the dead were not distinguished from the living. The dead could walk about amongst the living, who took no note of the difference. Some reports noted that it was difficult even to distinguish between men and women, people and animals, dead and living. Such ambiguity was, within Christian thought, a sign of uncleanliness. It was as frightening for medieval and early modern

Europeans as pioneers in the Americas could find the Creole people, who were the product of the blending of two different races.[70]

The question of the impact of the idea of the North, and how it influenced the descriptions of these islands, is certainly worth considering. It was generally thought, at least as late as the end of the 17th century, that the further north a land was from civilized Europe, the more barbaric the peoples must be who lived there. It is therefore no surprise that Greenland and Iceland were considered evil islands and even as the abode of Satan. There are signs though that this attitude towards the North was not fixed—there was also a tradition suggesting that the North could be a place of special plenitude, which explains why Greenland and Iceland could sometimes be described as paradise islands. By the 18th and 19th centuries, however, there was less room for such imaginings, and the idea of the verdant North disappeared. But at the same time, there was an expanding tradition that the North could be depicted as a place of learning, advancement, development, and a love of freedom that exceeded the situation in the South, which had previously been considered the cradle of civilization. This change of perspective on the North deeply impacted people's attitudes about Iceland in particular, allowing it to become a sort of Athens of the North in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the minds of northwestern Europeans.[71] Depictions of Greenland, however, were not impacted by this idea of an especially civilized far North: the largest island on the planet continued to be represented as the home of either the noble or the brutish savage.

The descriptions of Iceland and Greenland were greatly influenced by dominating ideas about islands and the far North. Islands were more often considered paradisiacal than the opposite, and the North was generally seen as a negative element in this period (though there are many exceptions, and the attitude about the North was changing by the 18th century). In a way these two islands were trapped within this discourse. The ambiguity about whether or not Greenland and Iceland were utopian paradise islands or the exact opposite, terrible hell, plagued the description of both islands until the end of the 18th century.

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[70] Gyssels 2007: 135.

[71] Ísleifsson 2007: 111–128.

In addition, the discourse on these islands was part of the international power dynamics of the time. The question of primitive versus civilized was particularly important as a means of justifying which people had control over whom and who had the right to exploit the riches in faraway lands. The powerful could also declare a country pleasing and exotic, a suitable locale for the sorts of exploits and adventures that were not appropriate in reality or in one's own backyard, but could be indulged in the playground of the "civilized" world.

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