The search for self-awareness
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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2018

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

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Conclusion

The message of Jón Aðils would echo well into the 20th century. To name but one example, in 1943, on the eve before Iceland’s regained sovereignty of 1918 was transformed into full independence, a civil servant named Sigurður Thorlacius published an article named Sjálfstæði Íslands. In this article he started off by stating that Icelanders more than most other nations should be able to make a distinction between ‘the blessing that is absolute freedom and the curse that is foreign servitude’: the chieftains in the 13th century had been both sweet-talked and threatened into forsaking that freedom, which had led to more than six centuries of humiliation by the foreign powers, with a complete lack of respect for the leaders of the Icelandic nation and protagonists of its culture. The struggle of those leaders, helped by both common and learned men, had resulted in regaining autonomy, which had immediately started a new golden age for literature, art and any kind of progress. Thorlacius went on to describe the situation in which Iceland found itself: the occupation by US troops, the hope that they would win the war in order to restore freedom and the common liberty between individuals and nations, and relying on their willingness to respect and fulfill Iceland’s autonomy once the war was over. He reflected on the events of 1262 and their disastrous outcome, and asked himself how such had been possible considering the fact that those involved had been anything but idiots; after all, theirs was the generation that had produced the highlights of Icelandic literature. Finally, he asked himself how his own generation could be prevented from committing a similar stupidity. In his opinion, the simple answer to that question was that all focus should be on sjálfræðismál þjóðarinnar, which in his words was the right to absolute autonomy – in a friendly relationship with other nations. No foreign control over their own business anymore: it was the Icelanders who had built their nation, who had laid the foundation for their splendid culture, and who had persevered through hardship and foreign oppression and safeguarded their culture and literary legacy, and it should therefore be only the Icelanders and nobody else who got to enjoy the country’s assets in the present and in the future.¹

In his exposé, Thorlacius used Aðils’ two key themes – culture or menning as such and love of freedom as a fully-fledged independence or sjálfræði – to advocate openly what Aðils could not: constitutional change. Of course, in 1943 Thorlacius wrote from a vastly different situation than Aðils in 1903: in the meantime, the ties with Denmark had been severed during the First World War, there had been the subsequent restoration of sovereignty in 1918, followed by a further development of nationalist tendencies in political respect in the following decades. Finally, the final blow to Icelandic-Danish relations had been dealt with

¹ Sigurður Thorlacius, ‘Sjálfræði Íslands’, Tímarit Máls og menningar 6-1 (1943), 36-43.
the outbreak of the Second World War: as early as 1940 Iceland had pronounced the Danish monarch, after Denmark’s occupation by Germany, to be unfit to rule and had informally declared itself independent.\(^2\) The situation was different, but Thorlacius elaborated on all the themes that Aðils had securely fastened in nationalist jargon – the two key themes, as well as the nation and its link with the individual, the past and the future, the people, and Iceland’s literary prowess then and now – to further the cause of that constitutional change. As for the present, this in Thorlacius’ eyes was focused on being able to enjoy the good that the land had to offer, all of which which was firmly rooted in the past; but other than Aðils had done, Thorlacius linked the present to a future that should be used for the same purpose as the present and that was also to entail the autonomy that had been in the pipeline for such a long time. One year later, aided by the ongoing events on the European mainland, that future would finally begin when, following a referendum, the union with Denmark was abolished and the present became a minor detail – again.

What emerges from this is that there is a lasting, historically distorted notion of time that permeates and marks Icelandic self-awareness. The gap between the present, reality and possibilities on the one hand and the past and future, conceptualisations and aspirations on the other hand when it comes to designing Icelandic self-awareness, that I presupposed in the introduction, extends itself throughout the Icelandic history, from the age of dependency and beyond.

But how did the fissure between the past of independence and the present of dependency impact the notion of either? Did it indeed lead to a continuous glorification of the past that was started by early modern authors, as the work of Jensson, Svavarsson and others have led us to believe?\(^3\) Absolutely not: the onset of the creation of an idealised golden past took place and shape in the middle of the 18th century through the work of bishop Finnur Jónsson, but it could never, and therefore did not, reach maturity until a century and a half later, when the concept formed part of contemporary nationalist thought. Was there a change for the better from an initial position of inferiority, that had resulted in apologetic writings, to a position of superiority in the late 18\(^{th}\) and early 19th century, as Ísleifsson stated, when Iceland came to be considered a ‘pastoral idyll’ by industrialised countries?\(^4\) Again, no: that happened half a century earlier, when the efforts of Denmark to enlighten people on the topic of Iceland through reliable accounts of the country bore fruit and positively changed the foreign image of Iceland. The way in which the authors dealt with the discrepancy between the past and the present in the construction of their image of Iceland was factually

\(^3\) See Chapters 2 and 3.
influenced and determined by the view of the country that foreigners held, which, in the case of ruling authority Denmark, they also wanted to present.

It is fair to say that the middle of the 18th century was a turning point in the development of the Icelandic self-image. Once the foreign view of Iceland underwent a drastic change in the first half of the 18th century, the Icelandic self-image also took a turn from a point of departure that was *ex negativo* to one that was *ex positivo*. Therefore, we may conclude that the way in which the division between the past and the present had an impact on the construction of the Icelandic self depended on external factors. This in turn leads to the fact that a distinct development can be discerned as follows, even though the social-political setting, with alterations over time, was much the same for a great part of the era discussed.

In order to bridge the fissure in his image of Iceland, Arngrímur Jónsson was not in a position to do anything else than to construct a continuity between the past and the present that balanced the two. He had to give them equal value on the level of ideas, even though the reality may have called for a different approach. Not only did Bodin’s universal principle on different forms of and changes in states allow him to do just that, they allowed him to present that continuity as an ideal situation.

Since the situation had not truly changed by 1746, Finnur Jónsson was forced to adhere to the same sense of an ideal continuity between past and present at the outset of his *Historia*, with a few small updates that fitted the historiography of his time. Yet along the way, because of a change in climate in the foreign perception of Iceland, he saw himself presented with the outstanding opportunity to start diverting the focus towards the past – a small but significant change. Jón Aðils for his part bridged the gap with the aid of Grundtvig by constructing an ideal continuity between the past and the future, with a full and glorifying focus on the former to provide a congruous outlook on the latter, be it mostly one-sided. Like Arngrímur and Finnur, the attention that Jón Aðils paid to the present was intrinsically linked to the past. For all three authors, the discussion of the present in their image of Iceland, in whichever way and with whatever possibilities, was a necessary evil, but they certainly made the most of it.

The consequence of this all is an extremely troubled relationship with time, a self-awareness that is at odds with the present and has an incomplete or no relation with the future. The outlook was bleak to start with. Not only did the author of *Alexanders saga* not challenge the mainstream ideas handed to him in its foreign example, the *Alexandreis*, but he also virtually bent over backwards to maintain the ideological purport of the *Alexandreis* and its classical precursor to render it acceptable to his native audience. If this is a valid reflection of the state of self-awareness on the level of ideas on Iceland in its day, i.e. its public self-

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5 See Chapter 3.
we see ourselves presented with a feeble starting point from which that self-awareness and the notion of autonomy could develop from the year 1262 onward: a lack of ideas on the self, or even ideas projected on the self, in the here and now. Was there actually any specifically Icelandic thought on the present self available to Arngrímur Jónsson, Finnur Jónsson and Jón Aðils? If *Alexanders saga* is taken as a point of reference, for which I have provided arguments based on its position in time, this is not likely. This offers an interesting starting point for monitoring the development of public self-awareness: the social-political situation accounted for the choice of the historiographic genre, as it left the three authors little leeway to address the present comprehensively, but it also called for the use of foreign ideas that could be used for the Icelandic cause for lack of national alternative. Imported foreign thought was applied to shape a public self-awareness that would take until the 20th century to reach its summit. First it was used in order to position Iceland on the international stage under the existing circumstances, which called for and allowed for a focus on the past; later on it was used to effect a thorough national awareness of the self in a time when it was commonplace to do so with a focus on that same past.

The general perspective on the self in the past (and the present or future) was developed in three steps. Starting with *Alexanders saga*, we see no explicit perspective, but its being an adaptation of a foreign, Latin epic into a native saga in the vernacular with the successful efforts to maintain its line of thought make for a text that contributed to a linguistic self-awareness in a political context from which it was actually kept separate. This is corroborated by the reception of *Alexanders saga* well into the 20th century, as well as the fact that it was claimed as an Icelandic text and a highlight in the development of the Icelandic language.

The first step in the development of the general perspective was effected by Arngrímur Jónsson’s use of the ideas of Jean Bodin in order to consolidate linguistic self-awareness and to construct a constitutional one. *Crymogæa* was the final touch to creating a linguistic self-awareness in undeniable ways, which as with *Alexanders saga* happened within a political context from which it was actually detached, and it was the onset of the development of ideas on the Icelandic state as another defining factor in the country’s make-up.

The second step was taken by Finnur Jónsson, when he changed Arngrímur’s purely constitutional approach to the historical Icelandic state into a semi-cultural one, with the aid of Montesquieuian ideas on the native character of peoples that allowed him to cause a shift in the balance between the past and the present of the Icelandic state as another defining factor in the country’s make-up.

The third and final step that brought the perspective to its final destination was effected by Jón Aðils’ cultural-political approach, as a consequence of which the cultural self-awareness of Iceland was finally consolidated and its political development was given implicit direction with the ideological construction of the

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6 For the distinction between public and popular self-awareness, see Introduction, 11-12.
Icelandic nation. On the whole, the public self-awareness of Iceland that these authors shaped was linguistic-cultural-political – in that order. The fact that the general perspective in all three texts, whether it is linguistic-constitutional, semi-cultural or cultural-political, feature an idealised continuity between past and present or future, yet lack a pure political component, makes it impossible to judge them by either primordialist-perennialist or modernist standards.

There are several great common denominators in each of these texts – some can be seen in all of them, some in a few. The themes that keep reoccurring in the shaping of the self are Iceland’s language, state, mediaeval literary legacy and culture. The overlap with the three fundamental factors that are supposed to have contributed to the ‘development of contemporary Icelandic identity’ as mentioned in the Introduction is clearly visible: the Icelandic language and mediaeval literary legacy played a pivotal role as building blocks in the construction of public self-awareness. The third factor, the ‘unsurpassed beauty’ of the Icelandic landscape, however does not belong to the body of these themes; in my opinion, it was and remains an exponent of the unconscious, popular self-awareness.

The one common theme that stands out the most is the explicit theme of the Icelandic literary legacy, because Arngrímur, Finnur and Jón each used this theme for different purposes. In Crymogæa, it was proffered as proof of the fact that the Icelandic language was a modern classic, and as such better than Latin – even though paradoxically, the author’s argumentation supporting this thesis was written in Latin, not Icelandic. In the Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae, it was staged as proof of Iceland’s wide scientific prowess during the Middle Ages, when other countries had erred in darkness when it came to learning. And lastly, in Íslenzkt þjóðerni it was used to demonstrate that Iceland’s was an ancient culture, which, being linked to the mediaeval state, also demonstrated that Iceland was a nation, and as such better than ancient Greece.

The other theme that occurs in all three texts in an implicit manner is the theme of the state. Again, all three authors – to a greater or lesser extent – used it to create a positive image of Iceland in comparison with other countries. Arngrímur came up with his two-state structure that made Iceland look better than ancient Rome, because Iceland had regained and maintained a favourable kind of state, whereas Rome had not. Finnur initially went along with Arngrímur’s reasoning, before he completed his take on the change in the historical Icelandic state in the last book of the Historia by indicating it had suffered the same fate as Rome, Athens, Sparta etc. Jón brought forward the old Icelandic society, with its dually-linked culture and government and its balance between the nation and the individual, in such a way that it implied superiority over ancient Greece: ancient Greek society had never known the same social-political balance, and unlike Iceland it could not reclaim its culture and autonomy.

8 ibid.
In all three texts, the application of these two themes – literature and state – anchored a paradoxical notion of superiority. This notion followed the construction of an ideal continuity between the past and the present or future that was born out of necessity. It is paradoxical in the sense that it was construed regardless of what the image of Iceland abroad was at each particular point in time when the texts were produced. From a linguistic and constitutional point of view, Iceland was better than ancient Rome; from a scientific point of view, Iceland was better than the rest of Europe, and from a cultural-political point of view, Iceland was better than ancient Greece. It is this sense of superiority, whether conceived in an actual situation of inferiority or superiority, that deals with the gap between the past and the present/future and that gives meaning to the line of continuity in the historical Icelandic self-image as provided by these authors.

Yet at the same time, the sense of superiority accentuates the fissure between the self and the other, because it stresses the aspects in which Iceland considered itself better than the rest of the world. In the case of all four texts, the use of foreign ideas is indicative of the desire and the ability to keep up with the ideas that were in vogue internationally at the time; in the case of the latter three, it also served the purpose of accentuating the sense of superiority that could not be derived from actuality, both historical or present. What started as a partly explicit, partly implicit idealisation of both past and present in 1609 evolved into an outright, yet not complete glorification of the past and future by 1903.

All along the way, the Icelandic mediaeval literature was the main key to claim superiority, and it fulfils this function to the present day. As the Icelandic scholar Sigurður Nordal, the key spokesman for the Icelandic language and culture in the 20th century, stated: ‘No other nation in the Northern Hemisphere has a mediaeval literature that equals Iceland’s in originality and brilliance (...). It would not be a silly thing to call Icelanders the greatest literary nation in the world (...) no other nation has dedicated that much energy, love and care to its literature, and no other nation has generally sought and found so much comfort and strength in it.’ Or to quote the website of the Icelandic Literature Centre: ‘Whatever the case may be, it is certainly not possible to ignore medieval Icelandic literature, which has not

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9 See Chapter 2.
10 See Chapter 3.
11 See Chapter 4.
only played a major role in the history of the nation but is also Iceland’s chief contribution to world culture.\(^{13}\)

That brings us to the fact that the achievements of these four authors, as demonstrated and discussed in this book, may be called monumental. The overwhelming reception of all four texts, especially the international reception of *Crymogæa* and the *Historia*, bears witness to their incredible accomplishments, even if – or perhaps especially since – in the case of the first three texts the initially intended audience would have been narrowed down to the learned.\(^{14}\)

Notwithstanding the restrictions set by any of the commissions that they may have received – especially Finnur, whose hands were tied the most, but who was in the lucky position that the tide was turning in his favour – they put the ideas that they had found to use in such a masterful way that they could anchor notions of the self and constitute a public self-awareness that did not bear contradiction. In the case of *Alexanders saga*, the ethical ideas handed down from the *Alexandreis* received a 13th-century update that would secure a safe landing with its domestic audience. In the case of the other three, the richness of their conceptualisation – aided by the use of Latin in the case of *Crymogæa* and in the *Historia* – defied opposition both at home and abroad.

If we think about the invention of the self and of national characteristics, this was something that the Icelanders proved extremely apt at, from an early date onward. Arngrimur’s invention of Icelandic as a modern classic, that suffered little to no change between the Middle Ages and now, is accepted until this very day, and his claim that the language was a direct continuation of Gothic found international resonance well into the 19th century. Finnur’s invention of mediaeval Iceland as the land of the learned, and his careful attempt to illustrate the events of 1262 as a deterioration, were immediately accepted by his Swedish colleague Uno von Troil. Jón’s invention of the ancient Icelandic culture and autonomy, and the nation with it, yielded such broad acceptance that its terminology and constructs were used to advocate both its culture and its independence in the build-up to 1944 and thereafter.

The craft that these authors displayed in using foreign ideas to invent domestic characteristics with a supposedly historical tradition, for the goal of shaping a communal self-image that was half-way credible to say the least, is admirable. It is actually all the more admirable when we consider the fact that the richness of those ideas about the past masked the sharp contrast with what Iceland’s actual history had been like. It was not heroic and it did not feature political and military achievements. To find the angles with which one can render a plausible self-image rooted in history under such conditions is a true accomplishment.


\(^{14}\) The reception of each text is discussed extensively in the corresponding Chapter.
The lack of a past that featured such a type of state and such achievements as could be connected easily to a public, ideological self-awareness is one explanation as to why the development of the latter was restricted and confined to other characteristics (language, literature) that could be taken from the popular, cultural self-awareness – not for lack of trying to connect it to a historical type of state, though. It also explains why in the 19th century, when the possibilities for displaying a public self-awareness increased and the road to nationalism was opened, the interaction between the popular and the public increased. Where the building blocks of the popular, cultural self-awareness – language and literature – previously had facilitated the limited construction and display of a public, ideological self-awareness, with no ideas of their own, the latter in its turn started influencing and facilitating the former, again with no thought that was originally their own. The result was an organic situation where the public, ideological nationalism that ensued was first and foremost culturally determined, and the popular, cultural nationalism was backed up with due ideology. For the first time they merged into what in my opinion may be called a national Icelandic identity, which is an identity because it concerned self-awareness on both levels, public and popular, and because it reached and permeated all layers of society, and national because it had the additional nationalist component, featuring joint national characteristics and serving the joint cause of the nation.

The highly successful display of public self-awareness in these texts shows a growth process, one during which limited signs of self-awareness were visible in what grew to be an intertextual continuity, and they gradually expanded as time moved on, but could and did not turn into a proper identity until after 1903. Jón Aðils’ role was pivotal in this transformation: he was the one who moved beyond the mere use of the old building blocks and actively entered the domain of popular self-awareness, in that he connected his ideological construct of the Icelandic self with a common awareness and honouring of the Icelandic past that was already in place. Subsequently, by writing and teaching in the vernacular he ensured the dissemination of his ideas among all layers of society, in a setting and with themes that they already would have been familiar with. Because of his dual approach the two kinds of self-awareness on Iceland finally met up, and the signs of self-awareness previously exhibited turned into more than a sum of parts – they retroactively became signs of identity.

Does this mean that the fissure between the popular and the public, the cultural and the ideological was closed? As with the sense of superiority, it was bridged on the one hand, but accentuated on the other hand, because the tools used to effect the bridge were foreign, and so, ironically, for the longest time was the language used. One could almost say that the interaction between the two started once Iceland’s public self-awareness could be manifested in the vernacular. On top of this, because of Iceland’s political situation its national identity could
never fully transcend the cultural level to reach a political one.\textsuperscript{15} That leaves me to conclude that the nationalism that developed on Iceland is an impaired nationalism, both in theory and in practice, that challenges – if not defies – any modernist or primordialist-perennialist stance as described in the Introduction.\textsuperscript{16} Regarding the modernist stance, Iceland does not conform to the idea that nationalism and the nation followed from industrialisation or capitalism, it did not – because it could not – feature a political component, its modern-time nationalism was not merely a constructed set of ideas, although it featured modern ideas on state. Regarding the primordialist-perennialist stance, a continuity in self-awareness reaching from earlier times into modernity can be discerned, which might qualify Iceland to fit the primordialist-perennialist model. The same can be said for the way in which language and culture were deployed as ideological signs of self-awareness long before such became common practice in constituting identities. However, because these ideological, public signs of identity were devised with the aid of foreign ideas, they bear little relevance to a pre-existing ethnic community. And more than this, the idealised continuity between past and present or future that starts with Arngrímur Jónsson and that was also portrayed by Finnur Jónsson and Jón Aðils would sooner qualify their texts as meeting modernist standards.

In sum, the case of Icelandic national identity and nationalism does not meet the criteria to support the ideas of either school. The public, ideological nationalism that ensued on Iceland in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century could not have occurred without its popular, cultural counterpart, and more than likely was indebted to its precursor signs of self-awareness on either side – both public and popular – from earlier centuries. In turn, it did contain the political agenda that was bound to be absent previously, but at the same time it could not apply that agenda to the present – until, or unless, a world war came along.

This leads to the initial question whether the gap between the past and the present or future, between the self and the other, and between the popular-cultural and the public-ideological was ever closed after 1918, or after 1944 for that matter. For the period discussed in this research and leading up to 1944, I have to answer this question in the negative. For the period after 1944, the gap is continued by the coloured view of the Icelandic past that was initiated by Jón Aðils and that is still current – both in public and popular self-awareness, as visible in popular-scientific sources. The notion that Iceland’s mediaeval literature was an expression of its culture is still in vogue,\textsuperscript{17} as is the notion that they were a nation that was not occupied by a foreign authority in 1262, but that remained autonomous – to a

\textsuperscript{15} See Introduction, note 25.
\textsuperscript{16} See Introduction, 7.
\textsuperscript{17} See note 12.
certain extent. The era of dependency, especially as visible in the Danish trade monopoly, came to be considered a dark age that was no longer viewed with the ambiguous attitude that Aðils displayed towards the Danes. But the most important way, with a long-lasting effect, in which Aðils impacted the further development of self-awareness was his perfection of the constructed culture and past, with its invented characteristics, versus historical facts. His focus on a fictitious past with its invented traditional characteristics, and the general acceptance thereof by his Icelandic audience, led to ongoing strained relations between the self and the other. Why? Since it concerned a fictitious past, the interpretation of its consequence as a constituent of the image of Iceland was highly arbitrary, especially when it came to presenting that image to others. Jón Aðils anchored a lasting attitude towards others: as long as the other honours the Icelandic ‘tradition’, the fissure between the self and the other is bridged, but as soon as they appropriate that ‘tradition’ as their own, the fissure becomes visible in its full extent. A nation in the making between 1918 and 1944, Iceland increasingly had to deal with the other – both internally and externally. Subsequently, the outcome of any discussion that involved the Icelandic self and the other – native or foreign – depended on how the self works within the framework that Jón Aðils provided, namely how they design their identity and make it acceptable, and on how the other responds to it. In other words, the outcome is always unsure, and in the end the fissure is never truly closed – a situation that is still in existence. Whether it concerns discussions of the tourism boom of recent years or on joining the EU, there is always the gap between the individualist and the communal internally, and ultimately between the self and the other externally. It all depends on who designs the self the best, and on how the other responds to it, so whatever the topic, the outcome is always arbitrary, and it is always one or the other, never an intermediate. And that brings me to the overall conclusion on the question whether both sides of the comprehensive fissure that runs through Icelandic self-awareness will ever join. In my opinion, this fissure is similar to the rift that is caused by the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and that runs across Iceland, dividing the country in two: the twain shall never meet.

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18 A good example of this is the fact that Gamli sáttmáli is still seen as an agreement whereby Iceland was not incorporated in the Norwegian realm; see e.g. https://www.visindavefur.is/svar.php?id=18233 (accessed January 5th, 2018).


20 I must note that this ideological kind of invented tradition that Aðils installed is of a different nature than the practical kind described by Hobsbawm to be ‘relevant’ to the “nation”, although it served the same purpose; see Eric J. Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: inventing traditions’, in Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Rover (eds.), The invention of tradition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 (1983†), 13.

21 Íþ á 239: ‘Þennan arf (i.e. forníslenzku bökmentirnar) hefur þjóðinni að tekist að varðveita óskertan fram á þennan dag, þrátt fyrir ítrekaðar tilraunir annara þjóða til að helga sér hann, og hún býr vonandi svo að honum í framtíðinni, að allar þjóðir sjáli þess glögg merki, að hún er sá eini réttí erfini.’