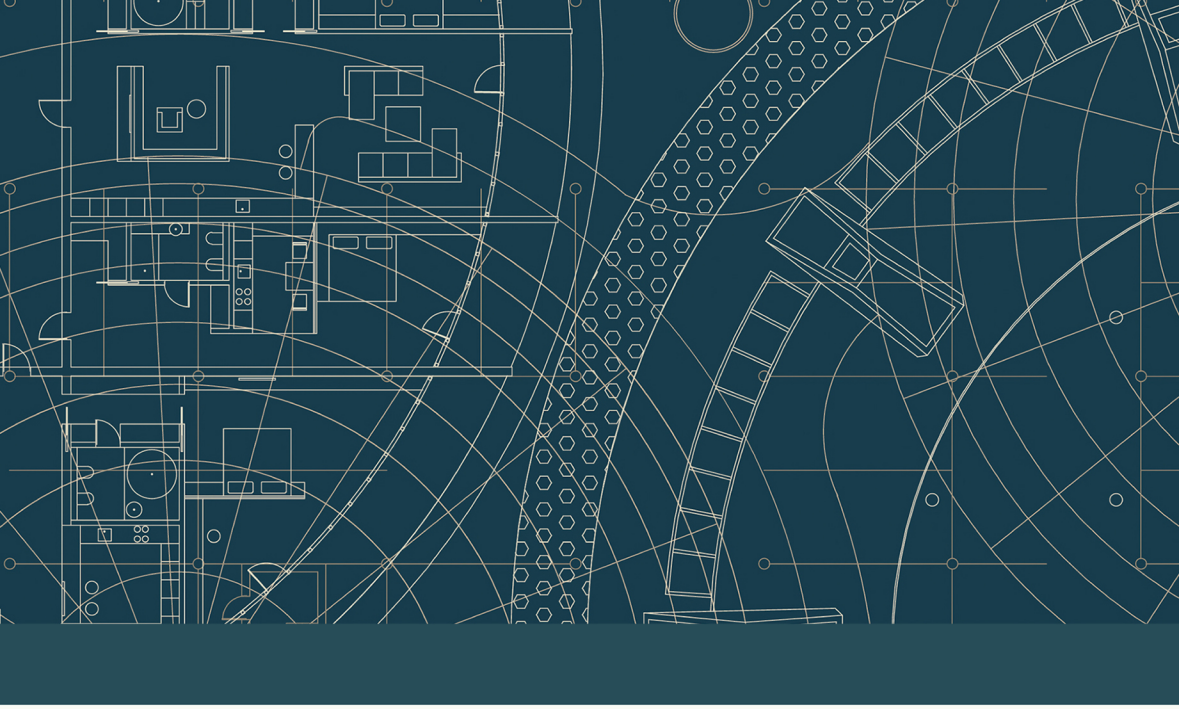

OBJECTS IN THE ARCHIVES

MODERN MATERIAL CULTURE AND HERITAGE IN THE NORTH

Edited by Kristján Mímisson and Davíð Ólafsson

Objects in the Archives

Situated on an intersection between Material Culture Studies, History and Museum and Archival Studies, this book investigates the material world of the Icelandic population in the late Modern Era.

Utilizing the great wealth of inventories of household goods stored at The National Archives of Iceland in conjunction with material objects, the book highlights new paths and insights into understanding people's possessions and material relations, and the entwined biographies of people and things. It shows how people shaped their own lives by means of things and how these material relations are "archived" and represented in heritage and museum spaces. The book is divided into two parts that explore how material culture contributes to history, the relationship between things and text, and the practice of collecting things and address the process of assembly, or how things gather. Micro and macro methods of investigation tease out new approaches to debates around human–thing relationships, acknowledging ideas about material agency and social significance and that the human–material relation is reciprocal.

This volume will appeal to students and researchers within the field of archaeology, material culture studies, museum studies, heritage, and the history of material culture.

Kristján Mímisson is an archaeologist and editorial curator at the National Museum of Iceland.

Davíð Ólafsson is a historian and associate professor at the University of Iceland.

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Modern Material Culture and Heritage in the North

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1 Introduction

What Are Our Favourite Things and Why?

Kristján Mímisson and Davíð Ólafsson

In Favour of Things

This volume presents the outcome of a five-year interdisciplinary research project carried out at the University of Iceland between 2018 and 2023 with a Grant of Excellence by The Icelandic Centre for Research. The project was titled *My Favourite Things: Material Culture Archives, Cultural Heritage and Meaning*. The project title cites a famous song, *My Favourite Things*, by Rogers and Hammerstein. There is an interesting consonance between the lyrics of the song and the project. In the lyrics there is a reference to a collection of small and ordinary things and their affect on the human condition. It's about "warm woollen mittens" and "blue satin sashes" that provide calm and ease to people at unrest things at hand that form a knowable world—a world of habitude. The project *My Favourite Things* revolved around these often non-spectacular and seemingly non-informative things that highlight everyday practices and underline the human–thing relationship. On the other hand, the project addressed the issue of collections, i.e. how things assemble and how the various categories of material culture assemblages—be that a museum collection or the accumulation of personal belongings—originate, are maintained, taken care of, and recorded.

Our most favourite things are thus not necessarily our most valuable or expensive objects but those that we keep nearest to us, and which create familiarity. They are not always rigorously selected and assembled but frequently concentrate into seemingly random gatherings. The Icelandic probate inventories from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries comprise lists with such things of closeness, not scrupulously collected but acquired over a life span creating an interesting mishmash of things that provides an exceptional glance into the human–thing intimacy. Each inventory is tied to an individual (or a couple) providing an utmost intimate account of the material residues of the persona. In the inventories find endless recitals of raggedy garments, rotten planks, hingeless chests, and cracked pots, but also silk kerchiefs, fine panels for the living room, Danish coffers, and silver spoons.

It is estimated that the Icelandic probate inventories list around 6.5 million items, which is almost 20-fold the number of all objects in the object collection of the National Museum of Iceland. Thus, we may claim that the largest collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Icelandic material culture is not found in the

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storage rooms of the National Museum of Iceland but within the probate inventories kept at the National Archives of Iceland.

The project title *My Favourite Things* also implies the notion of being *in favour of things*. The history of mankind is essentially a material history where societal progress is mostly reflected in material innovations. Nonetheless, history as a discipline has in the past tended to ignore things and the material involvement in the course of history. Certainly, there have been notable exceptions to this slant (e.g. Deetz, 1977; Domańska, 2006; Harvey, 2017) and lately we have seen considerably increased interest in History and Material Culture (e.g. Gaskell and Carter, 2020). Much of these approaches set out by emphasizing the importance of things and how things attribute to historiography. At its kernel, this project, however, aimed at taking a conventional dataset of historical inquiry—archive material/documents—and testing it against various modes of material culture studies and theory. How do we approach a material assemblage devoid of the actual objects it refers to?

Indeed, the human–thing relationship has been under academic scrutiny for a long time, but the idea that things are merely the product of human activity, cognition, and agency has dominated the agenda. This notion is still widespread, although many (Appadurai, 1986; Bennett, 2010; Domańska, 2006; Gell, 1998; Kopytoff, 1986; Latour, 1988, 1999, 2005; Olsen, 1997, 2010; Strathern, 1988) have argued vehemently against this attitude. The opposition argues for a relationship that regards the persona as a certain kind of material being, both being of things, i.e. being materially constituted, and being separable or dividual, i.e. a composition of many sources, material and human. Hence, the focus has increasingly moved away from material culture as a tool employed in social relations and identity building towards the agency, biography, and social significance of things themselves, as material objects. Questions are raised about self-contained material agency and how things, in power of their materiality and persistency, mediate, stabilize, and affect the existence of and relations between people. This is for example by not only symbolizing but realizing and withholding such social phenomena as gender, class, and power relations and other individual and group identities. Acknowledging these ideas about material agency and social significance implies that the human-material relation is reciprocal. Things, for instance, not only reflect economy or social standing but are eminent players in the creation, maintenance, and transition of human prosperity as well as elements such as personhood and identity. Such a perspective on things as active parts of human society also demands an alternative attitude towards their life histories and ability to change status. The identities of people and things are not fixed, but fluid and constantly changing according to their interactions and social situation. Thus, an individual thing can throughout its lifetime take on a different social status through playing the roles of commodity, gift, loot, heirloom, object of national heritage, waste, etc., and through these roles it interacts differently and establishes new relations with and between people.

Regarding this, it becomes obvious that the Icelandic probate inventories provide an extraordinary wealth of information about human–material relations during later centuries in Icelandic history. We could argue that the inventories present us

with the material residues of a deceased individual—records that list the things that formed a composite persona—a material being.

The Work

This volume deals with these questions of the human–thing relationship as well as the historiographical significance of things. In what sense are things (objects or material culture) the matter of history? The volume encompasses, in addition to this introductory chapter and a short postscript by the project manager, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 13 contributions by a varied group of international scholars of which most participated directly in the research project, whereas others were a part of the project's advisory team. Hence, it contains both articles from within the project itself and others positioning the project within a wider academic discourse.

The work is divided into two main parts, in the first part, *Objects of Expression—Expressing Objects*, the main focus lies on the historicity of things and how things exist textually. Már Jónsson sets the agenda by discussing the legal foundation for the Icelandic probate inventories and provides a statistical overview of the data. Anna Heiða Baldursdóttir focuses in her contribution on certain social groups within the inventories and looks into the material possessions of farm labourers and widows in nineteenth-century Iceland. Conversely, Davíð Ólafsson approaches the inventories by concentrating on a certain group of objects, i.e. books and how they circulated between people in the later nineteenth century. Gavin Lucas' article takes on the problem of wording things and how things cannot be separated from their textuality. Kristján Mímisson expands this perspective by focusing on the different manifestations of things (textual, pictorial, in fragments, and as wholes) and their varied historiographical significance. Finally, Andri M. Kristjánsson addresses material agency within literature by applying ideas from New Materialism to the literary analysis of a nineteenth-century Icelandic novel.

The second part of this book goes by the caption *Objects of Gathering—Gathering Objects*. In this part of the book, we see the authors delve into the phenomenon of object gatherings and the idea of the archive. Anna Lísa Rúnarsdóttir investigates the collection policy of Matthías Þórðarson, the Icelandic State Antiquarian in the first half of the twentieth century and how it contributed to forming an Icelandic national identity. Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson and Arnar Árnason discuss the Icelandic turf house and how documentary/archival preservation has been counterproductive for the conservation of this important Icelandic architectural heritage. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon ponders over the concept of the archive in relation to a private collection—the photographic collection of his grandfather. Ágústa Edwald Maxwell addresses the archive as well, but from the standpoint of waste material from archaeological excavations in Iceland. In their contribution, Tim Flohr Sørensen and Þóra Pétursdóttir express their experiences of materials in disarray, walking through the abandoned Holmegaard Glassworks in Denmark. L.K. Bertram tells in her article an interesting story about a Danish cake—vínarterta—that became an icon of Icelandic identity among Icelandic immigrants in Canada during the twentieth century. Ewa Domańska argues for a symbiotic

biocultural history by demonstrating how Bald Cypress Knees transcend the traditional categories of biology, nature, and culture. Finally, the project leader, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, reviews the project, its aims and returns, in relation to the ideas of potential history.

The spectrum of approaches is wide, but the focus is clear: How do we recognize things and how are we made aware of them? How do things gather into agentive assemblages?

The Archive—Gatherings and Histories

Language is an interesting phenomenon that not only expresses ideas but also directs discourse. Hence, concepts are not always directly translatable between languages, which results in culturally specific ways of thinking. The project *My Favourite Things* started with a small group at the University of Iceland discussing the idea, it was a local group, thus, all debate took place in Icelandic, where a single concept—*safn*—is habitually used for various entities, such as museums, collections, assemblages, archives, gatherings, and more. It is not at all confusing and at times clarifying prefixes are added to the term, for instance: *skjalasafn* = *documents collection* = *archive*. It wasn't until the debate shifted to English that certain conceptual conflict became apparent. Not that they didn't exist—they simply attracted less attention when debating in Icelandic. The problem that arose by going from Icelandic to English revolved around the notion of *Archive* versus *Collection*, i.e. the conceptual difference between a documentary preservation of an object and the preservation of the object itself. Here we encounter a well-known dilemma of the ontology/epistemology of things versus text (e.g. Andrén, 1997; Domańska, 2006; Olsen, 1997). Textual sources are generally seen as more informative than things, providing deeper understanding of historical processes, illustrating more clearly social circumstances or being more reflective of "human" intention and deliberate mediation—having more epistemological value. This project, however, started from the hypothesis that things (material culture in general) can be active on their own terms, i.e. possess agency, and are thus rich in content, although their mediation may be totally different from that of text. But the separation between things and text is not as clear-cut as one might assume, especially when looking at archives. First, we should not forget that documentary archives are nothing but a collection of objects, which like any other collection is dependent on a complex infrastructure for its well-being. Material collections are in the same way not composed of mere objects. Each museum object is linked to a variety of attached information, both scientific analyses and textual descriptions (cf. Lucas, 2012; and Lucas' article in this book).

Hence, both archives and collections are a mixture of material and textual information about the past. Approaching both the material culture collections and the textual archives as being a hybrid composition of material and textual sources was fundamental to this research project in general, as it enabled a treatment the sources (textual and material) on a level basis. In addition, it allowed for an alternative approach to the history of material culture that does not privilege one

source category over another. Within the project both types of collections (textual and material) were considered rich in content. Thus, we chose to unite them under a single term, *Archive*. This does not mean that the material archives need to be totally consistent with the documentary archives, but it rather emphasizes that the tensions that may exist between them do not rule out a juxtaposition of the two, but instead affords and calls for an exploration of their characteristics, how they divide and communicate, and how their joined forces may allow alternative perspectives on the past, as well as on the conventional distinction between text and thing.

Hence, the question of ontology or epistemology is perhaps not central to the essence of things and texts. Perhaps their fundamental essence lies in their historicity. In 2007 Tim Ingold published a seminal paper in the journal, *Archaeological Dialogues*, titled, *Materials against Materiality*. There he utters his discontent with the debate about materiality. It seemed to have lost all relation to "materials and their properties" and rather revolves around the relations between ease materiality and some "unfathomable qualities" like agency, intentionality, semiosis, spirituality, etc. (Ingold, 2007: 2). At the beginning of the paper, he invites the reader to a small experiment that includes picking up a wet stone and follow it while reading the article. At the end of the paper, Ingold (2007: 15) returns to the stone that has now dried:

> Though the shape of the stone remains the same, it otherwise looks quite different […] Though we might be inclined to say that a stone bathed in moisture is more 'stony' than one bathed in dry air, we should probably acknowledge that the appearances are just different. It is the same if we pick up the stone and feel it, or knock it against something else to make a noise. The dry stone feels and sounds differently from the wet one. What we can conclude, however, is that since the substance of the stone must be bathed in a medium of some kind, there is no way in which its stoniness can be understood apart from the ways it is caught up in the interchanges across its surface, between substance and medium […] Stoniness, then, is not in the stone's 'nature', in its materiality. Nor is it merely in the mind of the observer or practitioner. Rather, it emerges through the stone's involvement in its total surroundings […] and from the manifold ways in which it is engaged in the currents of the lifeworld. The properties of materials, in short, are not attributes but histories.

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Part I

Objects of Expression

Expressing Objects

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2 Probate Records and Private Property in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Iceland

Már Jónsson

Probate records have for some decades been perused by historians who investigate standards of living and consumption patterns, household economy, agricultural development, systems of inheritance, transmission of property, debts, and material culture (e.g., Hutchison, 2012; McCants, 2006). In Iceland, these sources have been used in studies on book ownership, cultural differences among farmers and housing conditions, and some specimens have been published in scholarly editions (Ágústsson, 2004; Ax, 2002; Jensdóttir, 1974–1977; Jónsson, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018). Probate protocols became obligatory in Iceland as late as in 1769, almost a hundred years later than in other parts of the Realm of Denmark-Norway. Almost immediately, though, an efficient system was established and from the period 1770 to 1900 over 30,000 detailed post-mortem inventories and partitions of inheritance are preserved that allow a thorough study of private property and its transmission between generations. In this article, an overview will be provided on the creation and preservation of these sources with some elementary statistics on the probate population according to gender, age, and regions, besides a preliminary discussion of the worth of estates, revealing the everyday workings of a society mired in poverty but nonetheless vibrant and dynamic on its own account.

The Law

Following King Magnus the Lawmender's Norwegian National Law Code of 1274, the Icelandic *Jónsbók* of 1281 required that whenever someone died, all property should be appraised by six men and kept at the deceased person's home until the heirs or their representatives arrived. When all the creditors had been paid, the inheritance was to be divided. Heirs who did not show up simply received the part allotted to them in their absence. If the deceased had small children, the nearest heir should take care of them and their inheritance, regardless of whether the person who took care of the property was a man or a woman. The guardian should ensure that the children would receive their inheritance in due course, taking into consideration what had been spent on their maintenance in the meantime (Jónsson, 2004; Keyser and Munch, 1848: 85–89; Rindal and Spørck, 2018; Schulman, 2010; Taranger, 1970: 87–92). There is no mention of written documents, so that any discussions and decisions would have to be remembered by the parties

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in question and others present. Wealthy families, though, will have realized that written documentation was more reliable. It cannot be determined when the first probate documents were produced in Iceland, but the earliest preserved date to the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth century (Jónsson, 2020: 211–212).

Danish medieval laws contained detailed provisions on the division of inheritance, but just as in Norwegian and Icelandic law, written documentation is not mentioned (Brøndum-Nielsen and Aakjær, 1933: 35–52, 59–75; Kroman and Iuul, 1945: 140, 143–149). However, Danish towns pioneered the production and preservation of probate records, first and foremost in order to protect the inheritance of young; this goes for Randers from 1536 onwards, Malmø from 1537, Kalundborg 1541, Odense 1556, Ribe 1562, Helsingør 1571, Vordingborg 1574, Køge 1596, and Nakskov 1598. In Norway, a booklet is preserved from the parish of Strandvik, close to Bergen, that contains numerous partitions of inheritance to minors in the years 1599–1602, by far the oldest of its kind. Otherwise, the oldest preserved Norwegian probate protocols were instigated in the years 1656–1662 in the districts of Aker and Namdal, Toten, Gudbrandsdal, Hadeland, and Hedemark (Jónsson, 2016: 10–11).

Practical needs thus came first, and legislation followed suit, with detailed provisions on the partition of inheritance, where written documentation was a central issue. Protracted discussions resulted in the promulgation of The Danish Law Code of 1683 (Iuul, 1949) and the Norwegian Law Code of 1687. The paragraphs on the partition of inheritance are identical. Only when the heirs were minors or absent, or they were not the direct descendants of the deceased, an inventory was to be made (par. 5-2-1). If they were "of age" and present, officials should not interfere unless they were asked to do so (par. 5-2-16). The general rule was that male heirs reached majority at the age of eighteen, but until 25 a guardian or someone appointed by the authorities should take care of their fortune (par. 3-17-34). A father could not withhold their mother's inheritance from his sons after they had turned 18, whereas daughters were under his tutelage until they married, or he gave them up to another lawful guardian (par. 3-17-38). An inventory should be made within 30 days in the presence of the heirs, their guardians, and relatives, and all the belongings assessed by someone who had no vested interests (par. 5-2-3). When the creditors had been disbursed, the inheritance could be divided …

> … so that what and how much belongs to everyone be clearly marked down, and that the whole state of the partition, the inventory, valuation, debts, active and passive, the residue of the inheritance, and portions assigned to each, be fairly drawn up.
>
> (Par. 5-2-15)

The heirs, their relatives, and guardians, as well as officials, should sign and seal the deed of partition. The heirs kept the deed of partition, and the relevant officials were to keep track of the documents and look after their preservation in a special protocol: "Every administrator of a partition shall have a register, in which shall be entered every deed of partition executed under them" (DL par. 5-2-90; NL par. 5-2-91) (*The Danish Law*, 1761; Iuul, 1949).

These rules were systematically implemented in Denmark and Norway in the following years. Correspondingly, in the Faroe Islands, the first lay probate protocol was instituted in 1701 with the division of the inheritance of farmer Oluf Pedersen at Hvalvík on Norður-Streymoy. The Faroese registration is rather superficial in the sense that only valuable belongings are included, such as land, houses, cattle, iron pots, and good clothes (FNA, The Faroese National Archives, Tórshavn. Je L0001. Probate Protocol 1701–1706, ff. 1r–6r.). In Iceland, no changes were made yet. There had indeed been a lively discussion there among officials and scholars on the need for a legal overhaul, and in 1688, judges and bishops were asked to put together a new book of laws based on the Norwegian Code of 1687. A draft of the inheritance chapters was ready in 1691. Its first paragraph is little more than a translation of the Norwegian Law Code, although adapted to Icelandic administration in the titles of the relevant district administrative officers (*hreppstjóri*) and sheriffs (*sýslumaður*). In the summer of 1693, the royal governor Christian Müller commented that most disputes in the country concerned inheritance, for the simple reason that no probate protocols were kept. He proposed that sheriffs should present him with a copy of all probate proceedings at the annual assembly at Þingvellir (*Alþingi*), which would also be copied into such a protocol (National Archives of Iceland (NAI), Danish Chancery DK 2. The Project of Law 1689–1693: sheet 3, ff. 340–341, 363).

A new Icelandic law code never materialized. The legal procedures of the Norwegian Law Code were made applicable in 1718 and some sections of its criminal law in 1734 (*Lovsamling for Island* 3: 628–629; Róbertsson, 2004: 43–47). Only a few probate records are preserved from the latter part of the seventeenth century and the first decades of the eighteenth century, mostly concerning wealthy individuals. It is unlikely, though, that any sheriffs or provosts had by this time started keeping these documents in a systematic way, although they most certainly were involved in their production. On 15 August 1717, Cornelius Wulf arrived in Iceland as royal representative of finances (*landfógeti*) and sheriff of Gullbringusýsla, the region closest to his residence at Bessastaðir. He immediately instituted a protocol of probate records. The book is preserved and contains copies made by Wulf himself of the probate records of 11 individuals, 7 men and 4 women, all of them written in Danish (Jónsson, 2020: 215–219).

Icelandic officials did not follow in Wulf's footsteps, not even his successor as sheriff in Gullbringusýsla. A decree made for Norway on 21 April 1731 contained detailed requirements for probate protocols that should be sent to the royal representative (*stiftamtmand*) when they were finished. The officials responsible for probate proceedings were also to send him annual abstracts of all such records (*Lovsamling for Island* 5: 565; Winge, 1996: 20). This was not considered for Iceland until much later. Soon enough, though, the Norwegian Law Code came to influence the production of probate deeds, at first within the Church, where a few provosts began safeguarding the records they made. In Húnavatnssýsla, there are originals of five partition deeds with inventories of the belongings of priests or priests' widows from the years 1723 to 1729, meticulously done. In Eyjafjörður, there are originals of six inventories, containing five partitions from

the years 1725 to 1746, all very well done and written in Icelandic. In Þingeyjarsýsla, there are originals or attested copies of ten partition deeds 1728–1760, most of them including inventories. Some sheriffs followed suit, the first one being Þórarinn Jónsson in Eyjafjarðarsýsla. From 6 May to 12 June 1739, he oversaw the registration, assessment, and partition of inheritance at eight farms, assisted by two prominent farmers in each place, explaining their role in a preamble to the document, where the heirs are also mentioned. In one of these cases an heir was absent, and in six cases some heirs were minors, but in one of them all six children had come of age. The inventories of belongings are detailed in respect of the property as well as the debts, and there is no doubt that the men who participated in these proceedings were experienced in such matters. Þórarinn continued keeping copies of partition deeds, but not all are preserved: three from 1740 to 1741 and no less than 54 from 1749 to 1766.

In 1743, Brynjólfur Sigurðsson, sheriff of Árnessýsla, started making copies of inventories and partition deeds into a special protocol. He died on 16 August 1771 and had then produced four such books that contain a total of 160 records, in most cases both an inventory and a partition. Damaged fragments remain of a collection of copies from Skaftafellssýsla, starting in 1760, and a fragment of a probate protocol of Rangárvallasýsla that starts in 1768. Thus, through the influence of the Norwegian Law Code, some Icelandic officials started keeping probate records in their archives, which had until then only been made for the heirs, either in books or as collections of single documents. Many more inventories and deeds of partition must have been produced all over the country, but as they were in the keeping of the families involved, they have vanished.

Probate protocols became obligatory in Iceland as soon as the section on inheritance of the Norwegian Code of 1687 replaced the stipulations of Jónsbók of 1281 with a royal letter on 17 February 1769. That was done because of a request sent by Pétur Þorsteinsson, sheriff of Norður-Múlasýsla, to the king on 16 June 1768. He had explained that his deceased father-in-law, the reverend Guðmundur Pálsson had fathered three children, Páll, Hólmfríður, and Þórunn, who had been Pétur's wife. Hólmfríður had died in 1754, leaving two children. Þórunn had died in 1764 and four out of her ten children with Pétur were alive. Their grandmother Þórunn Pálsdóttir, Guðmundur Pálsson's widow, was still alive, as well as her son, the reverend Páll Guðmundsson. Now, Pétur Þorsteinsson was certain that Páll, at the death of his mother, would try to acquire the entire inheritance of his parents according to "the old Icelandic law", that is Jónsbók. Its second class of inheritance included a son's son, a son's daughter, and a daughter's son, but a daughter's daughter only if none of the others were alive (Jónsson, 2004: 128; Schulman, 2010: 101). Pétur asserted that this was contrary to the law in other parts of the kingdom, where equally related individuals inherited alike. He thus wanted the inheritance of his mother-in-law Þórunn, whenever she died, to be treated according to the Danish and Norwegian Law Codes, for the sake of her daughters' daughters. In a comment of 16 July 1768, governor (*amtmaður*) Ólafur Stefánsson noted that in a recent draft of a new code of law for Iceland, still in progress, the inheritance section followed the Norwegian Code of 1687. On 13 February 1769, Christian von Pröck, the royal

representative for Iceland in Copenhagen (*stiftamtmaður*), agreed. Four days later the king decided that the inheritance rules of the Norwegian Law Code should be made valid in Iceland and the decree was published at the Alþingi in the summer (*Alþingisbækur Íslands*, 1982: 151; *Annálar 1400–1800* 4, 1940–1948: 396–397; *Lovsamling for Island* 3: 628; see also Sigurðsson, 1971: 192).

An Icelandic translation of the new inheritance law was printed at Hrappsey in the autumn of 1771. The text is in Icelandic with a commentary, and both were reprinted eight years later as part of a translation of the whole Norwegian Law Code (*Kóngs Christians þess fimmta Norsku lög*, 1779: 502–507). The translator, sheriff Magnús Ketilsson, started using a probate protocol for the region of Dalasýsla in 1782 and he included the inventories. Four years later the sheriff of Þingeyjarsýsla did the same and others followed: Húnavatnssýsla in 1791, Eyjafjarðarsýsla in 1793, and Rangárvallasýsla in 1793. This development was also influenced by instructions on probate proceedings published in Denmark on 9 April 1783 and 12 February 1790, although they were not made public in Iceland. The norm was to be a correctly organized probate protocol that was attested by the relevant authorities, but as a first and preliminary step, officials could just gather the probate deeds, providing page numbers, and draw a thread through the bundle, that then should be sealed (Jónsson, 2012: 93–96; *Lovsamling for Island* 4: 700–701; *Lovsamling for Island* 5: 664–665). At the initiative of Icelandic officials, on 16 August 1788, the Chancery in Copenhagen had also decided that sheriffs should annually provide an abstract of all probate proceedings, the finished ones as well as those in progress (*Lovsamling for Island* 5: 564–565). Finally, a royal decree of 12 September 1792 established a 4% tax on inheritance received by others than direct descendants if the value of the estate was more than 100 *rigsdaler*. A week later, the king explained that this was also valid for Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Finnmark in Norway (*Alþingisbækur Íslands*, 1990: 116; *Lovsamling for Island* 6: 39–44, 47).

New laws on inheritance, promulgated on 25 September 1850, did not affect the manner of probate proceedings but were a landmark by introducing the equal inheritance of daughters and sons. In both Jónsbók and the Norwegian Code of Law daughters had received the half of what sons got. Probate proceedings were radically revised in a law of 12 April 1878 in the sense that from now on a public partition could be avoided, even if the inheritors were minors of age, if their guardians and other inheritors agreed (Jónsson, 2011: 78–80).

The Distribution

The legal development is reflected in the preservation of probate records, as it became obligatory for officials to produce them as well as preserve them, besides reporting to the central authorities. Table 2.1 shows the number of individuals, divided by gender, whose records are preserved in the National Archives of Iceland and some local archives, be it inventories, partition deeds or both, as well as auctions. Such documents made for around 2400 people who were still alive, mostly due to divorce or bankruptcy, are included. Table 2.2 goes into more detail by showing the same numbers for every decade. There are some records on just over

Table 2.1 Probate records in half-centuries according to gender.

Period	*Female*	*Male*	*Total*	*Female in %*
1701–1750	33	80	113	29
1751–1800	675	1,239	1,914	35
1801–1850	5,902	8,243	14,145	42
1851–1900	5,845	10,810	16,655	35
Total	12,455	20,372	32,827	38

Source: A database made by the author in collaboration with the National Archives of Iceland, available at http://danarbu.skjalasafn.is

Table 2.2 Probate records in decades according to gender.

Period	*Female*	*Male*	*Total*	*Female in %*
1701–1710	3	6	9	33
1711–1720	3	5	8	38
1721–1730	6	16	22	27
1731–1740	5	19	24	21
1741–1750	16	34	50	32
1751–1760	35	78	113	31
1761–1770	58	90	148	39
1771–1780	89	159	248	36
1781–1790	233	497	730	32
1791–1800	260	415	675	39
1801–1810	482	809	1,291	37
1811–1820	788	1,191	1,979	40
1821–1830	1,060	1,461	2,521	42
1831–1840	1,590	2,212	3,802	42
1841–1850	1,982	2,570	4,552	44
1851–1860	1,597	2,776	4,373	37
1861–1870	1,519	2,591	4,110	37
1871–1880	1,144	1,882	3026	38
1881–1890	918	1,839	2,757	33
1891–1900	667	1,722	2,389	28
Total	12,455	20,372	32,827	38

a hundred individuals from the first half of the eighteenth century and on almost 2000 from the second half. Most of those documents are from the last two decades subsequent to the introduction of the inheritance sections of the Norwegian Law Code. Probate documents are not preserved from all districts in Iceland until the early years of the nineteenth century. This is clearly reflected in the numbers, as the first decade has two times as many records as the decade 1790–1800, and the second and third even more, with a maximum in 1841–1860.

During the nineteenth century, around 162,000 Icelanders died and of those, at least 75,000 were more than 25 years old (Jónsson and Magnússon, 1997: tables 2.2c and 2.40). There are probate records on almost 31,000 individuals in the period, which means rather more than a third of those who died—just as in Norway (Eliassen, 1996: 68; Hutchinson, 1996: 32). One can assume that in the years 1831–1870

Table 2.3 Estimated number of probate records in the Nordic countries.

Period	*Sweden*	*Finland*	*Norway*	*Denmark*	*Summa*
1651–1700	4,245	4,248	6,008	11,614	26,554
1701–1750	32,715	18,409	34,544	58,072	145,593
1751–1800	356,178	118,953	109,641	96,234	694,694
Total	393,138	141,610	150,193	165,920	866,841

this goes for a half of those who died. After that there is a decrease in the number of records and even more so after the new law of 1878 when it became easier to avoid a public partition of inheritance. As for gender, there are somewhat fewer women than men within the probate population that is 38% for the whole period. However, the proportion was at its highest in the years when the records are most numerous and went up to 44% in the decade 1841–1850. It should also be taken into consideration that when those who died had been married, the belongings of the surviving partner were included in the inventory as well. In other words, the registration was an assessment of the family or household, not just the individual who had died.

In comparison to what is preserved in the other much more populous Nordic countries, with hundreds of thousands of records, these numbers are of course extremely low. Numbers are only available on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Table 2.3), but for Sweden at least it can be estimated that for the nineteenth century there are probably around one million extant probate inventories, and in the other three countries certainly much more than in the eighteenth century (Jónsson, 2016: 23).

There are three types of records in the Icelandic archives—inventories of property, partitions of inheritance and auctions, either before the partition or after. The chore of these archives are the partition protocols kept by sheriffs, who were responsible for the partition after having made or received the inventories—most of them produced by a district administrative officer and another local farmer of means with the help of someone in the household. In the early nineteenth century it was not uncommon that the sheriffs copied the inventories into the probate protocols but after that, in most cases, only the partitions were included, often though with lists of what the individual inheritors were meant receive the so-called "lóðseðlar" or in Danish "lodsedler". A few sheriffs kept special protocols with copies of inventories but in most cases they were kept apart in bundles or boxes—with the result that quite a few have perished. Despite this, as can be seen in Table 2.4, an equal number of partitions and inventories are preserved, that is for around 77% of

Table 2.4 Types of probate records.

Period	*Inventories*	*Lots*	*Partition*	*Auctions*	*Individuals*
1701–1750	79	15	89	6	113
1751–1800	1,504	168	1,375	86	1,914
1801–1850	10,947	983	11,431	3,768	14,145
1851–1900	11,562	292	11,172	7,778	16,655
Total	**24,092**	**1,458**	**24,067**	**11,638**	**32,827**

Table 2.5 Constellations of probate records.

Records preserved	*Individuals*	*%*
Inventory + partition + auction	5,015	16
Inventory + partition	13,665	44
Inventory + auction	1,428	5
Inventory	3,988	13
Partition + auction	981	3
Partition	2,973	10
Auction	3,120	10
Total	31,170	100

the probate population. Additional information on the property of 1458 individuals or 4% can be had in "lóðseðlar" (here called lots and only included when an inventory is not extant). There are auctions on over a third of the individuals, many more in the second part of the nineteenth century when such events had become popular (Steinþórsdóttir, 2022: 63–76).

Evidently, not all of these documents are preserved for every individual, as will be seen in Table 2.5 that covers the whole corpus. The canonical combination is an inventory and a partition (44%). There was quite often an auction too (16%) but rarely only the partition and an auction are preserved (3%). Loss of documents accounts for the fact that in one out of ten cases only the partition is preserved, and this at least partly explains the cases where only an inventory is extant (13%) or an inventory and an auction (5%). Many of those, however, are instances where the estate did not go on to be divided publicly, either because the heirs were adults, or the deceased was so poor that everything went into the funeral. As to auctions alone (10%), half of those concern people who were still alive (see above).

Representativity

The slight gender imbalance has already been mentioned, with the caveat that the belongings of a married couple were assessed when any one of them died. This difference is thus no obstacle to the study of women and property. Other aspects relevant to the issue of how well the probate population corresponds with or mirrors the population at large relate to geographical distribution, age and amount of property—and these will be covered somewhat superficially in what remains of the article. There is indeed a difference in the preservation of records between counties (sýslur), as seen in Table 2.6. It shows the number of individuals in each of them and the population according to the census of 1850. The proportion of probate records and populations can be used as an indicator of the order of magnitude as to the difference between regions. Most of them are close to the average and, to put it simply, there are enough records in any of them to substantiate detailed research.

A great deal of work was put into tracing the year of birth of individuals whose probate records are preserved. This was greatly facilitated by the genealogical database Íslendingabók (islendingabok.is) but otherwise church records were

Table 2.6 Probate records according to regions.

County	*1701–1750*	*1751–1800*	*1801–1850*	*1851–1900*	*Total*	*Population 1850*	*%*
Norður-Múlasýsla	0	119	677	951	1,747	3,201	50
Suður-Múlasýsla	0	91	687	1,041	1,819	2,988	60
Skaftafellssýsla	2	103	758	842	1,705	3,340	50
Rangárvallasýsla	2	91	1,255	1,128	2,476	4,766	50
Vestmannaeyjar	0	2	184	306	492	399	120
Árnessýsla	34	208	1,110	1,095	2,447	5,018	50
Gullbringusýsla	26	107	1,382	1,687	3,202	4,162	80
Reykjavík	1	1	341	967	1,310	1,506	90
Borgarfjarðarsýsla	0	11	485	750	1,246	2,097	60
Mýrasýsla	5	16	486	722	1,229	2,410	50
Snæfellsnessýsla	2	38	741	821	1,602	2,684	60
Dalasýsla	0	96	453	436	985	1,923	50
Barðastrandarsýsla	0	26	235	547	808	2,518	30
Ísafjarðarsýsla	2	18	439	857	1,316	4,204	30
Strandasýsla	0	4	294	336	634	1,373	50
Húnavatnssýsla	7	208	1,222	1,129	2,566	4,117	60
Skagafjarðarsýsla	3	173	918	1,138	2,232	4,033	60
Eyjafjarðarsýsla	21	474	1,350	1,042	2,887	3,965	70
Þingeyjarsýsla	8	121	1,008	782	1,919	4,453	40
Total	113	1,907	14,025	16,577	32,622	59,157	60

Source on the population in 1850: Sigurðsson (1858–1975: 17–27).

consulted. The result was that the age at death of 27457 individuals is known. The distribution is shown in Table 2.7 and shows the same mild gender imbalance as shown before. In Table 2.8 the adults are compared to the age at death in Iceland as a whole in the years 1850–1855. The resemblance is fairly good, although there are differences, with more people in the probate population within the age groups 30–59 and fewer among the youngest as well as the oldest. Partly, this must be due to the legal definition of when to do a public partition, as people in their 40s and 50s were more likely to have young children.

Table 2.7 Distribution of age and gender.

Age group	*Female*	*Male*	*Total*	*Female in %*
0–9	52	39	91	57
10–19	136	163	299	45
20–29	823	1,548	2,371	35
30–39	1,881	2,855	4,736	40
40–49	1,988	3,263	5,251	38
50–59	2,215	3,459	5,674	39
60–69	1,865	3,028	4,893	38
70–79	1,270	1,793	3,063	41
80–89	433	544	977	44
90+	58	44	102	57
Total	10,721	16,736	27,457	39

Table 2.8 Probate population and age of death in 1850–1855.

Age	*Probates in %*	*Deaths 1850–1855 in %*	*Difference*
20–29	9	14	–5
30–39	17	10	7
40–49	19	13	6
50–59	21	19	2
60–69	18	18	0
70+	15	17	–2
Total	100	100	
N	**27,067**	**4,002**	

Source: Sigurðsson (1858–1975: 117, 350–355, 366–367).

Most Icelanders in these years were either farmers or worked at farm or had done so. The exact position of people is not always registered in these records—except for priests—which means that it is an incomplete and therefore useless variable. The distribution of wealth, however, appears to reflect the composition of Icelandic society rather well—only that people who owned absolutely nothing do not appear and they were not few. Destitute people are indeed numerous, who owned little more than their cloths, be they servants, lodgers, paupers, and cottagers, even farmers. The worth of belongings before debts, as seen in Table 2.9 with quartiles in rigsdaler, is almost identical between men and women. The mean value is equivalent to the second quartile: half of the group had less and half more. A lower limit for a decent living might perhaps be put at 60 rigsdaler, but an average farmer would need to own between 200 and 300 rigsdaler.[1]

This shows that not only substantial estates were registered and divided. Poor farmers are included and even indigent paupers, married or not. In that sense, Icelandic probate documents are more representative than Norwegian ones, if one can generalize the conclusions reached by Alan Hutchinson in a study of probate records in Nordland. He concluded that the wealthier part of the population was overrepresented, which meant that probate records were not at all representative for the distribution of wealth and material conditions (Hutchinson, 1996: 32–34, 42). In Iceland, there are probably more documentation available pertaining to well-off farmers and officials but there is far enough information on the material belongings

Table 2.9 Worth of Icelandic probate estates in quartiles and rigsdaler.

	Female			*Male*		
	1751–1800	*1801–1850*	*1851–1900*	*1751–1800*	*1801–1850*	*1851–1900*
First quartile	55	57	55	53	64	64
Second quartile	117	164	200	115	166	192
Third quartile	228	390	558	232	376	477
Fourth quartile	2,579	54,457	31,392	12,280	90,000	50,462

of poorer people as well—just as there is enough to be had on all groups of age after 20. The documentary bias can easily be circumscribed, and all social groups reached. There will always be one or more individuals in the material that can be taken and used to represent his or her group of age or position in society.

Having said that, it should be worthwhile—as a final statistical exercise—to put the Icelandic probate population as a whole within deciles à la Thomas Piketty. The unequal distribution of means thus becomes quite clear although it is not as glaring as it appears to have been in France. Piketty has shown that in 1810, 80% of the total "patrimonies" in that country belonged to the highest decile, that is the 10% richest people in the country, whereas the richest 1% owned 45% of the whole. By the end of the century these portions had increased to 88% and 59%. The majority of the population stayed poor or became even poorer (Piketty, 2013: 516, 547). The numbers for Iceland can be seen in Table 2.10. The percentages cannot be rounded up or down because otherwise those who owned the least would plainly and simply disappear.

According to this, the richest 10% of Icelanders in around 1800 owned half of the wealth in country, a little more 50 years later and even more 50 years after that. The share of the poor and even those with sufficient means got smaller, with half of the population owning 13% in the first period and 8% in the last. This certainly needs to be studied further and such an investigation would of course include not just statistical disquisition but also and even more importantly a detailed analysis of as many individuals as possible from the whole spectrum of society—from merchant Ólafur Thorlacius at Bíldudalur who died in 1815 leaving 90,000 rigsdaler through Jarðþrúður Benedictsen at Staðarfell who in 1858 left 12,000 rd. and Halldóra Kolbeinsdóttir from Kalmanstunga who died in 1809 leaving 1605 rd., with many more as the amount decreases, all the way down to indigent people such as Arnfríður Hermannsdóttir who died of leprosy in Fuglavík in 1819, leaving only clothes and a broken chest to the worth of 2 rd. (Jónsson, 2015: 305–317; 2022, 153–170).

Table 2.10 The part of total wealth in deciles of probate population.

	1751–1800	*1801–1850*	*1851–1900*	*Difference*	*Change*
Decile 1	0,8	0,4	0,2	0,6	–72
Decile 2	1,7	1,0	0,7	1,0	–58
Decile 3	2,6	1,7	1,2	1,4	–54
Decile 4	3,4	2,6	1,9	1,5	–43
Decile 5	4.4	3.7	2.9	1.5	–34
Decile 6	5.6	5.0	4.3	1.3	–23
Decile 7	7.0	6.8	6.2	0.8	–11
Decile 8	9.7	9.8	9.4	0.3	–3
Decile 9	15.0	16.0	15.8	0.8	+5
Decile 10	49.7	53.1	57.4	7.7	+15
	100.0	100.0	100.0		
1% richest	17	19	21	4.0	+24
N	1,529	12,224	12,100		

Note

1 In 1875–1900 the worth of estates is given in "krónur", but there were in the beginning two "krónur" in a rigsdaler, so those numbers have here been divided by two.

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3 Wool Socks, Silk Scarfs, Needles and Wood Saws

Material Culture on the Margin of Icelandic Society

Anna Heiða Baldursdóttir

Introduction

The 19th century has been a popular subject in Icelandic history. A common historical narrative has indicated the period as a time of modernization and political upheaving where the first ideas about independence from Denmark submerged. This has led to masses of studies focused on nationalism, politics, prominent individuals, changes in consumption, industry and education. (Ásgeirsson, 1988; Gunnlaugsson, 1988; Guttormsson, 2000; Hálfdánarson, 1995; Jónsson, 1998; Karlsson, 1980; Magnússon, 2010; Róbertsdóttir, 2012; Vilhelmsson, 2015).

Good preservation of sources from that time is also a motive for historians to take interest in the period. Diverse official records, such as censuses, police records, church registers, minutes and trade records. Personal sources are also varied due to a high reading skill among Icelanders from lower classes to the higher. Diaries, letters and other manuscripts have been used to study for example women, emotions, and everyday life of a "common Icelander" (Halldórsdóttir, 2011; Magnússon, 1997; Ólafsdóttir, 2022). In his book, *Wasteland with Words*, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon (2010) describes the sources used by historians. They are a wasteland with words where the material culture has been disregarded as a valuable source about the past. Historians who have used material culture have found it to be effective when dealing with groups or individuals who have left little, or no paper trail (text in any form) behind (Gerritsen and Riello, 2015; Harvey, 2017; Schouwenburg, 2015).

In 2012, Már Jónsson wrote an article in Saga where he described his preliminary research of Icelandic inventories and auctions papers in the National Archives of Iceland. These archives showed people's possessions when they died and was according to the laws of inheritance based on few conditions. If a person had owed the authorities on the day of their death, ongoing quarrels over the distribution of the estate or if minors were heirs. In the article Jónsson said that this form of sources had been neglected by Icelandic historians and encouraged his peers to make a matter more of it. His research had shown that these documents could reflect on lives of over two-third of every Icelander who died in the 19th century (Jónsson, 2012; 2016). But not only that, the things listed in the inventories could provide a new perspective on the past and add to the historical narrative.

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The people found in the archives are a broad spectrum of the society at that time. Farm workers, paupers, women, farmers, priests, merchants, widows, sheriffs, children, senior citizens, poor and rich, from all over the country and so on are in the records. The belongings of the individuals were as well informative and diverse, from torn underwear or socks to golden rings or valuable real estates. Studying everyday history, it became facinating to look through these documents and see how people went about in their daily lives, reading about their clothes, books, bedding, storages, furniture, domestic equipment, tools, tackle, livestock, real estates, buildings and other things. A strong sense of agriculture is seen in the documents, tools related to farming, livestock and farming product, for example, wool production and food consumption and craftsmanship. The individuals' skills and hobbies and even their desires for a better life or chances come through as well. Every inventory was unique in that sense that nobody possessed the same, and it became clear that not everybody was treated in the same way in the valuation of the estates.

This article aims to demonstrate the material culture in inventories of two groups which can be argued to have lived on the fringe of Icelandic agricultural society in the 19th century. Being a farm worker or a widow was a status of many Icelanders at that time. It was a natural and temporary position for people to be in but at the same time, they were not fully accepted as a valid member of the society. By studying their belongings it is possible to get a better understanding of their daily life. The main question is, can the archival sources reveal how farm workers and widows were marginalized and in what way? What can material culture add to previously acquired knowledge about marginalized people?

Farm Workers

The structure of Icelandic society in the 19th century was based on agriculture. Livelihood of the 82% of the population in 1801 was from farming or agricultural employment. This high percentage mostly remained throughout the century, but begun to drop in the latest quarter to 64% in 1900 (Jónsson and Magnússon, 1997: 211; Magnússon, 2010). Life in Iceland focused on the farming life where farmers enjoyed higher status than women and farm workers. An ideal lifecycle of people was to start at a young age, around 15–25 years old, as a farm worker to gather experience in running a farm. Later in life acquire land, livestock and start a family as a farmer or a housewife. But it was easier said than done. The reality of everyday life was harsh, with declining farm-tenancies due to rising population and natural forces which were a major element—as farming was contingent upon them for its crops and productivity (Gunnlaugsson, 1988; Hálfdánarson, 1993; Magnússon, 1997). These were tenuous circumstances where a small incident could cause a drastic transition for individuals. Unfavourable weather conditions or a volcano eruption would easily lead to bankruptcy of farms forcing farmers and housewives to split up their home and start (again) as farm workers. Sudden death or one of natural causes made wives into widows where they were able to run a farm for a limited time, often one year from their husband's death. After that they were forced

to farm labour, it was therefore in their best interest to secure a marriage or a man which could be the head of family and production (Gunnlaugsson, 1997; Gunnlaugsson and Garðarsdóttir, 1996; Helgadóttir, 1998).

In the 19th century there was a large part of the public farm workers in comparison to other Nordic countries and it remained that way throughout the century. In demographic data from 1801 23% of the people were farm workers while in Norway they were 11.9%. Later, the proportion had increased to 25.2% in Iceland, but for Norway it had decreased to 8.8% (Dyrvik, 1979: 192–193; Jónsson and Magnússon, 1997: 211). This high rate of farm workers has been argued to be a result of the vistarband or bonded service. Laws where people without farm tenancy were forced to work at farms. Due to a rather conservative agriculture society this system existed well into the 20th century but after 1863 and 1866 changes in legislation were introduced and gradually it became easier to escape bonded service. Many individuals were farm workers all their lives or at least a big part of it (Gunnlaugsson, 1988; Jónsson, 1981: 10–12; Vilhelmsson, 2015).

Ísak Þorsteinsson was a farm worker his entire live. He was born in the year 1777 at Heiðarbót located in north-eastern Iceland and died 74 years old (1851). He never got married but had one illegitimate daughter with Sigríður Guðbrandsdóttir, born in 1807. According to censuses and church registers he worked from the age of 18 years at three farms: Saltvík, Sandhólar and Skörð all located in the same parish. According to census 1816, Ísak and his daughter Ólöf were residents at Saltvík. Four years later they had parted ways and Ólöf located at another farm and later she became a housewife at Ytra-Áland in the same area until she died a widow.

Ísak died 26 February 1851 at Skörð where he worked the longest as a farm worker. Following his death, officials came to Skörð and valued his belongings into a probate inventory. In Ísak's probate inventory his possessions included over 72 entries with a total value of 75 rixdollars (rd.). The average value of farm workers properties was 119 rd. and annual salary of farm workers around 3–6 rd. A salary of farm workers was of course variable throughout the century and between parishes, farms, and depended on skill and gender of the farm worker (Baldursdóttir, 2022: 45; Jónsson, 1981; Jónsson and Magnússon, 1997: 604, 925). His worldly possessions were mostly clothing, few books, bedclothes and quite a few tools for carpentry. The objects listed in the inventory suggest few things about material culture at that time and are also an indication who Ísak was and what he did. The belongings are evidence of how he could interact within his position as a farm worker but as well on the private sphere at the home of his service, Skörð. By using carpentry tools, he seems to have made a profession of it and not only just at the farm he was working at but as well offering his skills to others. Magnússon has argued that professional work system in rural part of Iceland was a custom. People with special skills for workmanship such as carpentry, loading stone walls, shear wool from sheep, making of clothes or horseshoeing were in high - demand. Farmers, farm workers, women and others could increase their income by selling/exchanging their products or be hired for a temporary assignment in the vicinity of their stay in service (Magnússon, 1995). To develop a talent for workmanship of any kind was therefore especially desirable for farm workers not only because

of the extra wages, but it made them stand out in a large crowd and consequently made their odds for success more likely.

Ísak's collection of tools suggest that it was his profession and is likely that he went between farms and did carpentry there or at Skörð. In total he owned 20 different tools and 18 of them belonged to his skill such as hammer, three knifes, four types of planes and two types of saws. It could also be pointed out that he owned several furniture like a chair, chests, footlockers, and a valuable dresser which could indicate that it was his production. Other tools were spinning wheel and two rake heads, the first one used for spinning wool and the second one for hay making. Ísak's working field didn't only include carpentry but other chores as well. For a male farm worker, it was rare to own a spinning wheel or other tools for making of clothing so this is a sign of his age where physical condition must have been limited for his line of work. In other words, he was probably too old to carry out difficult physical chores such as tending to farm animals, agronomy or travelling with merchandise to town. When studying other farm workers probate inventories from this same time there was a considerably difference between women and men regarding tools. The women owned handcraft tools such as needles, spinning wheel, knitting needles and spindles, while men had carpentry or smithery instruments like hammers, wood planes and anvils in their possessions (Baldursdóttir, 2021, 2022: 75).

It was required of farmers or masters to provide basic materials for their workers such as clothes, place to sleep, tools and food (Jónsson, 1981; Vilhelmsson, 2015). Amongst Ísak's possessions it was clear that he still decided to gather objects which should have been at the farm for his disposal. That includes bed clothing but in Ísak's probate inventory were amongst his things a blanket, a duvet with cover, two pillows and sheets. Despite his masters' duties with him, Ísak still decided to acquire these things which suggest that they were of personal matters. This could as well be a sign of his attempts to create a private space within the home because in a matter of speaking farm workers didn't have a home—they were a labour at farms where another family lived. It is worth mentioning that houses at that time in Iceland came with a little privacy where all members of the household slept and worked in one part of the building—baðstofa (communal living room; Hálfdánarson, 2008; Rúnarsdóttir, 2007: 39). Farm worker's beds therefore could have been their home within another home. When they used their own bed linen, it would have been a major indication of their space in the communal room of 19th-century farmhouse.

Ísak's personal belongings like bed linen and domestic equipment reflect his private space at Skörð. A man that had been a farm worker at the same place for so long was not just a "regular" labour. He had through his possessions marked his space and made clear who it was in question. He had his own bed linen in the communal room, tableware for eating, carpentry tools for his specialization and personal items for hygiene and physical needs. Ísak's pair of glasses for example shows that his eyesight was not good due to perhaps his old age. Most likely he used them while he read his books or when he was making something with his tools.

Mostly of Ísak's belongings were daily clothes which weren't of much value and often described as old, torn or wretched. Of 72 entries in his inventory were clothes

in 33 and the most valuable clothing was a new blue "kaffeya" with the worth of 7 rd. This was a full-length jacket often used for riding and travel. Rest of his wardrobe was valued from 6 shillings (sk.) to 1 rd. and 32 sk., and so his jacket was rather expensive in comparison. For farm workers to mostly own clothes was often the case, and it seems that the officials who appraised their possessions were rather thorough when listing clothes and in fact suspiciously detailed compared to a probate inventory of a farmer.

In my doctoral research I studied material culture in probate inventories of 37 farm workers, 34 farmers and 33 widows. One of the interesting facts about that analysis was that farm workers owned more than others of clothing or 1331 items but farmers 968 and widows 1064. What made the most difference was a high number of unvaluable things such as socks, mittens, daily sweaters or undergarments. For example, in total 158 socks were listed in the probate inventories of farm workers but only 71 amongst farmers' possessions. Personal and unvaluable items were also more common in probate inventory of farm workers than farmers such as soap, needles, thread, caps and pens (Baldursdóttir, 2022). This should be the other way around because farmers often had families: Spouse, children and perhaps elderly parents or in-laws to provide and answer for. Therefore, they should have possessed a greater number of clothes than farm workers who were single and in most cases without children.

It can be assumed that officials were more detailed in appraising all of farm workers' belongings due to an interaction of few elements. First, and in many cases, it was a fact that farm workers simple owned fewer items and therefore resulted in better overview of their possessions for officials. Farmers had numerous possessions or more variables from all the categories used to describe people's belongings—items of more value like real estates, products and farm animals. For example, did the farmers in the before mentioned study own 1396 domestic equipment, but farm workers only had 187 of them. In other words, it was easier or quicker to appraise properties of a farm worker than individuals who were of higher economy or social status. Secondly it was in the best interest of the government and heirs to get the most out of the valuation to pay off the deceased's debts and other duties—most favourable was to benefit from this action. Consequently, it made officials more thorough when dealing with properties of people of lower status than the ones of higher status. Farmers possessed more diverse things and amongst them came more value which could pay of any claims and even made people able to profit from it. Small and unvaluable objects therefore didn't matter in the bigger picture but most surely did in the case of farm workers who owned a lot less. After a valuation of people's belongings in a probate inventory an auction followed later to sell of the properties.

Widows

Women rights in 19th-century Icelandic society were highly limited and considered to be a subordinate and not providers. They were supposed to be a supporting and dutiful housewife in their role within the private sphere of the home. If women

became widows, their circumstances altered and often they decided to give up their status as a housewife and became farm workers, but others took their changes and replaced their husband's role. This was not considered normal status for women, so they were only able to have this position for a year, after that they needed to have secured a new marriage or a man to run the farm. It was an unstable position and due to limitations on their public rights as women it often led to financials difficulties. Kristrún Halla Helgadóttir concluded in her study of priest widows that few of them wanted to run the farm because of fear of losing control over the farm's economical operation. Helgadóttir writes about Sigríður Pálsdóttir (1809–1871) who lost two husbands during her lifetime and how she struggled the first time when she was a widow for six years, 1839–1845 (Helgadóttir, 1998). It should be noted that priest widows had more protection in legislations about widowhood, for example where they supposed to be allocated a farm-tenancy from the church of their late husbands. In letters to her brother, Páll Pálsson, Sigríður describes how she and her three daughters occasionally had to deal with near destitution and her dread of the future due to poverty. Her opportunity to secure the family's economical probabilities was to marry again. When her second husband died 1865, she was able to retire at her eldest daughter home (Helgadóttir, 1998).

Þórunn Sigurðardóttir was born 1811, at Smiðjuhóll in west Iceland, where she grew up and lived until she married Runólfur Runólfsson (1805–1844) in 1836. A year later they moved to Höll a farm in the same parish and Þórunn gave birth to their firstborn son, Sigurður who died only a few weeks old. Another year went by and then their eldest daughter, Ingibjörg (d. 1916) was born and later two sons: Pétur (1840–1858) and Magnús (1841–1907). In November 1844, Þórunn became a widow when Runólfur died from the flu. When Þórunn died of measles on 12 July 1846 she still had the status of a widow—though more than a year had passed from her late husband's death. This was not according to the legislations which limited the time widows could lead the farm production (Gunnlaugsson and Garðarsdóttir, 1996; Helgadóttir, 1998). In censuses from 1845 there were two male farm workers registered at Höll with Þórunn and her children. Before Runólfur's death no farm workers were present at the farm so she could have resorted to hire men to act in her behalf for some part.

In Þórunn's probate inventory it shows that she owed one of her farm workers, Stefán Ásmundsson, his annual pay worth 12 rd. This amount is rather generous and is up to two times higher than the average salary of farm workers from that time which could indicate that Stefán was not just "ordinary" farm worker but had more responsibilities (Baldursdóttir, 2022: 45; Jónsson, 1981; Jónsson and Magnússon, 1997: 604, 925). When Stefán died of measles only a month after his mistress, he was listed in church register as ráðsmaður which can be translated as a household manager. It's more than likely that Stefán was involved in the farm's management with Þórunn through her status. Þórunn's solution to keep her farm and family was to hire a man which could take over the business and perhaps would have suited as a husband even. This was crucial for women to secure their living and to keep their family together at that time (Gunnlaugsson and Garðarsdóttir, 1996; Helgadóttir, 1998).

Þórunn's possessions in the probate inventory were valued at little over 248 rd. and thereof was her livestock worth 90 rd. She was able to procure dairy products from her cow, meat and wool from her 31 sheep and her two horses came in good use when travelling with merchandise to and from the village. Products like fish, wool and rye listed amongst Þórunn's belongings indicate her dealings to a certain point, but there was quite a value in her products. For example, there was 31 pound of white and mixed wool, worth 5 rd. and 30 sk., one cask of rye for a little more than 9 rd. and 140 fishes (cod and haddock) valued over 5 rd. With the probate inventory are few additional documents regarding the settlement of the death estate like a business accountancy where the trade of Þórunn is listed in debit and credit. The debit was for example rye, flour and coffee while the credit was wool, dried fish and artic char. This is example of how trade was conducted and as well what was part of Þórunn's production and consumption.

Domestic equipment in Þórunn's possession were used in making and using of these products. Pots, wash tubs and buckets for wool cleaning or dyeing—casks, tubs and platters for salting and drying fish—coffee grinder, kettle and cups for making and drinking coffee. Besides that, she owned for instance a filter and a rack for making skyr, milk platters and buckets all used when handling dairy products (Gísladóttir, 2007: 18). Other tools were of course used for these tasks and other work, like Þórunn's warp-weighted loom which was her most valuable implement. Comb for coarse wool, three regular wool combs, scissors and other tools for handwork were used for making clothes for the members of the farm and for sale. In my doctoral research it became evident that there were notably four kinds of use for tools: Agriculture chores, handcraft, carpentry or smithery and fishing or hunting (Baldursdóttir, 2022: 74, 121, 182). Amongst farmers' belongings there were all kinds of tools notably except those used for handiwork this was the other way around regarding widows. In their case implements for fishing or carpentry reduced drastically and tools for sewing and knitting increased and became more like the collection of the tools listed in possession of farm workers.

This can be explained by many reasons but most likely will be traced to the sample of the 33 widows in question. This group of women was not homogeneous where their circumstances were different. Some were farmers and housewives like Þórunn, one of them was a rich widow who lived on the fortune of her late husband, one was a freelancer, and some were in retirement and depended on their relatives. This combination made their belongings often more like what the farm workers used and owned—small unvaluable items. Elderly widows often had less of possessions in categories like riding gear, domestic equipment, tools and farm animals just like farm workers. Retired widows are though not the only reason for fewer objects in widows' possessions.

Þórunn, who was a farmer, had only one anvil, a saw, and a chisel, whereas the rest of her tools were for tending animals, haymaking and handcraft. No fishing nets or things related to fishing were listed which indicates that the officials left so things out when evaluating the belongings of better off persons o. Þórunn must have had these kinds of things because in her probate inventory there are 140 fishes. The same goes for carpentry. She had only a saw and a chisel, but plenty

of raw material for carpentry like five pieces of wood in addition to driftwood for building sheds, furniture, or maintaining houses etc.

These gaps in the archive can also be a result to Runólfur's death two years before passing of Þórunn. His probate inventory shows that the estate was valued at 303 rd. Later, in the summer of 1845 a partition of inheritance is carried out, but the auction is not until Þórunn's estate is as well put up for auction a year later. This chain of events shows that the estate had lost over 51 rd. between the years. The divisional of Runólfur's estate has therefore made its mark but Þórunn could also have sold his things like clothes, tools and riding gear to make end meets, paying her farm workers, merchandise, debts and taxes. This process had a negative impact on Þórunn's economy, but she was still able to run the farm despite all odds.

The daily life of Þórunn is not only to be seen in her production and consumption. Her clothes were a blend of finer and less valuable things. She was able to dress nicely while going to mass or other gathering in the area judging by her finest clothes. A blue bodice and a skirt with 12 silver lace hooks, silver lace and buttons, all together valued at 14 rd., thereof was the silver worth 5 rd. These fine clothes could have made her stand out in public and perhaps attracted worthy bachelors. Female farm workers are suggested to have used this method with their fine clothes: (Baldursdóttir, 2022: 56). Þórunn didn't only have nice clothes but as well old sweaters, scarfs, skirts aprons and bodices of little financial value but rather a practical one. These clothes were able to protect her from cold, moisture and dirt and they came in handy on daily basis. Other daily items were bed linen and from Þórunn's probate inventory it shows that she had beds for at least five people if the number of pillows, duvets and blankets are compiled. This is almost according to the census from the year 1845 where three young children and three adults were registered at Höll

Probate inventories of 33 widows and in the case of Þórunn suggest that they were being pushed to the margin of the society. Their status was temporary, their financials were getting worse and their belongings were fewer and therefore it came more of an issue for the officials to value every aspect of their possessions. If widows and farmers are compared regarding number of items in each object category, it is evident that production was smaller at the widows' farms. The object categories which the officials used when sorting people's possessions were Books, clothes, beddings, storages, domestic equipment, riding gear, tools, other things, livestock and real estates. Livestock was for example only the fourth largest category in the widow's probate inventories, or 585 animals, but second in farmer's possessions, 1379 listed animals. Livestock was of course an important property for the production of livelihood with food and other supplies.

Collection of clothes, unvaluable domestic equipment and tools for handcraft increases in widow's probate inventories like in the case of farm workers. Though this can partly be traced to older women in retirement then there is still difference in how much widows owned and their estates' value when compared to farmers. The average value of a farmer possessions was 718 rd. but only 578 rd. for a widow (Baldursdóttir, 2022: 94, 151–152). The material culture in probate inventories of

widows suggests that they were a group which was slowly pushed to the periphery along with farm workers. What separated widows and farm workers was that the former run a farm and therefore owned more valuables and had more and diverse possession like real estates, cows and sheep, beddings and productions like wool and fish.

Material Culture and the Margin of Icelandic Society

All the things which were listed in probate inventories and have been the subject of this chapter show a clear picture of how some of people lived in 19th century. The material culture in the sources suggests an agricultural society where livestock, farm-tenancy (real estates), tools and equipment for production could affect people's earning. In the archives are also the persons who owned those things and as well the ones who made the documents—their attitude, daily life and personal matters. People used objects which suited their interest, taste, specialization or contributed to better social connections or status within the society. Ísak's carpentry work and Þórunn's finest clothes and persistence to keep the farm show this. The belongings and the people in the archives reflect the individual himself/herself as well as society. Therefore, the relationship of materials and people have offered a new insight into the margin of Icelandic society.

In another words, material culture of probate inventories offered on a multilevel insight in daily life of farm workers and widows in comparison. The record itself, the probate inventory or the making of it revealed how officials acted differently when appraising possession of an individual of lower or higher status—and there in between. The material culture showed their daily life and how their circumstances were various. Where fewer things in the possession of people indicated that their resources were limited which entailed marginal position in the society. More of belongings and from all the object's categories gave individuals more to resort to when making a living and a life.

Farm workers made their mark at their working place where their things created both a sphere of activity and a personal space inside their master's house—a home within a home. Being a widow was not standardized status, they could run farms, live on fortune or be depended on relatives. Often related to age and material means and is a vital testimony of how Icelandic society was diverse, but it is often a tendency in historical narrative to generalize its subjects. It's clear that the widows suffered not just a loss of their husband but also a vital provider which made their life more difficult. That is evident in their declining farm's economy and how officials started to bring their unvaluable things such as needles and socks in the appraisal of widows' belongings. The document itself, the probate inventory, the persons related to them and the things listed in it have consequently posed an unknown aspect of marginal people lives and in what way they were treated differently and how they were pushed slowly there. Material culture therefore is a powerful force in everyday life and is well worth to regard it when studying the past, if not essential.

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4 Social Circularity of Books and Manuscripts

Sharing Economy and the Material Culture of Text in Nineteenth-Century Iceland

Davíð Ólafsson

Introduction

Sharing economy is one of the buzzwords of our times. It gained widespread recognition in the early 2000s as a term used to describe a novel pattern of exchanging goods, skills, or services among individuals, often facilitated by digital platforms in response to the growing influence of the internet (Lessig, 2008). Notably, the rise of peer-to-peer sharing platforms, such as Airbnb and Uber, has enabled individuals to rent out their assets, thereby disrupting traditional industries in accommodation and commuting, respectively. In today's modern context, the sharing economy can be defined as a social and economic system where individuals utilize technology platforms to connect providers with users, enabling the exchange of goods, services, or ideas without transferring ownership (Belk et al., 2019). In this paper, I will utilize the concept of resource circulation systems, where consumers both obtain and provide items, to examine the collaborative consumption of text-bearing objects (such as books, manuscripts, and journals) within the rural society of nineteenth-century Iceland.

During that time, Iceland was a semi-detached part of the Danish kingdom. It boasted its own language, rich literary tradition, and had a growing sense of nationalism. In many respects, it can be considered a late-premodern society, positioned in a transitional phase between the pre-modern and modern eras. This period was marked by the budding of notable social, cultural, economic, and technological shifts that paved the way for the emergence of modernity, but by all conventional standards Iceland was only taking steps into modernity around the turn of the twentieth century. One of those fields was print publication, demonstrated by the growing output of literature, historical texts, educational textbooks, along with a variety of journals and periodicals (Guttormsson, 2003).

Extensive research has been conducted in the fields of cultural history and philology over the last three decades, focusing on the literacy practices of ordinary people in Early Modern and Modern Iceland (Ólafsson, 2017). Several studies have explored how scribal culture persisted, and even progressed, into the late nineteenth century, while contrasting it with the limitations and inadequacies of print culture during that era. It has been argued that in the case of nineteenth-century

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Icelandic popular culture, scribal publication supplemented the limited output of secular print material. However, it is worth noting that printed secular books for educational or recreational purposes were not entirely absent in poor rural society in nineteenth-century Iceland. This paper aims to investigate to what extent the relatively few titles and copies available to Icelandic readers could expand their impact through lending and borrowing among peers. I will approach ownership of books in nineteenth-century Iceland, as revealed by recent historical research based on probate inventories but at the same time challenge its findings by revising other sources. One way to address these questions is through the examination of diaries penned by Sighvatur Grímsson Borgfirðingur, a poor tenant farmer and lay scholar, over several decades from 1863 to 1930 (Ólafsson, 2009). This unique source provides compelling evidence of the function of literary practices in the nineteenth-century Icelandic rural community and how the practices of book lending and borrowing could enhance the influence of a relatively limited collection of texts. His diaries are kept in the manuscript department of the National and University Library of Iceland (Lbs 2374 4to). In the following I will refer to the diary by the date of the entry.

Ownerships of Books

Over the past few years, there has been a growing interest among scholars in Iceland in a particular category of sources. These sources offer researchers invaluable and intricate insights into Iceland's material, social, and cultural history. This is largely due to the initiative of Már Jónsson, a professor of history at the University of Iceland, who has been working on systematically documenting and making accessible archival sources in the National Archives of Iceland related to official inventories of the estates of deceased individuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (https://danarbu.skjalasafn.is). The result is a database that includes records of approximately 33,000 individuals who died during the era, which was made available on the website of the National Archives of Iceland at the end of 2021. These probate inventories in nineteenth-century Iceland provide detailed records of the possessions left behind by deceased individuals, including clothing, bedding, kitchen utensils, tools, livestock, and more (Jónsson, 2012, 2020). Among the items registered there—customarily placed at the top of the list—were books, if any were present in the estate.

Ownership of books in a rural community in nineteenth-century Iceland has been the subject of recent historical research that largely relies on these documents. In an article from 2016, Már Jónsson examines the social distribution of books, using as a case study the publication of *Piltur og stúlka* (Eng. *Lad and Lass*) by Jón Thoroddsen, the first Icelandic novel to be printed (Jónsson, 2016). Jónsson studied the dissemination of the book in three regions: the capital Reykjavik and the counties of Barðastrandarsýsla and Borgarfjarðarsýsla. The novel was published twice in the nineteenth century, in 1851 and 1868. Már examined probate inventories from the ten years following each publication, 447 probate inventories, 177 belonging to women, and 270 to men. A total of 1,700 copies of the novel were printed for a speech community of 60,000–70,000 people. Therefore, it could be expected that the book would appear frequently in probate inventories from the

latter half of the century. However, this was not the case, according to Már's findings. Only one instance was found in the earlier period, 1851–1860, while two copies were found in the later period, 1869–1877.

In addition to studying the dissemination of Jón Thoroddsen's novel, he also gives overview about book ownership in general based on this evidence. When book ownership is categorized by quantity, in approximately half of the probate inventories, five or fewer books were found, and in many cases no books were found, especially among workers and servants. According to the inventories 11–26% of the estates owned 6–10 books each and similar number had between 11 and 50 titles in their library. Only 14 probate inventories (3%) contained more than 50 books (Jónsson, 2016). We can assert that roughly three-fourth of the libraries registered as part of probate inventories consisted of ten titles or less according to Már Jónsson's survey.

These findings are broadly in line with the results presented in Anna Heiða Baldursdóttir's PhD thesis, *Hlutir úr fortíð: Eigur fólks og safnkostur frá 19. öld* (Eng. *Things from the Past: People's Possessions and Museum Collections from the 19th Century*). In her research Anna Heiða examined the probate inventories of 104 individuals of different social status and economic means, including 37 farm workers, 34 farmers, and 33 widows. Together, these people in her sample owned 380 books, or an average of just over 12 each. The farmers owned a total of 377 books, or an average of 11 each. Of these, 315 were religious texts, while 62 were secular books. When Anna Heiða explores the individual titles, we see that the numbers are almost even, 47 secular books over 53 religious titles. These numbers shed light on the fact that every household was expected to own a minimum number of religious texts to maintain religious life and social order, leading to the fact that certain religious texts became canonized in Icelandic culture (Baldursdóttir, 2022). The most common books were religious, and most of the individuals examined owned such reading material. All the books on Anna Heiða's list of the 20 most common titles owned by farmers were religious, including sermons, meditations, and devotional works. Of the 34 farmers examined, 23 owned the *Vídalínspostilla*. The secular books were, on the other hand, both rarer and more diverse.

The 33 widows in Anna Heiða's sample owned a total of 191 books or around six books on average. Six of them owned no book but the biggest individual collection held 12 titles. Most of these books were of religious content, with approximately 72% of the titles were religious. Again, *Vídalínspostilla* was the most common, followed by psalms (*Passíusálmar*) and meditations (*Sturms hugvekjur*). Secular titles in this sample were 18 and only one widow owned more than one such book (Baldursdóttir, 2022: 156–157).

Finally, 37 inventories came from farm-labourers. In ten of them no books are registered. The remaining 26 estates had a total of 126 records related to literacy practices, 56 secular books and 41 religious, and 9 cases of other objects related to reading and writing. The youngest households had the most book entries, or 51, and secular titles were the most likely to be in their possession. This suggests an increased possibility for younger people from working-class backgrounds to have access to secular reading material with growing supply. However, it was the

farmers and household heads, according to the social structure, who had mainly acquired secular writings, as their publication was often directed in that direction (Baldursdóttir, 2022: 50).

Books in Kaldrananeshreppur

In a recent article, I have examined recordings of books in the probate inventories in the commune of Kaldrananeshreppur in the county of Strandasýsla over three decades, from 1851 to 1880 (Ólafsson, 2022). The estates from the period were a total of 34. Considerable proportion owned no books at all, notably elderly paupers (Icel. ómagar) but also farm servants of various age. It is not surprising that these were generally the smallest estates and the poorest part of society, especially the elderly but also younger labourers. Among them were two male farm-labourers having one book each: one a *New Testament* scripture printed in Copenhagen in 1813 and the second one a *Bible* printed in London in 1866 In essence, it can be said that no or very few books were found in the possession of the inhabitants of Kaldrananeshreppur that were not farmers. If books were found in the estates of this poorest part of the population, they constituted a minimum body of religious printed texts, often old editions or/and in poor condition.

Handful of estates from the years 1851–1880 can be said to be of a mid-size in terms of book ownership, holding 6–10 books each. Among these are the estates of working-class people of both genders. For example, Sólveig Bjarnadóttir, who died at the age of 39 in 1859, had six books listed in her estate. Jóhannes Brynjólfsson (d. 1858) had seven books, two of which were recent secular educational texts, one Danish reading book (Hallgrímsson, 1853), and the other a book of arithmetic (Briem, 1869). Similar was the case of Jóhann Jónsson, a farmer in Svanshóll, who died in the summer of 1879. His six books were mostly in poor condition and estimated to be of little value. Four were of religious content, but the remaining two were the first volume of the Norwegian Kings' Sagas by Snorri Sturluson (Stephensen, 1804), and *Svarfdæla Saga*, probably an edition of the Royal Nordic Antiquarian Society from 1830 (Guðmundsson and Helgason, 1830).

Four of the estates in this sample had around ten books, by and large of religious content. Two other estates, however, stand out both in terms of the number of books and the composition of their collections. One is Guðmundur Ólafsson, a day labourer who resided at the farm Hafnarhólmur. Records of his death in 1861 state that he owned some chests and trunks containing books. The content comes evident in documents related to his probate inventory and a subsequent auction. Despite being a poor estate in other respects, it is highly unusual for such an estate to have over 40 books and writings of various kinds. About half of Guðmundur Ólafsson's books were of religious nature, while the other half can be divided into four main categories: poetry, historical content, educational literature, and finally magazines and newspapers. In this way, Guðmundur owned collections of poems by Eggert Ólafsson (1832) and Sveinbjörn Egilsson et al. (1856), as well as Benedikt Gröndal's translation of Homer's Iliad (Homer, 1856). Examples of historical subjects include anthology from Icelandic history (Sigurðsson et al., 1856),

synopsis of world history (Melsteð, 1844), and one of Jón Espólín's multi-volume historical annals (1821–1855). Educational publications include instructions for settling disputes (Jónassen, 1847), a lexicon for Old Icelandic words from the law-code Jónsbók (Vídalín, 1854), popular translated textbook on astronomy (Ursin, 1842) and another on geography (Ingerslev, 1854). In addition, several issues of both the periodicals Ný félagsrit and Skírnir can be found, as well as what is known as "newspaper trash."

It is evident that Guðmundur has made a dedicated effort to acquire a diverse range of printed works, encompassing both educational and literary materials. Moreover, it is evident that this specific book collection generated considerable interest when it was offered for auction during the summer of 1862, when Guðmundur (alt. Guð-mundur) Ólafsson's assets were put up for auction, a total of seven buyers participated in acquiring books and writings. Among them, two individuals stood out as the most prolific, each managing to secure 12 books at the auction.

The second individual who owned a considerable body of books was Sæmundur Björnsson farmer at Gautshamar. When he passed away in 1864, at the age of 62, there were some 33 recordings of books, manuscripts, and magazines among his possessions. However, the actual number of titles was slightly higher since some numbers corresponded to more than one title. The collection bears many similarities to the aforementioned assemblage. Roughly half of the printed books are religious in content, many of them old. The other half are secular writings of various kinds and in most cases relatively recent publications. Some are educational works that were published in the past few decades under the marks of information and enlightenment. There are also writings in his collection that can be associated with historical erudition and ancient literature. Translated poems can also be found there, such as John Milton's Paradise Lost (1828) and Friedrich Klopstock's Der Messias (1834), both translated by pastor Jón Þorláksson at Bægisá.

The collection also holds two foreign fictional travelogues. On the one hand, the first volume of eighteenth-century German novel Insel Felsenburg which was translated and published in Iceland around mid-nineteenth century (Schnabel, 1854). The second book of this sort is an extensive work called Menoza written by the Danish bishop Erik Pontoppidan (1698–1764). The book was first published in the years 1742–1743 and tells of the voyages of a prince from India who travelled around the world to learn about various religions (Pontoppidan, 1742–1743). This text has never been translated into Icelandic, but the Danish edition is in three volumes, a total of about 1000 pages. The diarist Sighvatur Grímsson, records in his journal that he had bought a three-volume edition of Menoza at an auction held at the farm Gautshamar in May 1870, presumably coinciding with Sæmundur's widow remarriage. Further circulation of the book is manifested when Sighvatur lends it a year later to the farmer Björn, widower and lodger (Icel. húsmaður) at Asparvík (Diary, 6 May 1871).

At the same event Sighvatur also bought a manuscript containing story of Greek fabulist Aesopus, along with selection of his fables (Diary, 31 May 1870). This was in all probability the very copy that is now preserved in the manuscript collection of the National and University Library of Iceland, written out by Sæmundur's

father (Lbs 2315 4to). Again, there is at least one example of Sighvatur lending the book to yet another household in the commune (Diary, 24 December 1870). This volume was among at least five handwritten books in the collection. Two were only referred to as two written books while two contained prayers.

Based on these three studies, it can be inferred that book ownership among Icelanders in the nineteenth century was in most cases sparse and restricted by economical and institutional circumstances. It is, however, reasonable to assume that the larger and more diverse private book collections in each community would have had an influence beyond the confines of the owner's household. Given these circumstances, it raises questions about the role of individuals with the largest book collections within their community. How did such private libraries impact the literature available to others in the vicinity? Was book borrowing a common practice among individuals and households? Were borrowed books read during evening hours or even copied before being returned? Exploring the effectiveness of book loans in rural communities can potentially offer new insights into the history of vernacular literacy practices in nineteenth-century Iceland.

One way to address these questions is through the examination of diaries penned by farmer and lay-scholar Sighvatur Grímsson. The focus will be on the four-year period when Sighvatur resided in the community of Kaldrananeshreppur in North-western Iceland, specifically between 1869 and 1873. His unique case provides compelling evidence of how the practices of book lending and borrowing could enhance the influence of a relatively limited collection of texts within a community.

Lending and Borrowing of Books in Kaldrananeshreppur

After few years serving as a farm servant around western Iceland, Sighvatur Grímsson was able to occupy the farm of Klúka in Kaldrananeshreppur where he would reside as a tenant farmer along with his wife and young children for the next four years. The tenancy there was in most ways extremely difficult for the family and at the end of their first year there Sighvatur described the farm as poor farmland, and the yearly rent as a heavy burden (Diary, 31 December 1869). But Sighvatur had from an early age acquired attributes and assets that would supplement his income and help him make alliances with many of his neighbours, i.e. a substantial and growing collection of books and manuscripts, and a passion for penmanship.

One way that ordinary people in Iceland used to complement the restricted output of printed books was to produce handwritten books. This mode of book production was of course both slow and arduous, but for a miniscule speech community with week infrastructure handwriting became functional means of production, dissemination, and consumption of texts. As soon as Sighvatur Grímsson had settled down in Kaldrananeshreppur than he assumed a manifold and wide-ranging role within the community's literary culture. His skills and services were sought after and employed by many the communities' inhabitants over the next four years (Ólafsson, 2009).

Book lending as way of circulating reading material was another vigorous aspect of popular literary culture in the commune of Kaldrananeshreppur between 1869 and 1873 and the one that engaged most participants. In this sphere we can study not only Sighvatur's contribution to his society, to other farms and individuals within the community but also what he obtained from them and thus we get more sense of actual network than centralized distribution. The material in circulation can be divided into three main categories, manuscripts, printed books and journals, manuscripts but as Sighvatur's diary notions are often very short it can be hard to tell if a given title was circulating in printed edition or transcript. The knowledge alone that the text had been published in print at that time does not eliminate the possibility that it was circulating in handwritten form.

Sighvatur Grímsson's diary from his Klúka-period reports somewhere around 200 instances of books, manuscripts and periodicals being passed on between Sighvatur Grímsson and other inhabitants of Kaldrananeshreppur from June 1869 up to June 1873. These transactions can be divided into two almost equally large groups, texts lent by Sighvatur Grímsson and the ones he borrowed by him from various individuals, forming a network of book-lending that included 20 households within the commune, or around two-third of them and handful of individuals outside of it. These texts were mostly printed books from the preceding two or three decades but as greater part of these individuals and households were involved as well in the process of scribal publication and consumption, an examination of this local network suggests that the two cultures, the scribal and the printed, were closely co-existing. In the following section I will take stock of Sighvatur's textual exchange with two key household in the commune, at the farms of Hella and Sandnes.

Exchange with Hella Farm

The first instance of book exchange in Sighvatur Grímsson's diary is associated with one Jón Guðmundsson, farmer at Hella. Hella was among the few farmsteads in Kaldrananeshreppur that was owner-occupied at the time, and Jón and family made living by combining of farming and fisheries. Additionally, Jón was one of the unofficial folk-healers that operated across rural Iceland in the nineteenth century. Altogether Sighvatur lent nearly 20 books and other texts to the Hella-household over the course of two years, between 1869 and 1871. The first was the medieval account of settlement in Iceland *Landnámabók*, lent to Jón Guðmundsson in November 1869, most likely a printed edition from 1829 (Diary, 19 November 1869). This was followed by various recently published books of historical material, including a textbook on modern history (Melsteð, 1868) and some parts of Jón Espólín's multi-volume historical annals. The list also contains three medieval family sagas that had at that time all been published in popular editions (Diary, 20 January, and 21 February 1871). Further four items were manuscripts. Two of them can be identified. On one hand, an extensive account of the history of the people of the Westfjords, written by renown lay-scholar and popular poet Gísli Konráðsson (1787–1877). Another was a rímur-cycle—a traditional form of epic narrative poetry in Iceland—probably *Rímur af Haraldi hringsbana* by

Árni Böðvarsson (1713–1776). The remaining two were simply referred to as handwritten documents.

The books that Jón Guðmundsson sought to borrow from Sighvatur Grímsson's library bear witness to his strong interest in historical subjects. Good examples of this are reports on the construction of two collections on Icelandic cultural history, on the one hand, the Antiquarian Collection (later the National Museum of Iceland) (Guðmundsson, 1868) and, on the other hand, the Manuscript Collection of the Icelandic Literary Society (now part of the National and University library of Iceland) (Jónasson and Jónsson, 1869). We see, however, fewer examples of translated literature, whether poetry or prose, or material related to science or industries like farming and fisheries.

Table 4.1 Book lending from Sighvatur Grímsson Borgfirðingur to Hella household.

Short title *As recorded in Sighvatur's diary*	*Full title* *Full title of most probable publication*	*Date*	*Returned*
Landnáma	*Íslendingabók Ara prests ens fróða Þorgilssonar og Landnámabók* (Copenhagen, 1829)	19.11.1869	
Íslendingur 4 ár	*Íslendingur.* Journal	4.2.1870	
Vestfirðingasaga	MS. Lbs 1125 4to or Lbs 1287–1288 4to		4.2.1870
Nýja sagan	Páll Melsteð, *Nýja sagan* vol. 1 (Reykjavík, 1868)		1.6.1870
Skírnir 1869	*Skírnir* 1869. Journal		1.6.1870
Reikningar	*Skýrslur og reikningar Hins íslenzka bókmenntafélags* 1859–1860 (Copenhagen, 1860)		1.6.1870
Rímkver, gamalt	Jón Árnason, *Dactylismus Ecclesiasticus eður Fingra-Rím, viðvíkjandi Kirkju Ársins Tímum* (Copenhagen, 1838)		1.6.1870
Landshagsskýrslur	*Skýrslur um landshagi á Íslandi 1869* (Copenhagen, 1869)		10.6.1870
Prestatal sr. Sv.	Sveinn Níelsson, *Prestatal og prófasta á Íslandi* (Copenhagen, 1869)		10.6.1870
Fóstbræðrasaga	*Fóstbræðrasaga* (Copenhagen, 1853)	21.1.1871	
Haraldsrímur	MS. Possibly *Rímur af Haraldi hringsbana* by Árni Björnsson (Lbs 2312 8vo. 1859–1866)	21.1.1871	
Eyrbyggja saga	*Eyrbyggja saga* (Leipzig, 1864)	20.2.1871	
Laxdæla saga	*Laxdæla saga* (Akureyri, 1861)	20.2.1871	
Handritaskýrsla	Sigurður Jónasson, *Skýrsla um handritasafn Hins íslenska bókmenntafélags* vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1869)		19.3.1871
Forngripaskýrsla	Sigurður Guðmundsson, *Skýrsla um Forngripasafn* Íslands í Reykjavík vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1868)		19.3.1871
Árbækur	Jón Espólín, *Íslands árbækur í sögu formi* 1–12 (Copenhagen, 1821–1855)	11.9.1871	
"Handwritten book"	MS. Unknown		
"Handwritten saga-sheets"	MS. Unknown		

Other sources confirm that Jón Guðmundsson at Hella was himself active in building a substantial library that had both personal and professional function. Records of an auction of the late Guðmundur Ólafsson's possessions during the summer of 1862 reveal that Jón Guðmundsson at Hella purchased 12 books out of a total of 42 (Ólafsson, 2022). Ten of them were secular, including Benedikt Gröndal's translation of Iliad, a lexicon for Old Icelandic words, a textbook on geography and instructions for settling disputes (see the discussion on Guðmundur Ólafsson above).

Yet another testament to Jón Guðmundsson's appetite for books is a small body of manuscripts from his possession extent in the manuscript department of National and University library of Iceland. Some were written by him, like his transcript of a medical book and other writings associated with his healing practices. Others were written by others, including two collections of chivalric tales, penned by one Þorsteinn Guðbrandsson, farmer at Kaldrananes, for him in 1879 og 1880 (Lbs 5150 4to; Lbs 5152 4to). Jón Guðmundsson's appetite for handwritten reading material is furthermore manifested in Sighvatur Grímsson's diaries during his tenure in Kaldrananeshreppur. The most striking examples are the transcript of an Icelandic translation of the works of the first-century Jewish chronicler Flavius Josephus, *Gyðingasaga* and a 350 folio-pages miscellany of various travel-books.

The mutual textual exchange between Sighvatur Grímsson and Jón Guðmundsson at Hella via lending and borrowing of books was dynamic throughout. The items that Sighvatur borrowed from there were mainly recently printed books, for example *Skarðsárannáll*, historical annals written by Björn Jónsson (1574–1655) (Jónsson, 1774–1775) and a controversial theology book that Sighvatur refers to as "Magnús Eiríksson's heretic book" (1865). They would reciprocally exchange periodicals and journals like *Þjóðólfur*, *Skírnir* and *Íslendingur*. Periodical and journals had by the time become important aspects of the cultural and political life in Iceland and the width of their dissemination comes apparent in Sighvatur Grímsson's diary where at least ten different periodicals and journals are mentioned to have circulated around the commune.

Sighvatur's tenure at Klúka provided the literary community of Kaldrananeshreppur with a valuable and extensive collection of texts. Jón Guðmundsson from Hella, who actively participated in this informal network, effectively utilized this opportunity. It is evident from Sighvatur's testimony that the practice of lending and borrowing of books was generally reciprocal. Interestingly, Sighvatur borrowed fewer books from Hella than the number of books he lent to them. The balance was tipped the other way around in his exchange with the farmer and carpenter Einar Gíslason at Sandnes.

Exchange with Sandnes Farm

Sandnes was another esteemed and well-off household in the commune of Kaldrananeshreppur, headed at the time by Einar Gíslason (1807–1874) and his wife Valgerður Jónsdóttir. In addition to being a prosperous farmer Einar was said

to be a skilled carpenter (Icel. Þjóðhagasmiður) and highly knowledgeable (Icel. Afbragðs vel að sér). According to the diary Sighvatur lent six items to Sandnes during his Klúka years, printed books, periodicals and in one case a rare manuscript. Among them was a (probably fragmented) copy of a Nordic version of the Popular Encyclopaedia or Conversations Lexicon, fashionable around Europe in the nineteenth century (Ingerslev, 1858–1863). On the other hand, he borrowed more than 30 items, books, journals, and manuscripts, which strongly indicates the presence of a substantial library at Sandnes.

Table 4.2 From Sandnes farm to Sighvatur Grímsson Borgfirðingur.

Short title	*Full title*	*Date*	
Bók frá Sandnesi	Unknown. *Book from Sandnes*	21.8.1869	
Harmonía, Danish	Unknown. *Harmonía*, in Danish	11.10.1869	
Félagsrit 1869	*Ný félagsrit* 1869. Journal	28.10.1869	
Piltur og stúlka	Jón Thoroddsen, *Piltur og stúlka* (1856/1868)	28.10.1869	
Þjóðólfur	*Þjóðólfur.* Periodical	8.11.1869	
Þingtíðindi	*Tíðindi frá Alþingi Íslendinga* (Reykjavík, 1845–1873)	8.11.1869	
Félagsrit 1862–63	*Ný félagsrit* (1862/1863). Periodical	19.11.1869	
Föstuhugvekjur	Pétur Pétursson, *Fimtíu hugvekjur út af pínu og dauða Drottins vors Jesú Krists* (Reykjavík, 1859)	4.2.1870	
Þjóðólfur, 11–19	*Þjóðólfur.* Periodical	17.2.1870	
Jarðatal Johnsens	Jón Johnsen, *Jarðatal á Íslandi með brauðalýsingum, fólkstölu í hreppum og prestaköllum.* (Copenhagen, 1847)	17.2.1870	*Possibly a gift*
Stúrm á dönsku	Sturm, Christoph Christian, *Morgen- og aften-andagter paa enhver dag i ugen* (København, 1794)	17.2.1870	*Possibly a gift*
Skírnir 1854	*Skírnir* periodical	17.2.1870	*Possibly a gift*
Skýrslur, 1859	*Skýrslur um landshagi á Íslandi gefnar út af Hinu íslenska bókmenntafélagi* (Copenhagen, 1855–1875)	17.2.1870	*Possibly a gift*
Baldur 2nd year	*Baldur*. Periodical	6.11.1870	
Prentara- og prentverkssaga	Jón Borgfirðingur, *Söguágrip um prentsmiðjur og prentara á Íslandi* (Reykjavík, 1867)	6.11.1870	
Árnapostilla	Árni Helgason, *Helgidaga predikanir* (Viðey, 1822/1839)	11.12.1870	
Þjóðólfur	*Þjóðólfur*. Biweekly newspaper	3.2.1871	
Föstuhugvekjur	Pétur Pétursson, *Fimtíu hugvekjur útaf pínu og dauða Drottins vors Jésú Krists* (Reykjavík, 1859)	3.2.1871	
Landshagsskýrslur 1870	*Skýrslur um landshagi á Íslandi gefnar út af Hinu íslenska bókmenntafélagi* (Copenhagen, 1855–1875)	18.3.1871	
Réttritunarreglur	Halldór Kr. Friðriksson, *Íslenzkar rjettritunarreglur* (1859)	18.3.1871	
Safnbindi	Unidentified manuscript (Miscellany)	18.3.1871	

(Continued)

Table 4.2 (Continued)

Short title	*Full title*	*Date*
Föstuhugvekjur	Pétur Pétursson, *Fimtíu hugvekjur útaf pínu og dauða Drottins vors Jésú Krists* (Reykjavík, 1859)	12.1.1872
Maturtabók Eggerts	Eggert Ólafsson et. al., *Stutt ágrip úr lachanologia eða maturtabók* (Copenhagen, 1774)	29.2.1872
Eptirmæli 18. aldar	Magnús Stephensen, *Eptirmæli Atjándu Aldar eptir Krists híngadburd, frá Ey-konunni Islandi* (Leirárgarðar, 1806)	29.2.1872
Stjórnartíðindi 1865–1868	*Tíðindi um stjórnarmálefni Íslands.* 1865–1875	1.3.1872
Guðmundur ferðalangur	Unpublished poem by the late local poet Helgi Guðlaugsson	24.5. 1872
Félagsrit 17	*Ný félagsrit* 17 (1857). Periodical	24.5.1872
Félagsrit 14	*Ný félagsrit* 14 (1854). Periodical	1.9.1872
Bænakver	Unknown [*Booklet of Prayers*]	13.11.1872
Hjört Börneven	Peder Hjort, *Den Danske Börneven. En læsebog för Borger- og Almuge skoler* (Copenhagen, 1858)	13.11.1872

Most of the books were relatively new and of contemporary content, religion, politics, economics, horticulture, history, and literature, along with several periodicals and journals. Some of the texts are books on Christian religion. An interesting example here is the repeated borrowing of a certain book of exhortations (Pétursson, 1859), yearly around the beginning of the lent for three consecutive years.

Here we also see examples of books that deal with the economic and political situation in Iceland around and after mid-nineteenth century. This included some of the first examples of statistical production in Iceland, e.g., a land register for Iceland, statistical series (Sigurðsson, 1853–1875), and gazette for official affairs in Iceland (Sigurðsson, 1864–1875). Examples of educational matter were a recent book on spelling in the Icelandic language (Friðriksson, 1867) and a concise precis on botany (Ólafsson, 1774). The impact of such collection must have been considerable within a poor rural society like Kaldrananeshreppur. Even if each household possessed only a limited number of books, it may be argued that each home could contribute to an informal, communal library.

Network of Lending and Borrowing Books

We see from Sighvatur Grímsson's diary how widespread this activity was during his four-year tenure in Kaldrananeshreppur. During Sighvatur's residency in Kaldrananeshreppur, he engaged in book lending and borrowing with more than half of the 23 households in the community. Interesting example is his interaction with the household at Bjarnarnes and its individual members. In this case the bulk of the book exchange takes place over three dates in April 1872. On 3 April Sighvatur reclaimed four of his books that he had lent to the household earlier

(Diary, 3 April 1872). This batch consisted of two historical textbooks by Páll Melsteð, *Fornaldasagan* (1864) and *Miðaldasagan* (1866), the second volume of Jón Árnason's collection of Icelandic folktales (1862–1864) and one printed rímur-cycle (Breiðfjörð, 1857). Few days later Sighvatur lent eight more books to the household, including three books designated to two daughters of the farmers there, two for Guðbjörg Björnsdóttir and one designated for Guðrún Björnsdóttir, Guðbjörg's sister. Most of the books lent to Bjarnarnes were relatively new, published after 1850, either in Reykjavík or Copenhagen. Noteworthy here are two educational booklets, written and published by politician and scholar Jón Sigurðsson around 1860, aimed at common Icelanders to improve their skills and knowledge. One was aimed at fishermen and has title that translates as "A small fishing book with illustrations and explanations for fishermen in Iceland" (Sigurðsson, 1859). The second was aimed at farmers, *Lítil varningsbók*, "A small book of supplies, for farmers and rural residents in Iceland" (Sigurðsson, 1861). The book mainly discusses the production and processing of food and is divided into three parts. The first part covers animal products of all kinds, dairy products, meat, wool, skin, and everything that is obtained from land animals, along with mountain grasses and coastal resources. The second part deals with seafood, while the third one discusses matters of trade.

The exchange of books borrowed and lent between Sighvatur Grímsson and other households was in most cases balanced but that was not the case with Kaldrananes. Sighvatur lent 15 titles to Jón Guðmundsson and Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir over the period in question but borrowed only two from them, one manuscript and one periodical (Diary, 21 March and 30 March 1873). Sighvatur supplied the household at Kaldrananes even-handedly with manuscripts and printed books. At the end of October Sighvatur borrowed a transcript of the rímur-cycle *Rímur af Ásmundi og Rósu* by Sigurður Breiðfjörð and returned the favour by lending her a transcript of his own *Gunnlaugs rímur* few weeks later (Diary, 31 October, and 13 December 1872). These transactions were interestingly all clearly attributed to the mistress at Kaldrananes, Ingibjörg Einarsdóttir but others were usually aimed at the household as such without further distinction. Examples of traditional literature lent by Sighvatur to Kaldrananes in printed form were also several, both poetry and prose. The list of books lent to the household of Jón and Ingibjörg at Kaldrananes furthermore represents well what seems to have been common duality of the textual consumption within the commune with traditional literature, sagas, and ballads, on the one hand, either in manuscripts or printed editions and, on the other, contemporary books of political, socio-economical, and scientific content, bearing witness to wide ranging post-enlightenment quest in informing and educating the nation in various fields.

Sighvatur lent several books of various contents to farm of Drangsnes, for the most part recent publications of contemporary texts. Case in point is an entry in the diary from 18 March 1870 when he brought them three books, a geographical textbook (Friðriksson, 1867), biography of Danish/Icelandic sculptor Albert Thorvaldsen (Thiele, 1841), and a booklet he refers to as "Sharp's speech" (Sharp, 1863). Sighvatur kept supplying the Drangsnes household with popular textbooks in the following

year as in March he lent the first volume of a book on modern history (Melsteð, 1868), on botany (Hjaltalín, 1830), and *Lítil varningsbók* (Sigurðsson, 1861).

Þorbergur Björnsson, a lodger at the farm Reykjarvík, borrowed ten books from Sighvatur, primarily on two occasions, in February 1870 and October 1871. His line of borrowed books represents an interesting mixture of contemporary scientific textbooks and traditional literature. In addition to the two on natural history and geology, Þorbergur borrowed one on physics (Fischer, 1852) and another on fishing (Diary, 19 February 1871). Others were exclusively drawn to traditional and historical literature, like retired farmer Páll Jónsson at Kaldbakur who borrowed three rímur cycles in the fall of 1870 (Diary, 30 October 1870). Two months later he would receive another batch, containing history of the kings of Norway (Stephensen, 1804), and of bishops in Iceland (Vigfússon and Sigurðsson, 1858), both printed, and Aesop's biography in manuscript (Diary, 24 December1870).

Even if Sighvatur Grímsson's diary gives detailed information on the book-lending between him and other households in the commune, what is missing from the picture is the exchange between other individuals and households. There is no reason to assume that this kind of book-lending was limited to Sighvatur Grímsson's person. Many households had evidently access to some books and manuscripts, old and new and more importantly the drive to seek for more and share with others. Another source supporting the idea that books and manuscripts circulated intensively via lending and borrowing in a dense and wide-reaching network is the diary of Jón Guðmundsson at Hella. On the 24 February 1868 he noted for example that he had lent five books of stories and ballads to his namesake at Kaldrananes and in December 1870 he lent three sagas in two volumes to farmer Sigurður Gíslason at Bær (Diary, 15 December 1870).

Multiple indications suggest that estate inventories' records offer somewhat an incomplete glimpse into the extent of literacy opportunities within rural communities during the nineteenth century. Books, like other possessions in that society, were not merely confined to their owners' material world but also formed an integral part of the community's material culture. Books were borrowed, circulated among individuals and places, read, and occasionally even written in, thereby transforming into new possessions. The diaries penned by farmer, lay-scholar, and scribe Sighvatur Grímsson between 1869 and 1873 in the rural commune of Kaldrananeshreppur give an extremely varied and multi-layered portrait of literacy practices among ordinary people in nineteenth-century Iceland. The lively circulation of books by borrowing and lending indicates that the readership of printed material, books, journals, and periodicals was, at this time, much more extensive than the limited ownership would suggest.

Conclusion

Historically, books and manuscripts have been lent and borrowed to a greater extent than most other types of things, and the idea of a library is seemingly as old as the history of written culture. Communities have sought and found ways to provide its members with access of reading material, beyond the confines of private

ownership. The emergence of modern public libraries as a solution to communities' need for access to books can be traced back to nineteenth-century England and the USA. Prior to the rise of this movement in the mid-nineteenth century, diverse types of community-based lending libraries existed.

> The current breed of public library displaced a flourishing, unregulated library culture built not by the state but by autonomous individuals acting from a range of motivations throughout the Anglophone Atlantic world between the mid-seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Over these two centuries, people from a vast diversity of backgrounds founded private membership book clubs and subscription libraries; well-to-do patrons formed libraries for specific audiences, like mechanics and apprentices; professional and artisanal groups congregated in vocational libraries for association and self-improvement; booksellers operated commercial libraries, hiring out books for profit; coffee-houses, taverns, inns and other public spaces provided print material to be read and debated; and religious groups provisioned libraries for charitable purposes and to encourage spiritual awakening.
>
> (Towsey and Roberts, 2018)

Before the emergence of modern Public Libraries of the twentieth century Iceland experienced an intermittent stage of community-based lending libraries in rural communes. Prior and parallel to these enterprises were the informal and interpersonal exchanges of books and manuscripts that have been the subject of this paper. In it I propose that individual text collections (libraries) played an important role in shaping and maintaining reading communities, cementing social networks, and communicating historical, scientific, and societal knowledge and literary and recreational textual consumption through the acquisition and submission of texts. This approach seeks to enhance our understanding of reading practices, knowledge sharing, and participation in literary culture during nineteenth-century Iceland, adding further layers to its historical narrative.

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5 The Speech of Spindle Whorls

Words on Things and Things in Words

Gavin Lucas

The Anonymity of the Artefact

In the autumn of 1880, a spindle whorl made from a soft, green claystone was found in a vegetable garden at the farm of Hruni in southern Iceland (Figure 5.1). The priest at the farm, Jóhann Briem, donated it to the National Museum the following year (Þjms. 1933/1881–69[1]), remarking that it was the first such artefact to spring from this spot, even though the ground had been cultivated for 60 years. However, the remarkable thing about this object was what had been inscribed on one side of the spindle whorl: 'Thora owns me' (ÞÓRA Á MIG) in runic letters. The archaeologist Kristján Eldjárn wrote about this object years later in one of his many essays, and he uses it as a device for reflecting generally on the anonymity of most archaeological finds (Eldjárn, 1948). Despite acknowledging the value of artefacts as sources on culture history regardless of their connection to specific people, he could not resist tying this particular find to a historically known individual—in this case, Þóra Guðmundardóttir who lived at Hruni in the 13th century which fell within the known date range for this kind of object.

Eldjárn's impulse to connect this find to a historical personage in many ways contravened his own interventions in Icelandic archaeology which were partly about drawing archaeology away from its subservience to the historical narrative as embodied in the rich literature of the Sagas and other texts. The lure was expressed by Eldjárn in his succinct phrase: 'we cannot bear artefacts to be anonymous' (Icel. "Við þolum ekki nafnlausa gripi"; Eldjárn, 1948: 139). Linking archaeological remains to recorded settlers or literary events was an antiquarian game that continued to have a powerful pull on archaeologists well into the 20th century and remains still a popular trope within the media and among the wider public (Friðriksson, 1994). At the same time, when such links can be made, it is foolish to ignore them. When Eldjárn and others were excavating the foundations of the medieval and later churches at Skálholt, also in southern Iceland and in the same county as Hruni, they unearthed the coffins of many of the bishops interred there, the remains of which were linked to specific individuals—most famously, the skeleton found in a stone sarcophagus which was identified at the remains of Bishop Páll Jónsson who died in 1211 (Eldjárn et al., 1988). Although there was no inscription on this

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Figure 5.1 Stone spindle whorl from Hruni with inscribed runes.
Sources: Þjms. 1933/1881–69; photo: Ívar Brynjólfsson.

sarcophagus, many of the post-medieval coffins had silver depositum plates on the lids inscribed with the name of their dead occupant (Eldjárn et al., 1988: 51–61).

Certainly, the ability to link such material remains to historically recorded individuals is exciting. It can make these things feel that bit closer, that bit more human; not to mention the possibility of enriching the known facts about such people for whom previously, we only had written documents to rely on. The bones tell their own stories. But what if we read such inscriptions in other ways? Not as intermediaries, linking objects to people, but as active agents in their own right? Not as signs pointing to person, but as enunciations coming from the object itself? Such alternate readings don't work for any inscriptions; some are so matter of fact they seem devoid of any voice, such as the inscription of Bishop Jón Árnason which read simply: 'Master Jón Árnason, Bishop of Skálholt, Born 1665, Died 1743' (MAG: : /IONAS ARNÆ/EPISC: SKALH/NATUS Ao 1665/OBIIT Ao 1743).

But for Þórunn Stephensen, the wife of Bishop Hannes Finnsson, the plate speaks to us: 'Here lies Madame Thorun …' (Icel. Her under hviler Frü Thorun …). Everything changes with those two little words in front of the name: here lies …

Who is speaking to us here? Or, indeed, in the case of the runic-inscribed spindle whorl with which we opened this paper? If we attribute the voice to a person, such a person is, in fact, the anonymous one. *Who* says that Thora owns this spindle whorl or that Thorun lies here? It cannot be Thora/Thorun. If it was them, why not say, I own this or I lie here? Of course, we all refer to ourselves in the third person sometimes, but in the case of these inscriptions, it seems unlikely, especially in Thorun's case as she is dead. No, there is something more subtle at work. So, who is speaking? As long as we want to attribute this voice to a person, we will never know; they are anonymous. But more importantly, in that very anonymity, any human speaker also surely loses any authority. Why should we believe you? Who are you that we should accept these words? And because of the very nature of these speech acts—they are proclamations, announcements, injunctions—surely authority is what matters. Surely the only way to acquiesce to the authority of these utterances is if the speaker is right in front of us. We should be asking ourselves, not *who* is speaking but *what* is speaking. The speaker of these inscriptions is not some disembodied, anonymous person, but the very thing which carries the text on its body. It is the spindle whorl which speaks, the depositum plate that talks to us.

Such a solution seems strange because for us, traditionally things do not speak; they do not have agency like people do. If they seem to have a voice, it is—we tell ourselves—because humans speak through them. But this is a historically constructed way to think about writing, one that also always needs to assign an author, whether that author is known or not. Yet in the case of the spindle whorl, authorship of the voice cannot be in doubt. Thora owns me. Who would refer to themselves in the first person except the one speaking? One response will be this is just a literary flourish. Whoever carved those runes on the spindle whorl, even if it was Thora herself, she was simply playing with words, a way of marking ownership that nobody really took literally. That may be the case, but it may also be that in carving these letters, the person believed they were imbuing the object with animacy, giving it the power to speak and that anyone reading it, would believe the same.

This does not have to be an either/or. Caroline Bynum's work on the animacy of medieval materiality in fact stresses precisely the inherently ambivalent nature of matter as both agentive and yet not. Specifically in relation to holy objects like relics or even religious images, medieval texts are replete with contradictory attitudes (even by the same author) to the way divinity is both immanent in, and yet merely represented by, such things (Bynum, 2015). Given this spindle whorl dates to the 13th century, it is certainly easy to see how this same tension is evident, albeit with more obviously secular objects. However, in this connection one needs to address the issue of the use of runes, even if only to set it aside. The association between runes and magic is well known, indeed the etymology of the word 'rune' means a secret, a mystery, or secret talk/conversation and such magical associations are clearly central with runic inscriptions on certain objects such as amulets (MacLeod and Mees, 2006; Steenholt Olesen, 2010). At the same time, the use of

runic inscriptions in connection to magical practices was by no means an exclusive or even dominant feature, so one needs to be careful in over-extending any such associations. The runic alphabets were, after all, the general alternative to the Roman one for much of northern Europe in the late Iron Age and early Medieval periods.

A large number of runic inscribed objects have been found in Iceland. Another famous item very similar to the spindle whorl from Hruni is a wooden spade found in a peat bog in Indriðastaðir, southwest Iceland in 1933 (Þjms. 11687; Eldjárn, 1994: 72). This was inscribed with the text: 'Páll owns me. Ingjaldur made me' (PÁLL LÉT MIK, INGJALDUR GERÐI). This has been dated to the 12th century. Yet more relevant are other spindle whorls found more recently in archaeological excavations with similar inscriptions to the one from Hruni (Snædal, 2003, 2011). Two stone spindle whorls were found from recent excavations in Reykjavík: one (Þjms. 2009-32-1600) dating to the 9th–11th century, inscribed with the words 'Vilborg owns me' and another broken spindle whorl from the early 13th century with a partial woman's name (such as Þórunn or Guðrún) '… owns me' (Þjms. 2008-32-705; Snædal, 2011: 169–70, 172–3). At the same time, the use of runes for such inscriptions was clearly not exclusive as the Roman alphabet could serve the same function. This is evident in the example of an ornately carved wooden spindle whorl, still attached to its spindle which was recovered from excavations at the farm mound of Stóraborg on the south coast of Iceland. Around the top, it reads 'Anna owns me' ([A]NNA A M[IG]) in Roman letters and came from a floor dated to the 16th–17th century (Snæsdóttir, 1981).

In all these cases, I would suggest we are encountering a very old and deep folk tradition which surrounds the way people regarded objects as animate and, when given the words to express themselves, articulate. Such an ascription seems even less problematic in the wake of wider scholarship on indigenous ontologies and the animacy of objects (Alberti and Bray, 2009; Harrison-Buck and Hendon, 2018; Henare et al., 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017) not to mention the previously cited work of Bynum (2015). Yet while we can accept this perhaps for medieval objects like these inscribed spindle whorls, we may find it harder for the later, postmedieval depositum plates on the coffins. After all, these were engraved in the 18th century, at the height of Enlightenment. There is also a big difference between saying 'somebody owns me' and 'here lies …'; only in the first case is the voice of the first person explicit. And yet, when you read a sign that say, 'this way' or 'keep to the right' or 'stop', do you not implicitly regard that sign as the one speaking?

Perhaps the larger lesson here comes from actor network theory whereby ascribing authorship at all (whether to the object or to a person behind the object), is to miss the point. It is not about identifying actors but tracing agency. Just pause for a moment while you read this text you have in front of you now: who or what is speaking? Indeed I, Gavin Lucas, as the ascribed author at the head of this chapter, did write them and I am speaking to you. By what magic is this possible? I am not there, beside you. How is this, then possible? That the invention of writing was a form of communication that subverted the normal rules of time and space; that one can speak with a time delay between utterance and reception or to people separated by large distances is well known. But all too often, we focus on the consequences

of writing rather than the objects which made it possible. Let's remind ourselves of Marshall McLuhan's well-circulated phrase, the medium is the message (McLuhan, 1964). Pay attention, not to what I say, but how I say it. I do it through a keyboard linked to a screen via CPU, through a wi-fi connection and fibre optic cables which relays this text as binary code to a publishing house, where it is either transformed again onto a printed page, bound, shipped, and delivered to your hands or re-sent back through cables to your computer or e-reader. This is a kind of magic; and I say this not to fetishize technology, but to highlight the agency of all these things which play the essential role in enabling me to speak to you. As essential as my mind and hands. Who or what is speaking? All of these things; including me—but not exclusively me. Whoever inscribed those runic characters on the spindle whorl, whether it was Thora (whoever she was) or someone close to her, they had not lost the enchantment with nor their humility towards the agency of things in ascribing authorship to the spindle whorl. Things can talk too.

Things in Texts

If words inscribed on things can give them to power to speak, can render objects animate, articulate—what do things do to words? What happens to things when they are rendered as words? In the second part of this paper, I want to address the question of the lives of objects in texts and so to start, I want to delve into the historical archive. In a probate inventory from 1807 for one Böðvar Jónsson of the farm Réttarholt in the north of Iceland, among his estate are listed four spindles (presumably with their whorls), valued at two skillings each. Instead of words written on a spindle whorl, we now have a spindle whorl manifest as a word. What agency do things have as words? I want to explore the implications of this question by following a cue from Ben Jervis and Sarah Semple who observe of medieval inventories: "… if we perceive of objects as defined through relations then the process of writing about things changes their very being—inventories are not epistemological tools for thinking about things, they are ways in which the ontological status of things is challenged and defined—they are a means through which we come to know these things" (Jervis and Semple, 2020).

For archaeologists working with historical documents, one of the best places to encounter things in texts are inventories and account books. Working with these kinds of documents from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, the uniformity of how objects appear is quite remarkable. Often, the object occurs as a single word on the left side of the page, with a monetary value on the right. Merchant's ledgers, administrative inventories, probate lists all have this same structure, albeit with some slightly subtle differences. From a merchant's account book at Arnastapi 1782: '4 pounds of rolled tobacco, priced at 1 rixdollar'. From a probate inventory at Kross in Skarðströnd, 1791: '1 pound of rolled tobacco, not full, priced at 24 shillings'. From a stock-taking of the bishop's see at Skálholt, 1754: '18 silver spoons, valued at 27 ½ rixdollars'. The similarity is not surprising of course. All these documents are written for one purpose: to keep track of the value of objects as they change ownership or stewardship. In the case of the merchant ledger, it is about sellers and buyers, debts,

and credits. With the probate lists, the value of an estate is being assessed for inheritance purposes as the possessions of the deceased are distributed among claimants or for sale at auction. With the episcopal inventory, the stock-taking was done every time there was a change of Bishop to oversee responsibility for church property. In these texts, objects are reduced to names, quantities, and monetary values; sometimes, the object is qualified in terms of its condition (e.g., worn, incomplete) which is of course purely intended to justify a (usually low) evaluation.

Object lists like these have been a valuable source of information for historians looking into issues such as consumption, status, quality of life, and so on, while for archaeologists they offer an invaluable complement to excavated assemblages. But this is not my focus in this paper. Here, I want to rather explore what these things do in these lists in relation to the point raised in the quote by Semple and Jervis above. Quantification is clearly a central aspect of these lists: counts and values. How many items, how much are they worth? What each thing is, is of course important, whether it is tobacco or silver spoons; but in quantifying this thing by count or weight and monetary value, it is also a way of setting up an equivalence between them, so they can, all ultimately be compared. Such reductions—or abstractions—are a well-recognized feature of European thinking from the late medieval and early modern periods, linking capitalism with the emergence of science and natural philosophy (Crosby, 1998). While the practices of actually trading goods or distributing inheritance helped to foster this view of objects as quantifiable things, it was the role of writing that was critical. Especially given the fact that actual money may not have changed hands in most situations, the accounts books, ledgers, and inventories are where this new perception of objects took most concrete form.

This is not to say everyone began to regard all things as fungible all the time. The qualitative engagement with tobacco as a stimulant, a luxury, a moment of pleasure would still have been the dominant way people interacted with these objects. Indeed, we need to pay attention to the particular contexts and situations in which such quantification occurs. As pointed out earlier, all these lists have one thing in common besides their similar format and ontology of quantity: they are drawn up in situations where objects change ownership or stewardship. This is important because it points to something critical. Let us unpack this carefully starting with Kopytoff's classic paper on the cultural biography of things (Kopytoff, 1986). One of the key insights that emerged from his paper is the way objects fluctuate in and out of commodity status as they circulate in society. You buy an item in a shop for a price; in that transaction, the object is a commodity, but it is a very short-lived state. Once you bring the item home—say a new pair of shoes—it starts to become personalized, or as Kopytoff puts it, singularized. As one of your possessions, its singularity only becomes more entrenched as it accumulates thick layers of meaning through repeated use. Perhaps though, one day you tire of those shoes and decide to sell them or gift them to a charity or second-hand store which re-sells them. Then they return to a commodity status and begin a new cycle of singularization. Yet as second-hand goods, they may not completely shake off their earlier incarnation as personal possessions; there is wear and tear on the soles, there may even be a name written on them inside (common with children's clothing). It can be hard

for objects to shake off their history. Except in the cash till; check that receipt and what is printed on it: pretty much the same as on those 18th century probates, ledgers, and inventories. A name, a count, and a price.

In these documents, whether it is a modern-day shop receipt or an 18th-century inventory, this act of reduction through quantification—and more specifically, quantification through writing—also serves to facilitate the transformation the object goes through from one social context to another. From merchant to farmer, from mother to daughter, from bishop to bishop, the change of ownership and stewardship of things may seem unproblematic and straightforward to us, but I would suggest it only appears so because of the work that inscription does. Certainly, the locale of such transformations is also important (e.g., trade store, shop), but even then the merchant's ledger or modern-day cash till play a pivotal role. Rendering things as words is, in a sense, a way of managing the circulation of objects in society because it has a critical performative function in disarming any potential threats to social networks that come as object move between people. It does this precisely by minimizing or eliding any of the singularity or personal/social memories that objects carry of their past, because it reduces objects to quanta. And this applies not just to second-hand goods but even brand-new ones, as the commodity status of an object usually masks or at least carefully scripts the context of its production. This is why Marx's concept of commodity fetishism was such a key moment in his critique of capitalism.

Seeing such contemporary lists of objects in this light means we might also shift our understanding of their temporality. One of the typical observations made about probates or other inventories is that they only ever offer us a brief moment in the past, a snapshot. The inventory of a widow cannot give us a complete idea of all the things she ever owned in her life; certainly, it may represent a long-term accumulation, but as we all know, things enter and leave our lives at different rates and times. The probate list is just what there was on one particular day (and even then, only what the appraiser saw fit to value). Merchants' ledgers are rather more dynamic in this sense as they will contain dated transactions over several years or decades; but then the limitations are of another kind—not everything we own comes from a store. But the temporality of these lists is still, in a sense, a succession of frozen moments. But what if we see these lists less as dated records and more as tensed presents, helping to mediate between past and future ownership/stewardship? Again, this is not about posing conflicting or contradictory perspectives but rather enriching our conceptual stock. What if, rather than simply representing a frozen moment or snapshot, they also embody the dynamic moment of an object as it moves from the past into the future? To see probates, inventories, and ledgers as key players in the rites of passage for things in a capitalist society.

The Archaeological Object

One of the key conclusions of the last section is that things in writing can do things they cannot do in their physical form, at least not easily. In writing, an object reduced to quanta—count, weight, price—can shed its history and, as a result,

perform a key function in mediating transition of ownership or stewardship. If this is how objects work in inventories like probates and merchants' ledgers, what happens when they are inscribed in other kinds of lists, such as those of archaeologists and museum curators? Let us return to our spindle whorl with which we started this paper. Focusing purely on how it is initially described as an object, it appears in much the same form across three different texts:

National Museum Database: A spindle whorl made of light brown, stone soft, convex on top and flat below, 5.4 cm in diameter and 1.4 cm thick. A round hole in the middle, 1.4 cm at the top, and 1.7 cm at the bottom. Has been polished and evenly made, but there is some wear on the edges (Þmjs. 1933/1881-69).

Kristján Eldjárn article: It is made from a greenish, soft claystone in the most common shape, convex on top and flat below, 5.4 cm in diameter, 1.4 cm thick. The hole is circular but somewhat wider below than on top. It is well made and neat, but has some wear on its edges (Eldjárn, 1948: 143).

Þórgunnur Snædal article: Spindle whorl from claystone, 5.3 cm in diameter, hole 1.8 cm diameter, 1.6 cm, thick (Snædal, 2003: 36).

The first two descriptions focus on similar characteristics: the material, the dimensions, the shape and its general condition and quality of production. The similarity is not surprising as the one in the National Museum database is not only based on Eldjárn's description (which it cites), it may even have originally been written by Eldjárn in his role as the state Antiquarian, a possibility which could be checked by consulting the original accession books (aðfangabækur). Snædal's description is briefer and only mentions the material and some key measurements, but this is in line with the topic of her paper, which focuses on the inscription. There are some curious differences however. In Eldjárn's paper, the material is described as greenish while in the National Museum database, it is rendered as light brown. Possibly the colour has changed, possibly the lighting conditions were different, or possibly one of the people describing it was colour-blind. Snædal's measurements also differ from those of the other two—not by a lot (+/– 1 mm) which is small enough to be of no great relevance but does highlight problems of precision when it comes to making measurements.

These differences however are not as important as the similarities: the emphasis given to the material from which the spindle whorl is made and its spatial dimensions, which is most accentuated in Snædal's text as a pared down description mentioning only the most basic or essential properties. This is not unusual and in fact rather typical of most artefact descriptions in archaeology. But what do such descriptions tell us about the way archaeologists think about objects at a fundamental and largely tacit level? There is certainly more than a strong flavour of hylomorphism here inherited from Aristotelian philosophy where any object can be reduced to a compound of matter and form. But there is also a more recent inheritance that perhaps plays a larger role here. It is that of the mathematical impact on 17th-century European natural philosophy which sees matter as res extensa (i.e., extended thing). In many ways, this is part of the same history alluded to in the last section regarding

the quantification of reality. Just as in those inventories and ledgers, objects are reduced to quanta (count, weight, cost), so are they in scientific texts like archaeology—albeit sometimes different kinds of quanta (e.g., dimensions). For Descartes, matter, as res extensa, highlighted the spatial properties of matter as a kind of being which has extension (in opposition to res cogitans in Descartes (in)famous dualism of mind and matter). The dimensions of our spindle whorl take on such primacy in these descriptions precisely because it is an echo of this cartesian view of matter as res extensa, something which was later elaborated on by Locke through his distinction between primary and secondary qualities. This Lockean distinction brings us even closer to the archaeological description of things as it basically underlies the separation between the so-called objective and subjective qualities of objects. Objective, or primary, qualities include extension—measurable properties which hold irrespective of the observer, while secondary or subjective qualities are those which are observer-dependent and on which individuals might disagree —such as its colour.

My point here is not to push the philosophical basis of these archaeological descriptions, but rather to show how these archaeological descriptions are embedded in an older history of European thinking about the nature of objects and matter. That, in short, they embody a certain ontology or way of conceptualizing the world (e.g., Bowker and Star, 1999; on museum catalogues specifically, see Turner, 2016, 2020). How we choose to talk about things in texts works to constitute our perception of and engagement with those things in the real world. For example, if someone were to hand you a spindle whorl, what would you do with it? What would you notice about it? Probably its size, its shape, its weight, and you would primarily use your eyes and hands which are the best senses to grasp these particular properties. It is unlikely you would taste it or smell it, or even listen to the sound it makes as you rub it between your fingers. But why not? Because these properties somehow don't seem as essential to what the object is (Locke's secondary qualities)? How does one make such judgements? In all likelihood, one doesn't make any kind of conscious decision at all—one just does what seems most 'natural'. And this is the point; the descriptions we make help to reinforce and perpetuate a certain way of engaging with and perceiving of objects. They simultaneously represent and help to constitute the very thing in front of us.

Such a view on scientific observation is nothing new and forms part of a wider acknowledgement of the performative nature of scientific work as inextricably co-constitutive of the reality it investigates (Latour, 1987; Soler et al., 2014). Such practice-based approaches to scientific work also completely subvert the philosophical basis of distinctions such as Locke's primary and secondary qualities as the separation of the objective and subjective is reconfigured in terms of instrumentality. Objectivity is all about the delegation of observation to non-human devices such as callipers or scales. We have devices to measure the dimensions of spindle whorls, but not the texture of their surface. But in the case of the archaeological descriptions of these spindle whorls, the privileging of certain sensory qualities of objects over others is also overlain by another hierarchy: that of description over interpretation. What we can describe about the physical properties of the object conventionally acts as the bedrock over which interpretation hovers. Whatever I

have argued about the significance of those inscriptions on the spindle whorls in the first part of this paper can be—and surely will be—debated; but what will remain unchanged by any such debates—bar minor discrepancies of precision—are the descriptions cited earlier about their size and shape.

This sense of an object being split by its natural or material properties and its social or cultural meanings, although related to Descartes res extensa/res cogitans or Locke's primary and secondary qualities, more significantly brings us back to Aristotle's hylomorphism where the social/cultural is what imposes form on matter as the natural (Ingold, 2010). This is most evidenced in the way archaeologists typically understand artefacts in terms of production technologies where natural raw material (e.g., wood or stone) is worked upon to produce a cultural artefact (e.g., spindle whorl). Archaeologists reproduce this division at a conceptual level as they work upon the artefact by first describing it as a purely physical object (res extensa) in order to interpret its cultural or social meaning as a product of the human mind (res cogitans).

However, as with the case of our early modern inventories, the critical issue about these archaeological lists is the context in which they occur. Whereas our trade ledgers and probate lists acted to mediate between past and future lives of objects as they change ownership or stewardship, the same is not happening with the artefacts—or least not quite. Arguably, such basic descriptions of artefacts are often made when they move from the earth into storerooms or are accessioned into museum collections. There are certainly grounds for suggesting a similar rite of passage occurs with artefacts which has stewardship (or even ownership) connotations. But there is also something more going on. With the lists of objects in ledgers and probates, there is a very clear sense that these lists are marking a temporary status of the object and that list situates the objects in transit between two contexts (e.g., seller and buyer). With archaeological or museum archives, the lists mark the reception of objects into a more permanent (or at least long-term) context. As such, the characterization of objects in these texts plays a much more extended function linked to the production of archaeological knowledge. As Latour's immutable mobiles or as travelling facts (Howlett and Morgan, 2010; Latour, 1987, 1999), the inscribed or textual object takes over from the physical thing in developing narratives and accounts about the past.

When archaeologists produce these accounts, they are rarely working directly from the things themselves but rather things as they exist in texts. The object with which I began and ended this paper—the spindle whorl from Hruni—has only ever existed for me in textual form. I have not seen the object 'in the flesh', I have not handled it. Everything written here has been based on the object as it exists in textual form. Although by no means would I argue that we abandon direct engagement with things, neither should we lament such mediated engagements for I would suggest its status as a textual object is precisely what has enabled me to write this paper. At the same time however, we need to be cautious in over-dichotomizing the 'real' thing from its textual incarnation. What a spindle whorl is, is distributed across these domains. Indeed, if there is one feature which accentuates this, it is the archaeo-museological practice of inscribing accession numbers on objects. Although largely abandoned today in favour of tags, objects used to have such identifiers marked on their bodies in indelible ink (Figure 5.2). The numbers there act in

Figure 5.2 Spindle whorl made from steatite, found at Litlu-Ketilsstaðir with inked accession number.

Sources: Þjms. 12439/1938-108; photo: Freyja Hlíðkvist Ómarsdóttir Sesseljudóttir.

a very material way to mediate the existence of such objects in different worlds and domains, the object in the glass cabinet and the object in text. It is not that different to the silver coffin plates discussed earlier in this paper which mediate between the corpse and the discursive memory of a named person.

Fittingly, this brings us full circle. Those words inscribed on the spindle whorl from Hruni denote their own ontology of things, where things speak; the museum number written on the back of similar objects constructs another ontology, where things can become words. In either case, objects are entangled in distributed networks of agency. Just as inscribing those words on the spindle whorl gave that object animacy and the power of speech, so inscribing the spindle whorl in words has given it agency to work in a different way, to connect it to other textualized objects, to weave together objects in other texts, and to spin this story, just as the spindle whorl once spun yarn.

Note

1 National Museum of Iceland catalogue number.

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6 The Affect of Relating

The Divergent Manifestations of Things

Kristján Mímisson

Introduction: Browsing through the Philosophy of Things

All around us there are things, embracing various necessities. The world is primarily characterized by material things. Without them, human existence would be utterly inconceivable. In fact, the history of humanity is best understood as a continuous process of materialization (Olsen, 2003: 88). Consequently, the emergence of our genus, *Homo*, has been linked to the advent of toolmaking, marking the beginnings of culture. The toolmaking *Homo habilis*, stands as a prime example of that train of thought (Corbey, 2012). Nonetheless, the connection between *Homo habilis* and the origins of material culture has always been somewhat ambiguous and facing recent finds at Lomekwi in Kenya (Harmand et al., 2015), this relationship seems completely untenable. However, the fact remains that the ongoing materialization of humankind serves as the distinguishing factor separating humans from other Earthly creatures.

This means that nothing is as intimately related to humans as things. Most human endeavours revolve around the creation, utilization, alteration, recycling, and disposal of things. Even when things cease to serve a purpose, they occupy space and exert an impact on people's settlements, actions, and well-being (Babs-Shomoye and Kabir, 2016). Therefore, things are an intrinsic part of human existence and being. This leads to the following questions: What constitutes the essence of things themselves? Wherein lies the influence of things on humans? What is the human–thing ontology?

Throughout history, scholars have continuously grappled with these questions about the human–material relationship. René Descartes, with his notions of the dualism between the body and the soul, established the groundwork for much of the subsequent discourse, despite not explicitly focusing so much on material objects. Descartes asserted that substances could be differentiated from one another if their existence could be independently determined, devoid of any external association. Consequently, he was able to separate the mind from matter or the body from the soul (Bermúdez, 1997: 760). According to Descartes, the mind was indivisible and independent of the body, whereas the body was not only dominated by the mind, but also could be fragmented into smaller units. This same principle applied to

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objects as they relied entirely on human existence and had no inherent selfhood apart from the attributions given by the human mind.

Immanuel Kant directed his attention towards the objects themselves, yet his metaphysical conclusion shared resemblance with many of Descartes' ideas. Kant argued that the essence of an object—the-thing-in-itself—existed beyond the grasp of human understanding. We perceive and apprehend only the appearances of things while their true nature remains elusive to us (Adams, 1997: 807).

Kant's transcendentalism left a profound impact on the field of phenomenology of the late 19th and early 20th century. Edmund Husserl proposed that we approach objects from a specific natural attitude, assuming that they form a distinct framework compared to our own. However, he then introduced a novel and somewhat radical perspective on the essence of things. Accordingly, things do not exist independently of human experience; rather, their essence resides in the reciprocal interaction between our perception of things and their own actions (Husserl, 1999: 38). Thus, Husserl's notion of thingly appearances resonated strongly with Kantian principles. However, their essence was rooted in the relationship between humans and things.

Martin Heidegger, who succeeded Husserl at the University of Freiburg, stated that things are what stands close to us (Heidegger, 2001: 165). Through things we come to know the world in which we are born. This occurs through things *ready-at-hand* (Germ. Zuhandensein), which are practical objects, as well as through things *present-at-hand* (Germ. Vorhandensein), which reflect our theoretical understanding of the world. Things present-at-hand belong the realm of science, which most of us are unfamiliar with, yet we acknowledge their materiality (Heidegger, 1962: 93). We undergo a COVID test, even though we cannot perceive or fully understand the virus itself, and we recognize that oil rigs are necessary for the gasoline in our cars, despite lacking knowledge of their structure or the process of extracting oil from the depths of the Earth. On the other hand, we are skilled at handling things ready-to-hand that are always within our reach. These objects signify how we engage with the world in a practical and utilitarian manner. We reach for them daily without any reflection, and we only notice them when they become useless or lost and, thus, are no longer at hand (Heidegger, 1962: 99). Heidegger argues that this utilitarian essence of things (being ready-to-hand) precedes their theoretical nature (being present-at-hand). In doing so, he turns Descartes' philosophy on its head, claiming that thoughts preceded everything else. In contrast, Heidegger views humanity as an inseparable part of the material world. The ontology of humans and things is thus intertwined in a joint venture, something Heidegger referred to as *being-with* (Germ. Mitsein; Heidegger, 2001: 149).

In the later stages of his career, Jean-Paul Sartre delved into phenomenological ideas, albeit in a somewhat different manner than Husserl or Heidegger. Sartre pondered over collectives of individuals defined by specific and standardized behaviour, which he termed *series* (Sartre, 1978: 166; Cornell and Fahlander, 2002: 30). For instance, he considered people waiting for a bus. Each person was there on their own terms, adhering to a standardized action guided by things such as bus stops and shelters, streets and sidewalks, buses, and their routes. Thus, things were

not only inseparably interconnected to human behaviour but seemed to control it. The human realm became a subject to the material realm.

> That is why we can equally well reject the dualism of appearances and essence. The appearance does not hide the essence, it reveals it; it *is* the essence. The essence of an existent is no longer a property sunk in the cavity of this existent; it is the manifest law which presides over the succession of its appearances, it is the principle of the series.
>
> (Sartre, 2001: 71)

Variations of this idea are found, for example, in the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and his ideas about *habitus*, as well as widely in postmodern humanities. In the context of postmodernism, the overarching objective was the deconstruction of any kind of Cartesianism. However, instead of completely discarding the mind-versus-matter dualism, the focus simply shifted towards language and its meaningfulness (Hoskins, 1998; Preucel, 2006; Crossland and Bauer, 2017). Accordingly, our perception of the physical world relies solely on language and how words assign meaning to things. There is no foundation in materiality, as the meaning of things swiftly changes (Holtorf, 2001: 55).

This subordinate position of things was met with opposition along with a call for giving greater attention to things and their material conditions (e.g. Latour, 2005; Domańska, 2006; Olsen, 2010). The criticism notably came from scholars who adhered to a distributed agency and flat ontology, as exemplified by theories such as Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) (Harman, 2018) or Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Law and Hassard, 1999; Latour, 2005). Bruno Latour was a prominent advocate of this critique, and he called for enhanced democracy towards objects (Latour, 1988: 142), asserting that they possess their own material agency. As a result, actions, activities, and events always emerge from the interplay between human and non-human actors. Cycling, for example, requires both a pedaler and a bicycle to form a cohesive entity, where the characteristics of both contribute equally to the event; slicing bread cannot occur without the involvement of both the person and the knife working together. Here, material and human agency converge, resulting in a novel ontological condition that possesses qualities not possessed by individual participants, whether they are objects or humans.

Jane Bennett engaged in this discourse with her book *Vibrant Matter* (Bennett, 2010), in which she explores the concept of lively materialities. She presents the idea that life is not solely confined to organic matter but emerges through the convergence of diverse agencies. The universe is not merely an infinitely inert expanse with isolated and dispersed pockets of organic matter scattered randomly; rather, it constitutes a cohesive and interconnected whole. Bennett (2010: 89) asks herself:

> But what if we loosened the tie between participation and human language use, encountering the world as a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages? We might then entertain a set of crazy and not-so-crazy questions: Did the typical American diet play any role in engendering

> the widespread susceptibility to the propaganda leading up to the invasion of Iraq? Do sand storms make a difference to the spread of so-called sectarian violence? Does mercury help enact autism? In what ways does the effect on sensibility of a video game exceed the intentions of its designers and users? Can a hurricane bring down a president? Can HIV mobilize homophobia or an evangelical revival? Can an avian virus jump from birds to humans and create havoc for systems of health care and international trade and travel?

This brief historical survey of the philosophical discourse relating to things and their essence, understandably, falls short of providing a comprehensive analysis. It is inherently flawed and does little more than skim the surface of various ideas about things and their nature in the modern era. With this oversimplified insight, I have, however, attempted to shed some light on the diversity withing the discourse and how it interrelates, despite the significant differences in attitudes towards the material, the human, and interconnections between the two. Consequently, I have travelled from the notion that the material has no foundation outside of human thought, towards suggesting that the essence of humanity may reside within the realm of material things as lively matter.

Throughout history, a distinction was often made between the manifestations and the essence of things. This typically involved differentiating between the inherent material essence and human perception. I, however, now intend to approach this from a different perspective. Things are subjects of study for scholars in various fields, particularly those focusing on the past. Archaeologists, historians, art historians, anthropologists, museum curators, and many others examine the material world of the past in their research. The difference in approaches among these disciplines primarily lies in the sources they draw upon. Historians are likely to explore the material world of the past by examining documents and various written sources. Archaeologists investigate the things themselves, yet mostly fragmented artefacts, whereas we encounter objects in museums that can be considered intact. Anthropologists derive conclusions about the past by closely examining the lifeways of indigenous societies, both historically and in the present, while art historians explore past materialities through artwork, ranging from cave paintings of the Paleolithic to digital photographs and videos of the contemporary world.

My intention is to delve into the material essence of things in light of their diverse manifestations within scholarly sources. What sets apart the essence of things described in texts from those displayed in museums? How are material fragments discovered at archaeological excavations different from depicted things in paintings or photographs? To what extent do these various manifestations of things exhibit differences or similarities in their nature? And finally, how does this divergence influence the processes of interpretation and historiography?

Depicted Things

Nearly a century ago, the Belgian surrealist René Magritte painted two pictures of pipes with the Franch caption *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (Eng. *This is Not a Pipe*).

In one picture a realistic image of a pipe is depicted on a plain background, with the caption written prominently below. There is no spatial context, only the pipe and the text, seemingly contradicting each other, yet both being equally true, each in their own way. In the other picture, Magritte has created some spatial context for the pipe and the text. This image actually shows two pipes, resembling the pipe in the previous one. One is a shadowy image of a larger pipe on a blue-painted wall, while the other pipe, along with the caption, is positioned on a framed painting placed on easels, standing on a wooden floor in front of the blue wall.

Magritte called these paintings *La Trahison des images* (Eng. *The Treachery of Images*), and the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1983) wrote a famous essay delving into the apparent contradiction they presented. What was the relationship between the visual representation of the pipe and the painter's statement? How could the painter make such a claim after clearly painting a pipe? Well, indeed, he painted a pipe, and thus the statement did not refer to the actual object, the real pipe, but rather to the two-dimensional representation of a pipe on the canvas. It was truly not a real pipe but a work of art. In his essay, Foucault meanders around language and imagery, text, and objects, until everything dissolves, fragments, and falls apart, and ultimately vanishes. Foucault's discussion of Magritte's pipes is based on the idea that the essence of the thing (in this case, the pipe) is to be found within the human consciousness rather than in the thing itself. It is human consciousness that creates diverse representations of things. In fact, Foucault calls into question everything except for the text and the imagery. He doesn't contemplate the pipe as a tangible object or discuss its ontology, i.e., how it interacts with other objects and humanity, and so gives rise to new collectives, such as a pipe-smoker.

The Swedish archaeologist Håkan Karlson approached the ontology of imagery from a slightly different perspective. In a 2005 article, he presents a photograph of a renowned ancient monument in Sweden—a Neolithic megalithic—and then poses the following questions:

> How do we then conceive of the Being of the megalith shown in Figure 3.1? And how do we conceive of the illustration itself? In the fact that they are visible and manifest, or in the process that renders them manifest?
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> (Karlsson, 2005: 31)

Karlson poses two questions and offers two possible answers to both of them. Essentially, he wants to know if there is any difference in how we perceive the materiality of the megalithic in the photograph versus the materiality of the photograph itself. The first possible answer stems from a Kantian perspective where the essence of the things—the megalithic burial site and the photograph—resides in their physical manifestation, i.e., their surface and form. On the other hand, the second answer draws inspiration Heidegger's view that the essence of objects resides in the process that renders them manifest. Karlson sees the main challenge in anthropocentric ontology that prioritizes human consciousness and thought over other ontological manifestations. He then highlights Heidegger's argument that

consciousness and thought take place in an already pre-existing world. This means that thought is not about generating ideas about reality but about being open to what unveils itself to us. Instead of us actively pointing to things, it is the things themselves that manifest and reveal their own existence.

> [W]e can interpret the actual megalith as the 'House of Dwarfes', in accordance with the 17th-century view, or we can interpret it as a grave. And we can interpret the illustration as a reflection of the empirical reality, or as some black impressions on a piece of paper. The point is both the megalith and the illustration are (still) there.
>
> (Karlsson, 2005: 32–33)

This perspective highlights the diverse ways in which objects can manifest themselves. The megalithic burial site appears both on a photograph and as a stone structure on the roadside in Western Sweden. Of course, these manifestations are dependent on various physical forms, which convey different narratives, but the existent we perceive is that of a megalith. Consequently, things within images are true to their essence yet fragmented in multiple ways. Magritte's pipes are unquestionably pipes, that however will never be smoked. The Late Neolithic grave mound in Halland, Sweden, is obvious in the photograph, but the profound impact of the colossal stone blocks can only be truly experienced standing right next to them.

Images tell stories that primarily pertain to the visual surfaces of things. At the same time, they can be very accurate sources of information about things in action. Images, particularly photographs, depict objects in their actual environment. They show collections of objects and people who may have been lost in other types of sources. They can also change our perspective on certain objects, zooming in or out, and allowing us to either enjoy details that would otherwise be imperceptible or gain an overview that we could not otherwise obtain. Thus, depicted things reveal many aspects of their material essence although being fragmented and incomplete at the same time.

Textual Things

Images can be defined as a transformed representation of the things themselves. They depict their appearance and place them in relation to other objects, people, and circumstances. But what about things in texts? Things are undeniably present in various types of texts, including novels, poems, scientific reports, and documents. However, and unlike pictures, texts fundamentally alter the form of things and leave us with definitions, concepts, and terms while the entire tangibility—size, form, and surface—vanishes completely. Things can certainly be described meticulously in text, as often seen in manuals and instructions, yet the text itself is a highly constructed form of interpretation that is not easily transferred to the essence of things (Olsen and Pétursdóttir, 2021).

Throughout history, numerous scholars have pondered the relationship between things and text (e.g., Andrén, 1997; Olsen, 1997; Lucas, 2018; Pétursdóttir, 2021), with the debate primarily revolving around the relation between written and material sources. It has been argued that things and text are presented as some sort of opposition—objects belong to the realm of the material while text originates from the realm of the mental. Nevertheless, all text is material, with words and thoughts being conveyed into something tangible, either carved in stone, inscribed in wax, drawn on parchment, written on paper, or typed into a computer (Hodder and Hutson, 2003: 13). Thus, text, like all other things, is always subject to the laws of material decay and preservation.

In texts, we often find discussions and descriptions of things, as they are inseparably connected to human societies. In fact, little is said unless things entering the narrative. However, there are texts that exclusively deal with things, entire object collections that exist only in written form, such as documents. The probate inventories at the National Archives of Iceland exemplify such an assemblage of textual things. These sources are essentially endless lists of objects, akin to a detailed record from an archaeological excavation or inventories of a museum collection. The question is: What kind of things do we encounter in these records; And, to what extent do they differ from the things themselves or depicted things?

The main characteristic of these records is that they document the belongings of deceased individuals. Each entry is intimately tied to a specific person, describing the items associated with that person at the time of their passing. Within these records, we discover exceptional sources of information about people and their material circumstances. We encounter intricate personas composed of the deceased and their belongings, which often serve as markers of their closest and most personal things—the things that stood closest to them. The material aspects of the person are given special attention, meticulously catalogued, or remembered (Olsen, 2003), before being redistributed anew.

Some estates involve more than a single individual. Married couples who pass away within a short period of time are often treated as one person and their belongings are redistributed as a whole. Sometimes, the estate includes items that were used, shared, and even owned by other household members such as a surviving spouse, children, or servants. In the inventories, we encounter personas that extend beyond the concept of an individual. They provide us with insights into the composition of the persona that are not as evident elsewhere.

Simultaneously, much of the thingly essence is lost. Similar to things in pictures, things in texts act as representatives or proxies for the actual things themselves. A lamp mentioned in a probate inventory does not emit light any more than Magritte's pipes can be smoked. Texts, like probate inventories, often provide only a limited understanding of the things. "2 Brass Candle Pipes and 1 Lamp" is recorded in the probate inventory of Halldóra Sigurðardóttir, a school principal's wife from Reykjavík, that passed away at the end of the 18th century (see Figure 6.1; Jónsson, 2015: 229, 234). Here, the lighting devices in her possession are listed, and the material of the candle pipes is specified. But what about the lamp? Was it also made of brass?

Figure 6.1 From the probate inventory of Halldóra Sigurðardóttir (d. 1795): *2 Látúns Kertapípur og 1 Lampi* (Eng. 2 *Brass Candle Pipes and 1 Lamp*).

Source: Photo: The National Archives of Iceland.

Probate inventories are essentially fragmented, emphasizing some information and omitting other. Interestingly, the fragmentation is not only a matter of the textual content but is also due to the physical deterioration of the documents themselves. The handwriting can be illegible, may have faded, or the paper may have frayed or torn, resulting in missing information. Textual things are fundamentally fragmented. Yet at the same time both language and text belong to the essence of things. Materials need to be addressed and named in order to become things. Furthermore, texts inform us about their relations and how they assemble and form novel compositions such as persons.

Fragmented Things

Almost 20 years ago, the Norwegian archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen (2003: 89) wrote the following: "Archaeology is, of course, the discipline of things *par excellence*." This quote by Olsen has become iconic and he certainly was right in his assertion. Although archaeologists engage in diverse activities and pursue various research avenues, things ultimately form the common thread that ties the entire field of archaeology together.

Artefacts and antiquities, particularly those uncovered during archaeological excavations, represent the traditional subjects of archaeological inquiry. The manifestations of antiquities are generally characterized by decay and fragmentation. They are the remnants of human constructions and production that once actively participated in the societal context of the past. However, the things archaeologists unearth have lost their connection to their past roles. Yet, archaeological remains are not inert or insignificant—it is because of them that archaeological excavations take place at all—but their original context has faded away, not least due to their decay and fragmentation.

Therefore, archaeology is more the discipline of fragments rather than wholes (see Tronzo, 2009). This is of course mainly due to pre- and postdepositional formation processes. However, it is worth considering the possibility that fragmentation itself could have had a significance within past societies. This is exactly the case in John Chapman's theory of fragmentation (Chapman, 2000; Chapman and Gaydarska, 2007) which finds clear roots in the ideas of the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss (2001). However, in the case of Chapman—and for that matter the many others following the same Maussian train of thought (Gell, 1998; Strathern, 1988; Fowler, 2004; Jones, 2005)—the perspective is rather anthropocentric, as

significance is neither with the object as a whole nor its fragments, but the personhood of the giver and receiver and/or the social act of exchange (e.g., Chapman and Gaydarska, 2007: 1–2).

The primary challenge posed by fragments lies in distinguishing and assigning them to the original thing, i.e., understanding the whole in each individual fragment. Archaeologists are indeed experts in this regard and can, for example, differentiate various types of pottery from single pottery fragments. The complexity, however, increases when dealing with larger wholes comprising numerous components. In this context, Gavin Lucas (2012: 211–212) introduced the concept of the irreversibility of archaeological remains. Irreversibility refers to how well an entire assemblage can be discerned within its individual components, even after it has been dismantled, or, how well a whole is preserved within a single fragment. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and therefore we lose valuable information about the original state. For example, a secondary burial may wipe away all evidence of the primary burial so that it becomes impossible to determine the original state of that burial after the changes.

It is the inherent nature of things to decay, fragment, and disperse. The material fragmentation of things is registered in textual sources as well. The state of decay and fragmentation is, for instance, often mentioned in the probate inventories (Figure 6.2). There we find raggedy clothes, barrels without hoops, and bottomless buckets that are nevertheless valued and put up for sale. The probate inventories were compiled to put a value on the estate of a deceased person. In order to collect that value, the estate was very often sold at an auction. Auctions were in that sense events of fragmentation and redistribution, where things that previously shaped a particular persona—the deceased—were sold to the highest bidder and scattered far and wide. No good junk was treated the same way as usable utilities and may have been purchased at the auction as raw material that could be recycled in various ways.

An example of this can be found in documents in the National Archives of Iceland recounting the auction of the estate of Svanhildur Jóhannsdóttir and Guðfreður Guðmundsson, which took place on April 1, 1898. The couple had passed away the year before. Several of their compatriots attended the auction and acquired a few things each. It is noteworthy that a tenant and labourer from the neighbouring farm,

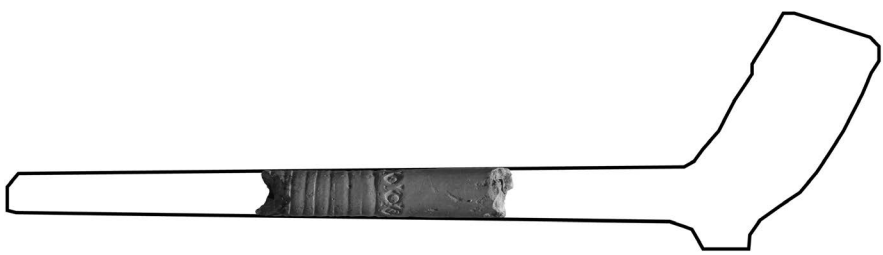

Figure 6.2 A fragment that reveals the original state of a clay pipe.

Sources: Þjms. 2009-63-17; Drawing: Kristján Mímisson; photo: Ívar Brynjólfsson.

Jón Sigurðsson, was one of the most lavish buyers. However, he did not partake in the auction on his own behalf, but represented his landlords, Magnús and Brandur Árnason that were excluded from the auction. They were not only the auctioneers but also had a hand in the appraising of the estate. The tenant Jón bought among other things a barn, an earth-bound turf house. It was certainly not bought to be used as such, but as material (timber, stones, etc.) for reuse at another place. Here we see again the fragmentation of a whole—a barn being acquired, dismembered, and then re-membered in new forms with new functions. Such is the life of things: their essence is fragmentation, dispersal, and reconstitution.

Whole Things

Finally, it is worth paying attention to wholes, be that intact things, or complex assemblages. Here we must encounter the true essence of things. But what exactly defines a thing as whole? Is it its physical structure or its utility? A porcelain cup that is broken in pieces has lost both its physical structure and utility and is therefore no longer whole. On the other hand, if the handle breaks off, it has lost its physical form but still retains its usefulness. At the same time, a cracked and leaking cup perfectly maintains its material form, even though it is totally useless. What about more complex composite things, such as bicycles? If the chain snaps, the bicycle becomes just as useless as a broken cup. However, if it lacks a saddle, bell, or even a few spokes in its wheel, the utility of the bicycle has not been significantly diminished, despite missing some parts. From this, we can conclude that neither utility value nor physical structure alone are decisive factors in determining the wholeness of things, although both contribute to their definition.

Intactness is often an issue within museums that curate antiquities. The condition of museum objects varies of course greatly and most have suffered some form of deterioration, wear, and tear. Hence, museum objects are seldom whole as they lack both some of their material form and original utility. However, museum objects primarily miss their original coherence and relation to other things and people. In museums, there is a tendency to isolate things and remove them entirely from their original context. The church door from Valþjófsstaður, East Iceland—on display at the National Museum of Iceland—no longer hangs on hinges and can neither be opened nor closed. Its purpose has been limited to the aesthetic and historical value of the wood carvings on the door. It has preserved its material form and usefulness but is now submitted to the modern requirements and conventions of conservation and exhibition. An object that once permitted access to a church house has been reduced to a piece of art, hung up on a wall. This museum-related transformation from things-in-motion to things-at-rest becomes even clearer when considering all the things that are simply stored away and will unlikely ever be exhibited. Museum collections are filled with things that are not only out-of-sight, meaning never seen or experienced, but mainly out-of-context, i.e., removed from any relation to other things or people.

For instance, in the collection of the National Museum of Iceland there are numerous train oil lamps, some of which are likely of the same type as the one

Figure 6.3 A train oil lamp in the collection of the National Museum of Iceland.
Sources: Þjms. 14447/1950-179; photo: Ívar Brynjólfsson.

mentioned in the probate inventory of Halldóra Sigurðardóttir (see Figure 6.3). These lamps have retained their form and function completely, yet they are fragmented and incomplete. Their wholeness is dependent on the relation to both fuel (train oil), wicks, any kind of fire-lighting devices, and people in the dark. Therefore, we may claim that train oil lamps in the collection of the National Museum

of Iceland are, in essence, as fragmented as the lamps written down in the inventories of deceased persons, captured in pictures, or found in pieces at archaeological excavation.

The Essence of Things and Their Historiographical Significance

All this pondering about the essence of things and their various manifestations in historical sources, such as images, texts, fragments, or wholes, leads to the same conclusion. Things are inherently incomplete, and no sources category contains information about their complete nature, only certain aspects of it. The concept of an entirely intact thing is, to some extent, an illusion. Heidegger's (2001: 151) etymological analysis of the word *thing* is well known. The word stems from the old Germanic/old Norse *Þing* (also known in modern Icelandic), meaning gathering or assembly. Hence, a thing is what brings together—a thing is an assembly or a gathering of many. Interestingly, in the Icelandic language the word for a thing is *hlutur* which means a part or a piece. The perspective has been turned towards the incompleteness of things and instead of emphasizing the attracting essence of things—their nature of assembling—the fragmented essence is underscored.

Thus, the complete nature of things is only revealed in the moment when various thingly and non-thingly elements are brought together. The essence of a piano is its sonorous affect, and it only manifests itself when the piano is played. The essence of a car lies in its motion; the essence of a door in controlling access; the essence of a lamp in providing light; the essence of a pipe in smoking tobacco. This perspective on the essence of things is similar to what Igor Kopytoff (1986) argued in his seminal article on the life cycle of things. He directed his attention to commodities and how value is attributed to things. According to Kopytoff, the value of a commodity is not inherent in its nature but becomes apparent during moments of exchange (buying, selling, trade, etc.; Kopytoff, 1986: 83). In between these moments, the things (commodities) are essentially worthless. I do not claim that things become inert if not fulfilling their intended role and bringing together all the necessary non-human and human elements of that gathering. Things do not disappear if they are left unused. The piano still fills up the same space in the living room although nobody plays it, and there are always more immobile cars in parking lots than moving about out on the streets. The essence of things lies in the affect of relating, i.e. drawing together affective relationships. Thingly relations are affective due to their invariable connection to humanity. Things enable us to recognize ourselves, and it is through things that we relate with the world around us. Unrelated things do not exist as the constantly speak back to us, creating new relations. Music may be the intended relation of a piano but is not less important as a shelf for family photographs; a decrepit car is of little use on the streets but may become a valuable hoard of spare parts; the Valþjófsstaður door does not open or close anymore but draws our attention to chivalric sagas and the woodcarving craftmanship of the Icelandic Middle Ages; and lamps in the Icelandic probate inventories do not spread the stench of fish oil or provide faint light in the dark premises of an Icelandic turf house. However, each mentioning of a lamp in the probate

inventories is a direct reference to people that lived in the dark. Thus, the essence of things is their narrative quality, their historicity (Ingold, 2007). And please note, these material narratives do not originate in the minds of people but stem from the affective relations that things create with humans and non-humans through time.

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7 An Old Manuscript, Leather Shoes, and a Cane

The Role of Material Agency in Literary Criticism

Andri M. Kristjánsson

I

Things are important for humans and have been from the beginning; things have played a larger role in human history than we realize. But rarely do we hear of their importance, or to phrase it more accurately, rarely does the role of things in the grand scheme interest us humans. This is perhaps quite normal since the focus in human history is the human and our ability to harness this and conquer that for the betterment and progress of the species, made possible by our own merit and ingenuity. What tends to be forgotten is the fact that for millions of years, by our side, in our hands and all around us have been and still are things that help us, work with us, and enable us to do all that we do. We tend to notice things more when they do not work as they are supposed to (broken things), are out of reach (precious things), or are new or lost. This book, for example, has piqued your interest because for you it is something new, something yet to be explored and exciting. This book, while not being read, will sit on a desk or on a table, and the cover will remind you of the texts it contains. But in due course it will make its way to the shelf, and the spine will be the only visible part of the book. Occasionally the spine will catch your eye, and you might remember something from its pages. One day this book will leave your mind, and the spine will be nothing more than a small part of the tapestry of your bookcase. This is often the fate of things—to be forgotten, fade into the background and become silent, but they are nevertheless important supporting actors in the lives led around them. This is also the fate of things within literary texts. We as readers are prone to identify things and objects within the text without paying much attention to them. But ultimately, they are just as important to us in the text as they are outside of it. Things imbue reality or fantasy to narratives whether they are silent in the background or in the foreground and might challenge our conceptions. Things are the building blocks that erect every universe in every novel in the same way they erect our own reality. We are surrounded by things all the time—we sit on them, wear them, put them on us, and go inside them. Things are what fill every gap in our existence, material, literal even emotional.

In this chapter, I will be discussing the novel of Jón Espólín, Söguna af Árna yngra ljúfling (Eng. The story of the younger Árni the good-natured). More specifically, I will analyse how things—a pair of shoes, walking stick and a manuscript—within

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the novel have specific agency to affect both the narrative and the plot of the novel. The manuscript in the story is to the best of my knowledge fictional and will therefore be discussed in this article as a part of the fictional work of Jón Espólín. Moreover, the fictionality of the manuscript does not play a part in the analysis for the qualities of the manuscript are the same in and outside the literary text. This chapter deals with the material agency of things within works of fiction and how humans and things are constantly in a symbiotic relationship that creates meaning for both humans and things, even if we humans are for the most part unaware of this relationship. It is the same within literature and real life, that we tend to identify things without paying attention to them, which is not surprisingly since pattern recognition is one of the human's strongest attributes. The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky coined the term "defamiliarization" in the first half of the 20th century, and it entails an attribute of art and literature to represent things in a way that is unfamiliar or strange to the audience. Shklovsky says: "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known" (Shklovsky, 2012: 57). He also states that after encountering things regularly, we begin to recognize them and this takes them into the unconscious realm of the automatic and mechanical (Shklovsky, 2012: 58) similar to the way this book will eventually become a part of the tapestry of your bookcase. Defamiliarization gives us a way to see things anew, revivify our connection to them, and reclaim them from the realm of the automatic and mechanical. In Sagan af Árna yngra ljúfling, things play a vital part in both the progression of the plot and the features of the frame narrative in which the narrator tells the reader what he sees on the pages in Árni's manuscript. At first glance, the part played by things could easily escape one's attention, but by shifting the focus and paying attention to the role things play in the novel, their importance becomes evident. Shklovky's defamiliarization is a good entry point to start thinking differently about things, and I believe this article in a way is an exercise in defamiliarizing the frame narrative within the field of comparative literature. By doing so it points out the fact that the agency of things, objects, and the material in general has been overlooked as an actant in the way we analyse the function and form of the frame narrative, as well as in literary studies in general.

To accept that things have some sort of agency one must first rethink the definition of what constitutes agency, for it is evident that things do not have the same sort of agency as humans. So, we think of different actants possessing different kinds of agencies, which act in concert with one another. Therefore, it is crucial to think of agency as something that is achieved through the cooperation or symbiosis of human and non-human actions. This view on agency can be traced back to the theories of Karen Barad, which will be discussed in more detail below. By thinking of agency in this way, both the non-human thing and the human become ontologically more than the sum of their parts. The thing becomes a 'thing in contact with a human' and the human becomes a 'human in contact with a thing', which ontologically is different than a human or a thing on its own. By viewing agency as a process of symbiosis also entails a fundamental critique on the anthropocentricism

that has dominated western thought for the last 400 years. When things and other non-human actants are granted agency, we automatically agree that something other than the human can occupy the point of interpretation. This in turn decentralizes the human from the point of interpretation or at least open it up to other forms of non-human actants. Accepting that humans are in constant communication and cooperation with non-human actants and live in symbiosis with their environs and the material things that make up said environs (Alaimo, 2010: 2; Barard, 2007: 353–396; Bennett, 2010: 20–38). This statement does not expel the human from the interpretive centre but rather is a call of awakening to all humans to make room within the point of interpretation for other non-human entities and the non-human agency they bring to the table.

II

Sagan af Árna yngra ljúfling was first published in 2009 by Einar G. Pétursson but is thought to have been written between 1834 and 1836 (Pétursson, 2009: vii–xxxiv and xiv–xxx).The story is about Árni, a young man in his 20s and his journey clockwise around Iceland. The narrative begins in Vopnafjörður on the east coast of Iceland, and the reader follows Árni until the abrupt stop in the northern part of Iceland near Akureyri. The reason for the unexpected end is thought to be the death of the author, Jón Espólín. The narrative is quite formulaic and is roughly as follows: Árni comes to a farm, he then asks for and receives shelter and food. In the wake of his receiving the hospitality, Árni settles down in a good spot to eavesdrop on a conversation between two or more people at the farm. He then writes down the conversations in a manuscript that he always has on his person. The narrator of the story then tells the reader what is written in the manuscript. The story is a good example of dialog literature, where the author presents his own views and opinions through different characters. Dialog literature has a long history and can, for example, be found in Plato's Socratic dialogs. The Saga af Árna feature different points of view from different classes in 18th-century Iceland, and topics include the chivalric romances, elves, trolls, folklore in general and the veracity of these things. Among other topics are different officials in Iceland at the time, e.g., county magistrate and priests and what their roles and duties are within society. The dialogs in Sagan af Árna have for the most part a relatively transparent purpose of conveying Jón Espólín's own moral ideas about Icelandic society, and they usually have a very clear distinction between who has the right opinion and who has the wrong one in the conversation. Little has been written about Sagan af Árna, with the most notable examples being the chapters by Steingrímur J. Þorsteinsson in his book *Jón Thoroddsen og skáldsögur hans* (Þorsteinsson, 1943: 189–197) and Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson's third volume of *History of Icelandic Literature*. Sæmundsson's discussion on the story can be a little bias in certain places, as well as influenced by an idea of hierarchy; nevertheless, Sæmundsson points out that both the form and content of Sagan af Árna carry the mark of a certain development in fiction-writing in Iceland at the time, in which the narrative technique was shifting away from the adventure or folktale style of writing, towards a more modern

way of narrating literature (Sæmundsson, 1996: 106–111 and 196–199). In an article from 2013, Gauti Kristmannsson takes a step further and declares that Sagan af Árna is the first attempt to write a modern novel in Icelandic (Kristmannsson, 2013: 381). But whether or not that is true, it is certain that the text is written during a very interesting period in Icelandic literary history (Antonsson and Þorsteinsdóttir, 2018; Driscoll, 1997: 207–249). A time period were the realistic and the ordinary was becoming more significant as a literary subject. This is also the phase in time that paved the way for the contemporary Icelandic novel and is certainly deserving of more scholarly attention.

Jón Espólín, the author of Sagan af Árna, employs a frame narrative in the story, a technique that even in 1836 had stood the test time and can be found in 1001 Nights, The Canterbury Tales, and The Decameron. In Sagan af Árna, the frame narrative is presented through the narrator, who tells the reader what Árni has written down on his journey around Iceland. Árnis manuscript is a fictitious narrative devise that only the narrator has access to; it serves as barrier between the author and the narrator of the story, as well as to keep the reader in the dark as to what the manuscript truly entails. As a result, Árni is only mentioned in the third person in the story, and his role is therefore reduced to being a voiceless character that only gains importance or weight through the narrator. In effect this places the narrator outside of the plot, that is between the reader and what is written in Árnis manuscript. It allows the narrator to imbue the narrative with his own opinions and values. This indicates that Jón Espólín had a clear understanding of how the position of the narrator can influence the reader, which is in itself interesting, considering the time of the story's composition. The technique of the frame narrative is a tried-and-true method within literary practices, but by paying attention to things and objects in the story, one can shed a new light on how the technique works and expand one's understanding of the technique, as well as how humans and non-humans can both be vital to the successful outcome of it.

The reader is often addressed directly by the narrator in *Sagan af Árna*, which shows clearly how the frame narrative works. A good example of this can be found in Chapter 23 of the book, where the narrator tells the reader that Árni has entered the living room at the farm Kalastaðir in Hvalfjörður, just north of Reykjavík. There he explains that Árni has only "heard nonsense about buying horses which he truly wrote down but is not included here" (Espólín, 2009: 69). Here it is obvious how Espólín positions the narrator between Árni's manuscript and what is narrated to the reader. Árni does in fact write down what he overhears at Kalastaðir, but the narrator refuses to include the conversation in the actual narration of the story, at the same time it reveals an attempt by the narrator to influence the readers understanding and opinion, by calling the redacted passage about horses 'nonsense'. The narrator is the only one with direct access to what Árni has written in his manuscript, which makes him a kind of editor or gatekeeper who wields the power over what the reader has access to, thereby judging and separating what is decent, good, and worthwhile from what he deems unethical, bad, and unnecessary. Coupled with the fact that the dialogues in the story are at times a pure moral message from the author to the reader, Jón Espólín manages to have a twofold influence on the reader's reception—directly through the dialogues and implicitly through

the narrator's opinions and judgements. By focusing on the interaction between the narrator and the manuscript, something new emerges that's worth looking at more closely. Árni's manuscript, which only exists within the story, plays a larger role in the function of the frame narrative than one might realize at first. The manuscript and the narrator interplay to create the narrative about Árni and both play equally important roles. This interplay between the material and the human are interesting in light of the theories of new materialism. In that field things are seen as having a certain agency, a material agency, that is both distinguishable and compatible with human agency and most importantly stands outside of any hierarchy. Before analysing how the narrator and the manuscript assert their agency, its's necessary to examine the how new materialism theorizes material agency.

The feminist physicist Karen Barad theorizes in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) that humans need to rethink their relationship with things and realize that the relationship between humans and non-humans is deeper and more meaningful than perceived by humans in their daily lives. Barad says that when one talks about interaction between humans and things, it implies that a preexisting agency is inherent before human end thing meet one another. Barad disagrees with the idea of agency preexisting human and non-human contact and suggests that true agency does not appear until human and things come in contact with one another (Barad, 2007: 139). To underline this point, Barad chooses to use the term intra-action as opposed to interaction. The emphasis on intra—something from within—is key here to Barad's interpretation of both human and non-human agency, which, in her opinion, arises from within the moment that the human meets the thing (Barad, 2007: 33).

Throughout Sagan af Árna, the narrator has this intra-action relationship with Árni's manuscript, and the narrator often addresses the reader directly to declare his own opinion of what is written in the manuscript, as in the example above. In other places, the reader is addressed directly by the narrator so he can describe the state of the manuscript, e.g., there are pages missing (31), a farm name has faded away (41), and pages are rotten (75) or missing (85). As a result of these direct addresses about the manuscript, there appear blanks in the plot that the narrator must fill. In these examples, Árni's manuscript influences the narrative directly by creating a gap between the narrative and the reader and thus giving the narrator space to express his opinions and in turn influence how the reader perceives the text. If one keeps Barad's intra-action in mind while taking a closer look at the frame narrative, one can see that the premise for the frame narrative's success is the symbiosis of the agency of human and thing. For the narrator to express his own opinions, he needs the manuscript and its specific manuscriptal characteristics. These characteristics appear in the story as faded writing or rotten paper, and they make room in the story for the narrator to address the reader directly, make judgements about its subject, and influence how one reads the story. The frame narrative in Sagan af Árna is dependent on the manuscript exercising its unique characteristics or agency, for if the manuscript is not legible there would not be a story to narrate. If the manuscript is not worn and torn by time and handling, there would be less room for the narrator to insert his own opinions and judgements. The role of the human is equally important, for without the narrator the story would be simple conversations without

any context. The political scientist Jane Bennett agrees with Barad to a point in her book Vibrant Matter (year), when she discusses the agency of assemblages and says that the collective and creative quality of the assemblage has a unique agency that is distinguishable from the agency of the individual elements that make up the assemblage (Bennett, 2010: 24). This idea that Bennett presents fits well with the discussion above on the symbiosis of the narrator and the manuscript in creating the frame narrative in Sagan af Árna. Each component has a distinct set of agencies that is uniquely defined, but when the narrator and the manuscript come together, an ontologically new phenomenon comes into being with its own distinct agency. It is worth noting that Barad and Bennett do not agree on whether agency is present before the intra-action happens or, in Bennett's case, before the assemblage assembles. I tend to agree with Bennett's view on agency when she says the smallest and bare entities can in fact express their vital impetus or drive, but an actant, on the other hand, never really acts alone. Agency is always dependent on the cooperation or interactivity of many entities or forces (Bennett, 2010: 21). Bennett also notes that "a lot happens to the concept of agency once non-human things are figured less as a social construction and more as actors, and once humans themselves are assessed not as autonomous but as vital materials" (Bennett, 2010: 21). In the case of Sagan af Árna, as I mentioned above, the manuscript has a distinct set of manuscriptal abilities; it tears, decays, loses pages and its colour, and the script fades. These abilities express a certain impetus, drive, or agency, but in collaboration or assembled with the narrator, there emerges something new with a different agency from its individual parts. This assemblage of human and matter is key not only in making the frame narrative authentic but also in allowing the author to get his message across through the voice of the narrator.

Lastly, I want to discuss how things affect the plot of Sagan af Árni by focusing on two objects that appear in the beginning of the story and their influence the commencement and progress of the narrative thread. In the first pages of the story one can find an interesting passage that sheds a light on why Árni sets out on his journey around Iceland.

> On the farm next to Hof in Vopnafjörður, where he [Árni] stayed one night in winter, there lived obliging people who provided him with good sheep leather shoes and a spiked cane. Now our hero started walking and vowed to himself to walk around Iceland, no matter what will come his way.
>
> (Espólín, 2005: 4)

Here one can see that Árni is already walking when he gets the idea to walk around Iceland, as if he gets inspired in the middle of taking a step and decides then and there to make the vow. Whether it was the beauty of the East Fjords of Iceland or a longing for a new view that prompted his decision is unknown. On the other hand, it is quite evident that the things he receives are prerequisite for his departure. Árni, with a pair of new shoes and a spiked cane, is ontologically different from Árni without these things. Therefor his discission to walk around Iceland is based on another criterion then if he had neither the shoes nor the cane. The things he receives make it possible for him to make this decision with good reason and to be relatively

certain he will finish the job. Árni with no shoes would stand a little chance of making it around the island, but to try would mean thinking very closely about the route. He would seek to walk on grass, moss, or sand. Undoubtedly, this would change the original route from the story, which in hand would lead him to different farms where he would hear different conversations. When Árni puts on his new shoes and takes the cane in his hand and starts walking, at that moment springs forth, ontologically, what Bennett calls the agency of the assemblage and what Barad the intra-action between human and things. Árni, the shoes and the cane all become something more than the sum of their parts. The agency of Árni and these things is different and distinguishable from the agency Árni or the things have on their own. The shoes and cane that appear at the beginning of the story become the premise for the direction the narrative takes, which makes their role equally as important for the development of the narrative thread as Árni's role in the story.

At the beginning of this article, I talked about Viktor Shklovsky's defamiliarization and how it entails the way art can make us as readers, viewers, and beneficiaries see things in a completely new way. The purpose of the defamiliarization is to reclaim things from the depths of the mechanical and subconscious and allow us to perceive, examine, and encounter things anew. The theories of the new materialism include a methodology that evokes the same effect as Shklovsky's defamiliarization. By viewing agency as a part of the non-human and accepting that agency is diverse, polyphonic and has many manifestations depending on who or what yields it. One emerges with a new understanding of things and their relationship with humans, both in the real world and in literary texts. This new understanding sheds a light on the things that are all around us, moves them from the mechanical perception and allows us to recognize their direct participation in every human undertaking. Jane Bennett says that "various materialites do not exercise exactly the same kind of agency, but neither is it easy to arrange them into a hierarchy" (Bennett, 2010: 98). What she means is that agency is the sum of its actants who connect like a chain, and it is impossible to determine which link is the most important, as they are all essential for the integrity of the chain. In Sagan af Árna one can find countless examples of the importance of Árni's manuscript for the frame narrative. At the beginning of the story, the shoes and cane are the spark that ignites the narrative thread. All these things play their part, and their distinct agency comes into play at precise moments within the story, and they could not be replaced by anything other, at least not without producing a different narrative from the one that appears in Sagan af Árna. To explain this further, it would be pertinent to explore what kind of narrative would arise if one would switch the shoes and cane for Árni's manuscript. It is quite obvious that the manuscript does not possess the same kind of agency as the things that gets Árni around Iceland. On the other hand, he could tear out the pages and wrap them around his feet, but this would only work for a short distance, since paper is not as durable as sheep leather. The manuscript would lose its pages rapidly and within a short amount of time, Árni would be barefoot with few places to go. A similar situation would occur with the narrator of the story if he had to rely solely on the shoes and the cane to impart the story of Árni. The narrator would certainly be able to tell the reader about the objects and describe how distinct markings could indicate specific uses. Based on those markings he could try to guess

where and how they came to be. In the end, the story would be filled with gaps that had to be patched up with guesswork and fabrication. In a literary context this would diminish the credibility of the overall narrative, as well as undermine the moral message the author is trying to convey to his readers. It is perfectly clear that the things in Sagan af Árna that have been discussed in this article are important. Moreover, it is essential where and how they appear in the story. The manuscript appears in the narrative because of its unique manuscriptal qualities—on the one hand, it can store and maintain human narratives and, on the other, it can forget and lose the same narratives. Both are important, as one stores the actual narration of Árni and the dialogues he hears, while the other forgets and makes space for the narrator to address and ultimately influence the reader and his perception of the story. In the quality of forgetting also lies the course of the manuscript's life, holes, stains, and decayed pages, which bear witness to its interactions with the world and give subtle hints as to what things or lifeforms it has come in contact with. Although humans can never be fully literate in such material-biographies, we get glimpses of the diverse agencies that have acted upon the manuscript.

The manuscriptal qualities of storing and forgetting are integral for the frame narrative in Sagan af Árna to function as it does in the story. Pointing out these qualities highlights the versatility, efficacy, and agency that dwells within the manuscript. This vitality has always been a part of it, as well as every other thing out there. Be it nature, microbes, environs, stones, or something else; but the grand, vivacious, and extensive agency of humans has for a long time overshadowed the vitality and agency of the non-human. By drawing attention to the importance of human and thingly cooperation or symbiosis in the function of the frame narrative and development of the narrative thread in Sagan af Árna, an attempt has been made to portray the unperceived non-human importance, both in and outside of literary texts.

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Part II

Objects of Gathering

Gathering Objects

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8 In Pursuit of Modernity?

On Collecting and Aesthetics in Iceland

Anna Lísa Rúnarsdóttir

Some of the material culture of the past is a part of the present. Certain things outlive their usefulness, break down, or degrade, and are cast aside. Other things remain in use, add layers of meaning as history unfolds, and become a part of the stories told about the past. In the nineteenth century the discipline of archaeology emerged for the scientific study of things from the past. Common household objects, tools, weapons, or ornaments became 'archaeological finds' or 'museum artefacts' and acquired new meaning, different from that they had had as objects of everyday life. The potential for interpretation was there, but how were these meanings uncovered? How did the 'narrators' of the stories become experts in the past and what structures were put in place to control things from the past and their meanings? Museum collections can be varied and contribute to an understanding of the past. Discourses can be shaped by the multiple objects that make up the collection, assembled through decades or centuries and they represent a nexus to different points in time, the time of production and the time of usage, but also to the time of collecting and the present.

In this paper, the main aim is to examine the collection of the National Museum of Iceland in order to expose some of the discourses relating to the process of collecting and the ideas attached to the ensemble of artefacts, the material culture archive. I explore how the material culture of the past in Iceland became the subject of government in the early twentieth century in relation to the Antiquarian Collection (later the National Museum of Iceland). Based on the concept of governmentality, as introduced by Michel Foucault, and discussed by Dean (2010), the analysis will focus on the techniques used to gain control, the establishment of expert knowledge, and the key ideas represented in the collection practices, as well as the role of one of the key players, Matthías Þórðarson (1878–1966), State Antiquarian from 1908 to 1947. What can an analysis of the collection reveal? What is the relationship between cultural heritage and social values, and how is turning to the past and preserving antiquities part of modernity? The context of collecting, the assemblage of artefacts and its key characteristics will also be discussed to shed light on the central issues at play.

Power, Culture, and Museums in the Modern State

The Icelandic modern state has been formed on the basis of social, cultural, and economic changes that have taken place in Iceland, as elsewhere across the world. The state has taken on various roles and exerted its power, directly or indirectly,

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through legislation, institutionalization, and modes of education, discipline, and surveillance. Daldal (2014: 150) claims that:

> This power is mainly exerted by the dominant bourgeois class through the medium of ideology: by working on the popular mentality via the institutions of civil society and thus establishing a hegemony using the State apparatuses.

Cultural hegemony, Gramsci argues, is a set of processes developed by the dominant classes to underpin and maintain their position of authority in society (Hoare and Nowell Smith, 1999). He claims that this is achieved in such a way as to enlist the participation of the dominated classes, who in turn enable the functioning of the system. For Gramsci civil society was the sphere of "ideology and 'cultural organization' in the broadest sense" (Bates, 1975: 357). In terms of cultural heritage and national museums it is interesting to explore the processes involved to uncover the hegemony of the emerging elite in Iceland. In what ways did a collection of material culture become part of the larger societal issues at the time?

However, it was not just the collection of objects for the museum that was at play, but also the ways in which the authorities assumed control over the heritage. Here I will rely on Foucault's concept of governmentality to analyse the measures prescribed for the state's role in regulating and managing cultural heritage and granting the authority to define its identity. In his work on the history of the penal system Foucault (1991) traces the development of certain measures that have used to exert power over populations and control behaviour. Power is thus channelled through different institutions that play an active role in affecting social control and forms of knowledge. In this context it is worthy to mention Gramsci's belief that the key lines of communication were through cultural organization. Bates (1975: 363) argues that:

> Gramsci believed that parliament and polling booth are mere forms, the real content of which is determined by effective control of the cultural organizations, of the lines of communication in civil society.

Bennett (1988: 99), following on from Foucault's ideas, examines how what he calls the "exhibitionary complex" (museums, exhibitions, and various areas of display) can also be seen to play a role as an agent of power. He says:

> Museums were also typically located at the centre of cities where they stood as embodiments, both material and symbolic, of a power to 'show and tell' which, in being deployed in a newly constituted open and public space, sought rhetorically to incorporate the people within the processes of the state.

The influence of national museums on the development of society can therefore be explored in terms of the ideas they disseminate and the knowledge it generates about the people, the nation, and its values. The processes of governmentality are manifested through heritage management, the creation of cultural heritage and a national collection, as well as the construction of a museum building.

However, the idea of the museum as an agent of power needs to be looked at in relation to the key actors driving the advancement of this sector. In his analysis of Gramsci and Foucault, Bates (1975) points out the necessity of organizers and leaders and highlights the role played by intellectuals.

> Critical self-consciousness signifies historically and politically the creation of intellectual cadres. A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself and does not become independent 'by itself' without organizing itself (in a broad sense), and there is no organization without intellectuals … without organizers and leaders. (Bates, 1975: 360)

These key concepts, of governmentality, hegemony, and the museum as an agent of power, are explored in this paper in reference to the National Museum of Iceland, its collection, and the State Antiquarian that advocated for the safeguarding of Iceland's cultural heritage.

The role of museums within the nation building process during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been the topic of research (e.g., Aronsson and Elgenius, 2011). For instance, they argue that national museums play a role in the formation of national identities. National museums were often founded with royal or aristocratic collections, that had previously served as display of the power of the king or prince. The appropriation of this cultural legacy was put in service of the people and as ideas of democracy were formed, access to and use of the collections was offered to the population. Education of the masses, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, was considered a necessary undertaking for the foundation of a modern, civil, and democratic society. The kind of education offered by museums was considered a contribution to this public mission.

Museums play a role in the cultural sphere and their activities, such as research, communication, education, conservation, and registration, revolve around the core of the museum, the collection. Research can only be carried out on what is in the collection, exhibitions display artefacts in the collection and registration and conservation go hand in hand with collecting. The history of the collecting, the shifts in focus, and the cultural values reflected in the process allow for a critical evaluation of the material at hand. The collection cannot be interpreted as an objective representation of the nation, nor a simple contribution to a nationalistic narrative. It is always the result of subjective choices and complex processes that are influenced by contemporary trends, social and political aims, as well as the interests and taste of the collector. The reasons for something being part of the collection are as interesting as the reasons why certain things are not part of the collection. The absence of particular things is telling in itself. However, without a thorough overview of the Icelandic material culture though the centuries since settlement in the ninth century it is not easy to ascertain what is missing.

In Iceland several key cultural institutions were established in the nineteenth century. Legislative power was transferred in part to Iceland from Denmark in 1904 with home rule and in 1918 with sovereignty. Full independence was declared in 1944. The cultural hegemony of the Danish officials and merchants that had been prevalent in Iceland was gradually undermined by the emergence of the bourgeoisie in Reykjavík in the early twentieth century (Rastrick, 2011). This

formal shift in power also afforded a degree of authority to be conferred on the directors of these cultural institutions, formalized through legislation. The opportunity was there for the newly established bourgeoisie to develop cultural values to underpin their position of authority in society. These cultural values therefore became the key tool in securing the roles of what were to be the dominant classes.

In a Eurocentric kind of way, one could say that at the turn of the twentieth century the cultural capital of the Icelandic population was not very high. The majority of children attended school or received some form of education and basic literacy was considered quite high (Guttormsson, 2008: 65, 75). Despite this not many people had the opportunity for more than the basic schooling. In 1895 there were around 100 students at the local college in Reykjavík (Jónsson, 1941). Those with means would possibly be able to study at the University in Copenhagen and graduates from there would be likely to occupy most of the key positions of power upon their return. Experience with or exposure to the arts, such as painting, sculpture, music, dance, theatre, or museums was limited. As was overseas travel.

In his research on Icelandic culture 1910–1930 ethnologist Ólafur Rastrick (2011) has illustrated how the establishment of cultural institutions and the state's early involvement of creating funds to support cultural projects or events was central to the development of modernity. He (Rastrick, 2011: 68) also explores the idea of the role of the aesthetic in the development of the state and certain cultural institutions:

> The vision for the model state of Iceland was based on each and every inhabitant's growth, disciplined and educated and would in that way become a model citizen in a model society.[1]

Heiða Björk Árnadóttir (2012: 87–88) traces the links between nationalism, modernity, and the foundation of the first public museums in Iceland, including the Antiquarian collection. She claims that public museums in Iceland aimed at bringing Icelanders into the international modern community and provide a contribution to the public's civilization.

Anthropologist Kristín Loftsdóttir (2019) discusses how the Parliamentary Festival, held in 1930 in remembrance of the establishment of the parliament in Iceland in 930, became a significant cultural enterprise. Not only was it a joint effort to highlight Iceland's standing, but a major cultural display for locals and foreign visitors alike. The success of the celebrations, Loftsdóttir argues, was experienced like a Judgement Day, a chance for Icelanders to see how they measured up against those counties that they wished to be compared to. To be considered part of the modernist, civilized countries.

Matthías Þórðarson and Cultural Heritage

The National Museum of Iceland, a cultural history museum, was founded in 1863 as the Antiquarian Collection (Icel. Forngripasafnið). In the early years, the collection was small, the operation received little funding, and was short staffed. The establishment and development of an Icelandic museum, as the country was under

Danish rule at the time, was not a priority for those that held the purse strings. The museum continued to grow and gain importance within the context of nationalism and rise of modernity. A turning point for the museum occurred in 1907 when the first legislation regarding the safeguarding of antiquities was passed in Iceland and the first official state antiquarian took office.

The legislation of cultural heritage in Iceland took place in a wider European context, where nations across the continent were implementing similar measures of control. However, in order to trace the incentive that in this case led the government to act, it is necessary to consider events that took place in Copenhagen a few years earlier.

In 1904, preparations had begun for a Danish colonial exhibition. It was Denmark's opportunity to display aspects of their colonial territories, in line with the major world fairs and great exhibitions that had successfully been held in London, Paris, and New York (e.g., Stoklund, 1994). The aim was to display artefacts from Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and the West Indies. Many of the Icelandic students in Copenhagen objected to Iceland being placed in the same category as Denmark's more distant colonies and called it the Skrælingja-exhibition[2] (Hjáleigusýningin og prófessor Finnur Jónsson, 1905). The upcoming exhibition was discussed within the Icelandic Students' Association and its appalled members tried to prevent Iceland's participation. In a meeting held on the 3rd of December 1904 the students claimed for instance that Icelanders were to be placed with "savages and negro-nations" and that Icelandic culture would not be "elevated beyond that of the lack of civilization of these semi-wild tribes" (Fundabók 1899–1907, 3. des. [1904]).

Matthías Þórðarson was one of the Icelandic students that actively participated in the protests. He had completed his secondary studies in Reykjavik in 1898 and then gone to Copenhagen, where he focussed on Nordic studies and archaeology. Given his interests, the topic was close to his heart. He felt the display of Icelandic culture in such a context would be demeaning. The students sent letters back home to the local media in an attempt to gain support for preventing Iceland's participation, and Þórðarson represented the association in discussions with the exhibition organizers. Ultimately, the students were unsuccessful in their attempts, but as a result of their discontent the title of the exhibition was changed to *Danish Colonial Exhibition and Exhibition from Iceland and the Faroe Islands*. The exhibition highlighted several contentious issues such as colonialism, perceptions of race, and Iceland's place within the European and global context (e.g., Finsen, 1958: 19; Loftsdóttir, 2019).

Having lost this battle, Þórðarson continued the campaign for Icelandic heritage using a different strategy. In 1905 he turned to the larger issue of the protection of archaeological artefacts, antiquities, and religious artefacts and gave a lecture on the subject to his fellow students (Þórðarson, 1905). The members of the Icelandic Students' Association in attendance resolved to call for the Icelandic parliament to follow up on their concerns and pass a new legislation that would "prohibit all sale of Icelandic antiquities out of the country and quoted the colonial exhibition as proof that the legislation is needed" (Fundabók 1899–1907, 9. júlí 1905).

The parliament reacted positively and in 1906 the government asked Þórðarson, by that time back in Iceland, to draft a new bill. His proposal seems to be largely

modelled on other European legislation in the heritage sector. He familiarized himself with legislation in various other European countries, the Nordic countries, France, Italy and also in Eastern Europe such as Romania (Þórðarson, 1905). The bill that was introduced to parliament was, however, not based on his proposal, but modelled on Norwegian heritage legislation from 1905 taking into account only a few of Þórðarson's ideas. As the bill passed through parliament significant changes were made before the Safeguarding of Antiquities Act was passed in 1907 (Lög um verndun fornmenja).

The legislation provided provisions for the establishment of an office of State Antiquarian, a formal role with responsibilities in heritage management (see Lög um verndun fornmenja, article 24). Subsequently Matthías Þórðarson himself was appointed to the post and also given the responsibility of being director of the Antiquities Collection (later National Museum of Iceland), with responsibilities concerning heritage protection and archaeological research across the country. Þórðarson held the post from its creation until he retired in 1947. With limited housing and funding, he worked tirelessly to build the collection, mostly on his own, but occasionally with temporary help.

Þórðarson's reaction, along with his fellow students, to the Danish colonial exhibition of 1905 ties into the nationalist discourse that was prominent in Icelandic society at that time. Iceland's classification in the exhibition suggests that Iceland's image was important to him, and the unsuccessful outcome pushed him further to take steps to campaign for matters of cultural heritage. Having trained in Nordic studies and archaeology, Þórðarson was undoubtedly very conscious of his role in building a collection for the National Museum. As State Antiquarian he carried the responsibility of the museum and spent four decades collecting. Can his collection strategy then be interpreted as part of the creation of an Icelandic national identity? Or is it possible that through his work he was aiming to accentuate the 'civilized' aspects of Iceland's cultural heritage and contribute to an image that placed the country away from its marginal position, lest Iceland be again placed alongside the savages?

The Collection

In Iceland, an antiquities collection was initiated as part of an independence movement and a response to important local artefacts being sent overseas. There was no royal or aristocratic collection that formed its foundation, as elsewhere in Europe. The founding gift was offered by Reverend Helgi Sigurðsson, a priest in a rural area of Iceland (Ómarsdóttir, 2008). In order to examine the role of Matthías Þórðarson and the National Museum of Iceland in the processes of hegemony in the first part of the twentieth century, this section takes a closer look at the artefacts Þórðarson collected. What types of accessions did he select for the collection? What do the different trends that can be discerned from the analysis reveal about the mission that he had set out for the museum?

The assemblage of artefacts analysed for this project is a part of the larger main collection of the National Museum of Iceland, which also holds several smaller

special collections with artefacts having belonged to a specific donor or pertaining to a particular theme. Þórðarson's 'collection' includes artefacts from the main collection, that he collected in the period 1908–1947, the time that he was director and responsible for all collecting. Throughout the decades he selected artefacts that gradually formed part of the collection. During this time, a total of 8.497 new acquisitions were registered in the museum's accessions catalogue, anywhere from 30 to 507 per year.

The legislation passed in 1907 provides a definition of archaeological heritage and archaeological artefacts (Lög um verndun fornmenja). Þórðarson took part in writing the bill and a comparison of his draft bill and the final legislation shows that the key ideas concerning this definition originate from him (ÞÍ. Stjórnarráð Íslands B/727-15; see also Rúnarsdóttir, 2022). Using the categories defined in the legislation to examine Þórðarson's collection can be helpful, as it represents not only his view on collecting but also the official view on cultural heritage in Iceland. However, it is important to note that the scope of these categories differs significantly. Some are very narrow and list for example only items relating to chess or coins of various metals, but others are broad categories of household items or textiles and handicrafts. The last category makes sure that nothing is excluded from the definition and states that antiquities can be all artefacts made by man or that have man-made traces on it. In that respect there should not be anything that could not be classified as antiquities (Lög um verndun fornmenja).

Looking at the thematic categories of the collection, the largest is that of household items, accounting for almost 24%. It includes various kitchen utensils, boxes, and containers for storage (including for personal items and food) and bed boards. Þórðarson also collected riding gear and in this category a number of metal artefacts can be found with various fragments of saddles or bridles, such as buckles, stirrups, rings, or rosettes. Noticeable here also is the interest in collecting the finer specimens, side-saddles covered in embossed brass plates, decorated bridles or parts thereof feature prominently, whereas the simpler riding gear is scarce. The main pillars of the economy in the past, agriculture, and later fishing, were also of interest. Various tools and implements as well as fishing gear were collected. However, considering their role in the history of Iceland, it is interesting to note how under-represented these artefacts are in the collection.

Costumes or clothing is also a substantial category, around 18% of the collection. A review of the artefacts reveals that it includes many fragments of costumes, with eyelets, buckles and such heavily represented, but complete costumes are rare and textiles not as numerous as perhaps would be expected in a category such as this. Most of the clothing is womenswear, with only a few items of men's or children's clothing having been added to the collection. Þórðarson seems to have favoured items of finer clothing, for instance there are a couple of children's baptismal caps, beautifully embroidered, but no everyday wear that children would have worn at home. It is of course possible that these would not have been easily obtained, as clothing would have passed on from one child to the next and worn until it was used up. However, this absence cannot be fully explained by difficult

access, as Þórðarson was able to acquire many artefacts that he considered important for the collection. Also, the preservation of textiles (an organic material) is less than that of the more durable metals, which could have had an impact on the available materials. Heavily worn and damaged clothing does not seem to have been considered of value to the collection, whereas the better-preserved metal detailing still bears witness to the craftsmanship of their silversmith creators.

Another important category of the collection is that of textiles (other than clothing), around 8%, including a variety of weavings and embroidery, such as wall hangings, saddle covers, pillowcases, tablecloths, and various tools for textile work. As with the costumes here can also be noted the propensity to collect the better-quality textiles, examples of fine embroidery and weaving. Þorgerður Þórhallsdóttir (2021) argues that Þórðarson's emphasis on collecting items relating to women's national costume reflects its symbolic status for the national identity and was consistent with his aim to collect treasures relating to the history of the nation.

The last category defined in the legislation was that of all old artefacts made by man or that has man-made traces on it. Around 15% of Þórðarson's collection falls into this category and contains a large variety of objects. The most common ones are small containers, seals, tobacco horns, weights (masses), and silver. However, here are also included a large variety of objects, collected in very few examples each. These can be for example different tools used for public office or professions that were not common in Iceland such as relating to medical history, surveying, or commerce, as well as personal items such as eyeglasses, writing implements, or watches.

Religious artefacts represent around 11% of the collection, with an emphasis on embroidered chasubles and altar cloths, baptismal fonts, ornate silver chalices, and painted altarpieces. Diverse decorative items were also collected and count for approximately 4% of the collection. This category includes jewellery, such as rings and broaches, Viking Age beads, pearls, and various engraved metal plaques. In addition, loose stones account for 9% of the collection. Around a quarter of that are whetstones, but also present are loom weights (for warp weighted loom), stone oil lamps and basin stones.

A notable category is that of books and manuscripts, which represent 5% of the collection. At the time Þórðarson became director of the National Museum, the National Library and the National Archive had already been established and indeed were located in the same building that had been constructed to house these diverse collections and opened in 1908. It is safe to assume that there would have been some communication, if not collaboration, between those in charge of each collection and an understanding of the collecting policy of each. The guidebook published in 1914 that accompanied the National Museum's exhibition at that time suggests that some of the books were collected as examples of excellent bookbinding craft (Þórðarson, 1914b).

Weaponry and armour are not a very large category, with only 4% of the collection. The most common artefacts are knives, knife blades, spearheads, axes, cannonballs, and swords. Many of these were found in archaeological contexts and were therefore acquired on those grounds. Some of the knives and other weapons

made from metal are not in good condition, corroded or fragmented. The remaining categories represent an insignificant proportion of the collection, around or less than 1% each, coins and precious metals, timber from old houses, chess implements, and illustrations.

Analysing Þórðarson's collection with reference to these categories reveals certain interesting trends. The collection is varied and contains artefacts in all the categories set out by the law. Looking across the different categories, silverware seems to have been of special interest to Þórðarson; tableware, decorative items, silver fittings of the women's national costume were all collected in abundance. In fact, the *skúfhólkur* (Eng. tassel cylinder)—part of the tail cap, a piece of the costume—is the most collected artefact during his time at the museum accounting for 753 of a total 8.497 accessions or 9%. Metal objects in general account for around half of Þórðarson's collection. In addition to silver there are many iron objects (some from archaeological contexts) and copper (riding gear and utensils). Other crafts are also well represented, ornately carved chests, bed boards and other timber artefacts, and embroidered or woven textiles. Various religious artefacts and other church fittings are also prominent in the collection. However, a list of Þórðarson's publications reveals that silver does not feature prominently in his writings or topics of research (Jónsson, 1962). A chapter on metalwork, about the history of metalwork in Iceland written from the perspective of the collection, published in an overview of the industries in Iceland is a rare find among articles on archaeological research (Þórðarson, 1943).

Matthías Þórðarson studied archaeology in Denmark and was in charge of several archaeological excavations during his time at the museum (e.g., Fornleifarannsóknir á Bergþórshvoli, 1927; Þórðarson, 1932, 1936). He was also active in attributing listed status to archaeological sites and ancient buildings, but sometimes he would have to rely on local help for excavation or making sure finds were delivered to the museum. A significant part of the collection is archaeological material, some surface finds discovered by chance, others excavated as part of archaeological research. At least a quarter of the collection are recorded as archaeological finds, according to an analysis of the museum database Sarpur, but the artefact descriptions suggest that this proportion should be higher. Archaeological artefacts therefore feature prominently in the selection. Þórðarson published reports (e.g., Þórðarson, 1922, 1932, 1936) and steps were taken to establish and follow academic developments in the field. Although he was not the first to practice archaeology in Iceland, he played a significant role in implementing the Safeguarding of Antiquities Act and making sure that the museum was central to the preservation of finds. It is hard to say how meticulous the collection of finds was at this time, but a number of unidentified (or unidentifiable) objects were added to the collection suggesting that their value as research data in combination with other finds and documentation was recognized.

Most of the collection was obtained through other means, and it is interesting to examine what was selected to be part of the National Museum. Analysis of Þórðarson's collection shows a preference for selecting finer things. This is apparent both within most of the categories, as well as by looking at which ones contain the

highest number of artefacts. However, to claim that Þórðarson collected more of the finer things, that it appears that his selection was to an extent based on aesthetic value, what does that mean? Here it is taken to mean that the appearance of the objects in question have an added element of decoration that goes beyond the general function of the item. Textiles, for example, can be simply woven and serve a purpose without embellishments or embroidery. Weaving patterns into the cloth or decorating them with elaborate needlework is more time consuming and although not necessarily out of everyone's reach, it was more likely that well to do households would have been able to afford such investments in the production. Objects made of precious metals, such as silver chalices and patens, were also prized items and Þórðarson seems to have solicited, accepted, and purchased such objects of beauty for the museum's collection.

It is important to note that the artefacts in the collection vary greatly in terms of type, age and provenance, and Þórðarson seems to have had a broad view on what belonged in the collection. The analysis nevertheless suggests that a great number of artefacts appear to have been selected for aesthetic purposes (see further discussion in Rúnarsdóttir, 2022). Other selection criteria seem to have included an aesthetic element, where objects that were decorated in some ways are well represented in the collection. Wooden objects are often carved to a greater or lesser extent. Textiles are predominantly embroidered or a testament to the craftsmanship of the maker. Metal objects are either artistically formed (such as chalices, candelabras, or silver tableware) or carry some sort of engraving or decoration. The scientific and the aesthetic are consequently a prominent feature of the collection, both placing it firmly within the European tradition (further discussion in Rúnarsdóttir, 2022).

Although Matthías Þórðarson clearly seems to have favoured the collecting of 'beautiful' artefacts, the collection of archaeological finds nevertheless represents around a quarter of the collection. A distinctive difference can be observed for objects collected from archaeological contexts, where the selection seems to be very inclusive, and all kinds of finds were added to the collection irrespective of their appearance or condition. Some were even in very poor condition and hard to identify. This shows that Þórðarson understood the research value of archaeological finds and adjusted his selection criteria accordingly.

Given the limited funding the museum received, the public's participation in collecting was essential. The museum was mostly dependent on gifts from various benefactors but also bought items considered of value to the collection. Collecting the finer things would have involved the participation of the more well-off people and thus represents the higher classes, although class distinction in Iceland had its own characteristics (see, e.g., Júlíusson and Jónsson, 2013). There are also indications in the accession documentation that the provenance of the objects was significant, especially if the previous owner(s) or donor was a renowned individual. This, however, does not account for the majority of accessions and is unlikely to have been a dominant selection criterion.

The material world of Icelanders was not entirely created locally, as trade was an important source of material goods. Þórðarson does not seem to have restricted

his collecting to locally produced artefacts, although these are a significant part of the collection, but also acquired various foreign artefacts that had been used in Iceland. The records show that wherever possible he provides information on their provenance and their story in Iceland (e.g., Þjms. 11277).

Collecting at the National Museum has of course continued since Þórðarson's retirement. The current legislation makes provisions for all archaeological finds to be accessioned to the museum and with a significant increase in archaeological excavations in the past 25 years the collection has grown exponentially. In 2021 Þórðarson's collection only represents around 9% of the artefacts registered in the museum's database. His selection, however, seems to have a greater impact, as artefacts collected from 1908 to 1947 represent close to a third of all the material in the museum's current permanent exhibition Making of a Nation.

In Pursuit of Modernity

Using material culture to support nationalistic narratives is nothing new (see, for instance, Kohl and Fawcett, 1995). One of the museum's main instigators and one of its first curators, Sigurður Guðmundsson 'the painter' (1833–1874), was very outspoken about the necessity for Iceland to safeguard its own heritage and not allow it all to be shipped out of the country to the museum in Denmark or to European collectors (Guðmundsson, 1862). Matthías Þórðarson was very much aware of this discourse and joined it during his years of study in Copenhagen. Does this mean that ideas about the Icelandic nation were the main focus directing the collecting process?

At the time Þórðarson was responsible for the National Museum, Iceland was fighting for independence from its colonial ruler Denmark. There was accordingly a need to portray the country as an independent nation and the National Museum of Iceland certainly had a role to play in that process (Árnadóttir, 2012). The literary heritage of the Sagas was an important part of the discourse on the formation of a national identity, the heritage and collections were in part to provide further support for the acclaimed past, but also to illustrate the achievements of the people (Byock, 1992; Friðriksson, 1994: 348). The establishment and development of the National Museum was in that way a part of the nation building process. The change of name from the Antiquarian Collection (Icel. Forngripasafnið) to the National Museum of Iceland (Icel. Þjóðminjasafn Íslands) was a part of the 'branding' considered necessary to give the museum its required status and took place in 1911, just a few years after Þórðarson was appointed State Antiquarian (Alþingistíðindi, 1911: 289, 443–444).

I argue that Þórðarson was one of the key players in the development of the modern state, using the museum and its collection to further his aims. But what were his aims? What insights can an analysis and interpretation of his collection provide in this respect? Collecting always takes place in a socio-cultural context that is of great significance in its impact on the collecting policy, whether written and formalized or informally put into practice, based on the collector's mission, and accumulated knowledge. The analysis of the collection Þórðarson amassed

suggests that the choices he made on aesthetic grounds cannot be solely explained as a desire to represent the emerging nation in a pleasing or positive way. Selecting the finer things also indicates that value was placed on things of greater monetary worth, thus including contributions from those echelons of society that had greater means. This highlights their status within society and contributes to the hegemony of the power shift that was taking place in Iceland, resulting from increased autonomy from Denmark.

An inconspicuous article in a daily newspaper in 1924 provides an insight into Þórðarson's views on the value of culture. The piece promotes a concert to be given the following day by a Finnish singer and says: "Those that have the opportunity to enjoy the pleasure of Hanna Granfelt's wonderful singing, will be richer and better off, such art enriches and ennobles the spirit" (Þórðarson, 1924).[3] His contemporaries also described how Þórðarson had great appreciation for the beauty and the aesthetic value of art and craftsmanship (e.g., Auðuns, 1962; Bjarnadóttir, 1962; Eldjárn, 1962).

Did Þórðarson's strategy perhaps go beyond the national identity? That it was not just about making a distinction between us, the Icelanders, and them, the Danish. The collection is not entirely indicative of a distinct Icelandic identity. In fact, it is not uncommon to find artefacts that have been produced elsewhere and imported to Iceland. Many of the locally produced artefacts are also part of a larger European/Western artistic tradition, with silverwork and embroidery prominently featured. Is it possible that his motivations were based on a more ambitious desire to have Iceland count among 'us', the modern and powerful western states, rather than 'them', the subjugated, colonialized countries on the periphery? I argue that Þórðarson's collection demonstrates a desire to place Iceland firmly alongside the European, civilized, and cultured nations. That he wanted to influence Iceland's position in the world, in order for it to be considered among the civilized. The aim seems to have been to have the nation-to-be included in the 'us', as opposed to 'them'—them referring to the colonial subjects, savages, and less-civilized peoples that he had been so keen to avoid being associated with during his student years. Perhaps he considered that the price of admission to the modern state was the cultural capital required to be considered among those at the centre and not on the periphery. In this way Þórðarson was an active participant in the larger social project of developing modernity in Iceland.

Matthías Þórðarson's impact on Icelandic society was not limited to his work at the museum. In his official capacity as State Antiquarian, he participated in the creation of the modern state in Iceland. As a member of the emerging bourgeoisie and an intellectual, he used his influence, through his work at the museum, in heritage management and by participating in various cultural associations that were established in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. He was involved with different associations and although his membership in some of them would have been on a professional basis, they highlight his interests that are also reflected in the collection. He was the chairman of the Icelandic Archaeological Association, member of the Friends of the Arts Association, the Icelandic Handicraft Association, the Icelandic Literary Association and served on the Reykjavík Cathedral's parish

council. After retirement from the National Museum, he continued his work for the Icelandic Literary Association until he passed away in 1961 (Auðuns, 1962).

The use of the collection to achieve this would then have been twofold. First, the collection and its display in the museum's galleries served as a representation of Icelanders to foreign visitors. The exhibitions were an opportunity to demonstrate that Icelanders were a nation among nations. In selecting and displaying mostly 'beautiful' objects, artefacts that were testimony to quality craftsmanship and artistic skill, the exhibitions were meant to underline the status of the Icelandic people, as not savages or barbarians, but as sophisticated and cultured people. This was to further the idea that the Icelandic nation was part of the centre, not the periphery, and should not be categorized among the less-civilized nations.

Second, the collection and its display in Reykjavik were also a means to educate the predominantly rural nation, to increase awareness of Iceland as a nation and its history. The aesthetic value of the collection, promoted though the collection process, the publication of lists of gifts and their donors (see, e.g., Þórðarson, 1914a), exhibitions and access to the collections, was to have an impact on the relationship between the past and the present. In that way the characteristics of the collections contributed to the reinforcement of an ideology to be shared by the Icelandic people. Their 'exposure' to artefacts of such 'beauty' was thought to have a positive impact on the very fabric of society, elevating the cultural standing of the citizens to such a degree that they would be considered worthy of being counted among the modern and civilized countries. The governmentality involved in the management of heritage and the museum's collection indicates a desire to incorporate the population in the modern state, advancing certain cultural values and elevating the status of the past, in service of the present.

Conclusion

In this paper I have traced the events leading up to Iceland's first cultural heritage legislation and Matthías Þórðarson's role in the process. His impact on the heritage sector is undeniable, as well as on the collection of the National Museum of Iceland. I suggest that his emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of the collection are not merely a desire to select the finer things for display, but tie into the social project of modernity as well as the political struggles of the time. By influencing the discourse, he positioned the museum and the collection within the cultural hegemony. As an intellectual, having been educated in Denmark and participated in academic discourses on cultural heritage, as well as engaged in political discussions relating to the status of Iceland, Þórðarson became a key figure in the nation-building project. As State Antiquarian it is clear that he took on responsibilities of leadership, in the terms considered by Bates (1975), contributing to the process of distinguishing the Icelandic nation on the road to independence. By taking control of the cultural heritage, assigning its care to an expert, and developing a narrative (through collecting and displaying artefacts) concerning the identity and nature of the nation to be, the government, and especially Þórðarson, took deliberate steps to position Iceland and Icelanders among the civilized, European, and modern states.

The museum provided a forum for transmitting these ideas to locals and foreign visitors alike. Civil society was engaged, through participation in the collecting process, or as visitor to the exhibitions, considering the characteristics of the island's heritage and questioning Iceland's colonial status. This is in line with Gramsci's belief that communication took place though the society's cultural institutions, conferring it with power to produce ideology. Þórðarson's efforts to make the material culture of the past subject to governmentality show how he took control of the narrative in service of the nation. The legislation conferred authority over the past to an institution and its director, i.e., the museum and State Antiquarian, paving the way for a discourse about the nature of the Icelandic nation. I argue that the power over the past assumed by the state has produced "apparatuses of knowledge" in the Foucauldian sense (Daldal, 2014: 166) expressed through the elevation of the material culture of the past to museum artefacts. Furthermore, the choices made throughout the four decades of collecting shed light on the ideology Þórðarson was promoting for advancing the nation into modernity and the role of the museum as an agent of power.

Notes

1 This and other translations from Icelandic are by the author.
2 Skrælingjar is a derogatory term that can be translated as savages or barbarians.
3 "Þeir, sem fá tækifæri til að njóta ánægjunnar af hinum undurfagra söng Hönnu Granfelt, verða auðugri og betri en ella; slík list auðgar andann og göfgar".

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9 The Icelandic Turf House as Skin

Archive, Anarchy, and Heritage

Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson and Arnar Árnason

Introduction

On arriving in Iceland recently, we were both, on separate occasions, struck by an advertising poster hanging on the wall of the long corridor of the terminal building at Keflavík International Airport. The poster features a man we might now have to recognize as being "our age," naked to the waist holding a baby tenderly in his arms. The text on the poster reads something like this: "Icelandic fish skin saved my life. One day I will tell my grandson the story." As such the poster archives a personal story of mortal danger, serious injury and healing; a story of kinship ties with intimation of bonding, care and the archival work of passing things down the generations; and, it would seem, a story of Icelandic ingenuity that has been mobilized to save a life. Perhaps we were struck by the poster, at least partly, because of the skin graft so visible on the man's body, the scaliness of it betraying still its origin, encapsulating in an instant a future, already present, in which humanity is enhanced by the incorporation of elements from the non-human kingdoms: the acquired skin that is presumably not passed down the generations. Perhaps we were struck too because of the importance of the theme of skin: of inscription on skin as for example in the case of the *Torah*, of the cutting of skin, circumcision specifically, as bonding, even binding, in Jacques Derrida's (1995) initial archive fever. Skin as archive and as binding arises for Derrida in this context as he addresses Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's book on Sigmund Freud and the question raised there whether psychoanalysis is a specifically Jewish science. Derrida notes, first, that psychoanalysis initiates a new theory of the archive. The notion of the dynamic unconscious and the idea of repression certainly suggest a mechanism that makes any reference to the archive as a simple repository of the past, suspect. Derrida notes, secondly, that Yerushalmi's work in turn problematizes the Freudian archive, the archive of psychoanalysis, the orthodox history of a transformative science. Is psychoanalysis a Jewish rather than a universal science is a question that calls psychoanalysis itself into question.

Maybe we remember having been so struck by the poster because of the work of identification the poster engages you in just as you have passed through passport control. Identification is a matter of archiving, a matter of the archive. It is a process that speaks to the placing of the past in the now for potential future use. Identification plays a key role in Freud's (1957) account of mourning and melancholia.

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Identification, Freud says, allows the mourner to make the lost love object a part of themselves while they work through their loss, as we might now have it (see Flatley, 2008). Only how, and when might loss ever be worked through? And so, identification can, in this formulation, be understood as an ongoing process through which identity is created by the incorporation of lost love objects, the incorporation of the other into the self (see Eng and Kazanjian, 2003). Identification, then, is a work that is always to some extent about binding, as Cornel West (1995) would remind us. Maybe the skin-on-skin of the poster exhibits the materialization of binding through kinship: grandfather and grandson share (some of) their skin, their biological material, in a way akin to how the removal of skin can in other contexts effect binding through kinship and community, a convent. Skin—or as we might now have it, the instructions for making skin—has, in conventional wisdom, been passed down the generations from the grandfather to his grandson. Still, the poster draws attention most powerfully of all to the skin they clearly do not share, skin that is not as such even human to begin with, skin the grandfather, initially, did not share with himself. Even so there is the possibility of—if we may—higher-order sharing through the identification of being Icelandic, one that might here bring grandfather and his new skin, the grandson and the being from whom the new skin was taken, all together. The story of this skin will be passed down, is already being passed down the generations.

But how is fish skin Icelandic, how can it be Icelandic? The waters in which the fish was likely caught are Icelandic, but they are so only by the claim of a state, a claim here made in the name of a nation, recognized by other states. But what—you will anticipate the question—makes this state Icelandic, or indeed the collection of people, the imagined community (Anderson, 1983), on whose behalf the state made its claim? Whatever the answer to these questions might be, it will in turn provoke the same question again, bringing us swiftly to the lesson Slavoj Žižek is so keen we learn from Jacques Lacan: at the heart, so to speak, of identity, personal or collective, there is but emptiness, lack, except through the play of signifiers—play that happens among other places in the archive—that create difference (Žižek, 1997, 2008). Difference constitutes the notion of sameness that is the necessary precondition for the formation of identity (Leve, 2011), the other is the substance of the self, the necessary presence in the self, as Derrida (1976, 1978) might have it: I am what I am not.

The *Icelandic Sagas*, the embodiment of Icelandic culture and identity, the archive that speaks of the very constitution of "Iceland," were of course, like the *Torah*, inscribed on skin, albeit not fish skin. Still, using fish skin to make, among other things, shoes, is part of what we now call Icelandic cultural heritage. Fish skin, that is, has been skin for humans before, at a time when it was likely identified by its species origin—haddock, cod, wolfish—but not its nationality. Using fish skin to make shoes is part of Icelandic cultural heritage precisely because it is no longer done except perhaps as the practice of Icelandic cultural heritage, as something done expressly to pass it down the generations. Indeed, the grandfather will share his story with his grandson, he will pass it down through a process that is presumably not the same whereby his biological material has already been shared. He will make

a contribution to the archive of Icelandic cultural heritage, on which his grandson can later draw, among other things to fashion an understanding of who he is.

We begin this paper with a story of fish skin because it captures for us neatly the issues we want to address here. What follows is an attempt to think of the Icelandic turf house as skin and, because as skin, as an archive. The existing literature on the Icelandic turf house tends to be rather preoccupied with how adequate, or indeed not, the houses were for human habitation (see Magnússon, 2010; Stefánsson, 2020). As such this literature tends to, as we will come to discuss, participate in the narratives of the native state in Iceland as it emerges in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (see Hálfdánarson, 2001). We contend that this emerging state was informed in its actions by the sense of loss the fall of the Icelandic Commonwealth is suffused with and that this sense of loss plays a role in how the state would seek to legitimate itself partly as an instrument of modernization and progress. Thus, the state would depict the turf house as essentially unsuitable for human habitation and as an emblem of the poverty, stagnation and humiliation that attended foreign rule following the collapse of the Commonwealth. As such the turf house was in effect to be eradicated from the landscape. Still, by the time almost all existing turf houses had been eradicated this same state took it upon itself to protect the turf house as cultural heritage.

The established take on the history of the Icelandic turf house is, we suggest, informed by what Tim Ingold (2000) has termed the "building perspective"; it posits the turf house primarily as a house or, in other words, an object. Contrasting the "building perspective" with a "dwelling perspective" Ingold notes that "the forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings" (Ingold, 2000: 186) in living their lives. To inhabit is a continual practical investment. In thinking of the turf house as skin we have taken inspiration from Edgar Tasia's (2023) work on home as second skin. With Tasia's help we seek to draw attention to the part of the story of the Icelandic turf house that tends to be forgotten, a part of the story we thus seek to restore to the archive. Built out of stone, wood as was available and for the most part turf, the Icelandic turf house served as protection for humans and their animals against the elements; it was second skin. Seen from the dwelling perspective, moreover, the turf house is primarily a home, a place within, around and in relation to which people lived their lives.

How does thinking of the turf house as skin inform thinking of it as an archive? What might be usefully brought to light if we seek to illuminate the Icelandic turf house—so often depicted as the darkest of places—with the notion of the archive as recently articulated in the humanities and social sciences (see Stoler, 2002). We suggest that the turf house now tends to appear in the archive as simultaneously a symbol of a past best left behind and as a valued item of cultural heritage. As such it embodies a past that is significant in demonstrating and reminding of the adversity "Iceland" needed to overcome on its march to its current prosperity and promise of further progress.

The notion of the archive as currently employed in established scholarship speaks first of all to the link between political power and the establishment and

managing of access to the archive. Existing work stresses the different shape the archive may take depending on the form of political power it serves—if that is not too functionalist way of putting it. Scholars have, as part of the insights thus offered, sought to highlight the exclusions the archive enacts, the forms of knowledges, embodied knowledges, for example, the particular experiences, female and queer ones, for example, the archive will not or cannot store. Of course, the exercise of political power that the archive does is not least carried out through these exclusions, if also through the inclusions the exclusions serve to make possible. Thus, the archive participates in the processes of identification that are integral to political forms, democratic ones in particular: it is part of the decisions made about who belongs and who does not as a member and even participant in the political unit; it is part of the processes whereby people are persuaded of their belonging. Fish skin being Icelandic is work that has such implications.

With this in mind, we suggest insights to be gained from thinking about the Icelandic turf house as skin and as archive, insights of relevance to scholarship on the turf house and the history of architecture, more generally, of relevance to the Icelandic archive and to the notion of the archive as such. The turf house is, as noted already, in some ways, part of the Icelandic archive most powerfully through its erasure and negation, as something to overcome. This, we suggest, is linked to the establishment of the modern state in Iceland, with its concomitant archival practices and logic. The turf house was a key element and symbol of the past the modern state sought to overcome. Still, the turf house re-appears through these archival practices as cultural heritage, object to be conserved specifically as a reminder of the adversity "Iceland" faced. What that archival practice—the conserving of the turf house as cultural heritage—excludes are the social, locally embedded practices that made the construction of the turf house possible in each case, the turf house as home, the location of life. It excludes the skin-like inscriptive archival work involved in the cutting of the turf, the transporting of the turf and the collaborative, collective and embodied work of building such a house. It excludes what we want to refer to here as an anarchist—because it existed away from and sometimes in opposition to the state—tradition of local independence and mutual help. What the exclusion of this "tradition" in turn excludes are the various freedoms lost through the establishment of the modern state in Iceland, a state ordinarily seen as the embodiment of and necessary condition for independence and national freedom (see Hálfdánarson, 2001). It is important, we seek to suggest, to think the turf house differently in order to think the "Icelandic" archive differently.

The Archive

The phenomenon and the notion of the archive have been the focus of sustained critical attention since at least Derrida (1995) first spoke of his "archive fever." Some scholars have gone as far as to suggest that the humanities experienced something of a "archival turn" in the wake of Derrida's work (Stoler, 2002). While the common sense notion of the archive as something like a place for and the activity of collecting, storing, ordering and preserving information, or knowledge, has its

uses, the critical deconstructing of this notion, fountained by Derrida's work, has sought to draw attention to what it is that already has to be in place for an archive to be established; the exclusions that constitute the archive; indeed the possibility of the archive, as commonly understood. Tracing the "archive" to its classical Greek foundation of commencement and command, Derrida (1995) already drew attention to the mechanisms of knowledge-power that determine the limit of the archive and decide what is archivable. What such determinations imply is of course what it is that is not achievable, or indeed what it is that should not be archived but rather thrown away and forgotten (see Agostinho, 2016). The Greek *arkhé*, to which Derrida returns, contains both the principle of history—commencement or where things begin—and the principle of law—command—and hence social authority and order. The etymology of the archive, moreover, is tied to the Greek *arkheion*, the place where the *archons*, the superior magistrates who command and guard the law, reside. It is the archons, Derrida reminds us, who have the "hermeneutic right" and competence to interpret the law.

Herein lies the important juncture of authority and interpretation that Derrida pinpoints as one of the key characteristics of the archive (Agostinho et al., 2019). Derrida (1996: 4) noted that there "is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory." Drawing on Derrida's work Dominic Pretorius (2019) has remarked that there are many different archives that might be relevant to the claiming and exercising of political power: "parliaments where legislation is formulated, the various courts where justice is distributed, universities where knowledge hierarchies are established" (Pretorius, 2019: 39). Still, all archives, Pretorius (2019: 39) continues, "share two features: firstly, they have material substrates, for example, infrastructure, documents, and capital; secondly, they have officials who are invested with exclusive power over them" (see Derrida, 1996: 2). The form of political power will, in any given case, have implications for the archives that power seeks to control, to who can be involved in establishing the archive, contributing to its collections, accessing its treasures, interpreting its secrets even. Where democratic regimes have become the dominant form of political power, "archival places are expected to be increasingly accessible and transparent, and ultimately to be by and for the people, the founding ideal of democracy" (Pretorius, 2019: 39). Participation in and access to the archive—both in terms of its establishment and its interpretation—is the true measure of democratization, Derrida (1996: 2) writes. But precisely this intent of openness, this desire for allowing access even, that is characteristic of the archive of democratic regimes, serves to dramatize the problems archival reason faces (Derrida, 1996: 34). The claim to openness and access in effect highlights the "oral traditions and transgenerational heritage, ways of knowing that cannot be reduced to scientific inscription" (Pretorius, 2019: 39) that the archive tends to exclude. Working from these Derridean impression's, Pretorius (2019) examines Wikipedia as an archive and notes that "many undocumented knowledges, many of which are archived in oral and embodied traditions, cannot enter Wikipedia, which remains humankind's most extensive archive." Limiting what constitutes valuable knowledge, Wikipedia thus in turn "asserts what constitutes being human" (Pretorius, 2019: 41),

with all the exclusions that the failure to archive embodied ways of knowing imply. Scholars in performance studies, similarly, have noted how archival logic excludes "repertoires of embodied knowledge formed by gestures, voices, movement, flesh, and bone" (Agostinho et al., 2019: 424). Feminist and queer scholars argue that the archive has tended to ignore "the experiences of women and queers" (Agostinho et al., 2019: 424). Ann Cvetkovich (2003) argued specifically for an "archive of feelings," in order "to preserve everyday queer experiences that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a conventional archive" (Agostinho et al., 2019: 424).

Finally, we want to point out how scholarship has highlighted the ways in which the archive is not simply, indeed perhaps not even most importantly, about the past. Rather, the archive is a resource, a political resource not least for the future writing it enables. "Future writing," Pretorius (2019: 41) says, "is based on the repository of knowledge … and thus the archive produces the future as much as it stores the past." The making of the future, in turn, is accompanied by "a constant anxiety about the fragility of the present moving into the future, a future that will be defined by its archive and those who control it" (Pretorius, 2019: 41). It is with this in mind that we seek to examine the turf house as archive.

An Archive of a Past to Be Overcome or a Society without Architectural Heritage

With independence achieved during the course of the first half of the 20th century, and the efforts at "modernisation" that followed the transfer of political power to the country, the Icelandic turf house quickly became the embodiment and symbol of a past that should be left behind as quickly and decisively as possible. Turf houses were deemed unhygienic and unsuitable for human habitation (Hafsteinsson and Jóhannesdóttir, 2015). Their dire state became a shorthand for the cultural, political loss and the economic stagnation and humiliation that Icelandic historiography has in the past associated with the foreign rule that Iceland fell under in 1262. Such associations prevail and to this very day the Icelandic turf house remains a reference point, often enough evoked, to a past that should have been left behind. After the economic collapse in Iceland in 2008, turf house references became part of a demand for a renewed society, a new Iceland. Thus, for example, the activist Magnús Björn Ólafsson (2009) in a speech at a protest in Austurvöllur, in front of the Parliament building on January 24, 2009, said:

> I tell you: If we could do it then, plagued by pestilence and half-blinded by daylight, after a thousand years of rampaging in the pitch-black darkness of the turf house, we can do it a hundred times over now! Declare sovereignty from the yoke of the party system and establish a new republic in Iceland.

Helga Ingólfsdóttir wrote an article in *Fréttablaðið* under the headline "The *baðstofa*-era has passed in Iceland", where she claimed that after the collapse, Icelanders had turned to "their origins" and taken up "various kinds of crafts

in the spirit of the *baðstofa*," the main room of the turf house where people would do handiwork in the evening often to the accompaniment of readings by the head of the household (Ingólfsdóttir, 2015: 13). Ingólfsdóttir's point was that the return to the past that the collapse had provoked now had to be turned away from again; Iceland needed to look to the future again.

The evoking of the turf house as a symbol of a past that should be left behind—as much as it might linger problematically like a ghost (Gordon, 2008)—is not new. While such discursive constructions gained renewed prominence in the wake of the collapse in Iceland in 2008, these are nonetheless constructions that draw on discourses that can be traced at least back to the 19th century and the local struggle for independence from Denmark. In the 19th century, for example, Sigurður Guðmundsson, the founder of the National Museum of Iceland, spoke about Icelandic architecture as "Icelandic putridity" and the turf houses as barely even structures as such (Hafsteinsson, 2019: 58). Ideas and arguments like this were amplified even further in the decades following, particularly among the emerging class of educated professionals, such as architects. These ideas spread beyond the borders of Iceland. The Icelandic newspaper Vísir published a translation of a Danish newspaper article in 1936 that stated, for example, that …

> … a particular architectural style did not emerge in relation to the Icelandic farm or churches. Isolation and poverty prevented people from developing such qualities, and they had to settle for a mere roof over their heads.
>
> (Poulsen, 1936: 3)

Implicit in these views is the suggestion that somehow Iceland is without a history of proper house building and architecture. In 1939 the architect Þórir Baldvinsson argued that despite the passage of over a thousand years since the establishment of the first farm, Icelanders continue to be involved in the process of land settlement. Circumstances today, he claimed, bear resemblance to those that confronted the original inhabitants who arrived in this untamed and uninhabited land ten centuries ago (Baldvinsson, 1939: 29). Indeed, some commentators saw this situation as offering distinct opportunities. In 1943 the art historian Hjörvarður Árnason wrote that in Iceland the weight of a thousand-year heritage does not hang overhead as the majority of houses are relatively young. Consequently, he stated, traditions do not pose an obstructive burden for the master builder.

> Rarely can one find a place in the world where master builders enjoy such freedom from the constraints of the past.
>
> (Árnason, 1943: 397)

For the most part, still, the views expressed were more negative. Þorkell Jóhannesson, then national librarian and later professor of history at the University of Iceland, wrote an article in the magazine *Samvinnan* in 1929 about Icelandic art. Jóhannesson claimed that after the settlement of Iceland, there was a convergence of maturity, sophistication and elegance in practical and spiritual culture, which

could be seen in the writing and image-making in the Icelandic Sagas. After that period ended, however, the nation declined and "bent to the dust by the most painful and miserable poverty" it fell to a "primitive level" in all kinds of "practical matters." The houses in which people lived, he said, were "disrespectful hovels" and that in the absence of "general prosperity" no art of any kind could take flight (Jóhannesson, 1929: 297–298). Jóhannesson claimed that Icelanders are at a certain turning point when he writes the article in 1929 and that the countryside is "rising from the ruins" (Jóhannesson, 1929: 307–308):

> Towns are being created. Stone replaces soil and wood. Permanent buildings succeed the others, which rarely lasted a generation. But even then, a lot is missing for these buildings to be called magnificent. The soul itself is missing, no less. The art of house building is in its infancy and most of what is built is a permanent shame for our generation. This will be amended soon.

This idea that change is afoot in Icelandic house building is expressed very clearly by another architect writing a little later. In 1954 Skúli Norðdahl writes on the development and attitudes of the emerging class of architects. He says (Norðdahl, 1954: 26):

> Over the past three to four decades, the first generation of university educated architects has been working here, a generation that is studying during one of the greatest upheaval in the history of architecture in the Western world – a generation of architects who start work with a clean slate, without restrictive hereditary habits in the country's architecture, without ties and limitations of outdated legislation, but also without the support of an experienced tradesman class, without the support of the experience of building materials with the Icelandic climate and without the support of mature housing practices and an understanding of the work involved in planning, form creation and the construction work that shapes the environment and will be for future generations a measure of the external culture of each time.

Decades later, a similar conclusion is reached by Geir Hallgrímsson (1964: 12), then mayor of Reykjavík, who on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Reykjavík Construction Workers' Union in 1964 wrote that:

> For decades, housing issues have been one of the main problems we Icelanders have had to deal with. It really wasn't surprising, since in these decades we have actually had to build up the nation's entire housing option, *which was nothing before*[1], when other nations, with whom we communicate and compare ourselves, build in this respect on the legacy of many past generations and thus stand on old roots.

Even though these early to mid-20th century modernist perspectives on the legacy of turf houses have somewhat been amended, for example by reinforced

heritage institutions, the rejection of the tradition still prevails. The historian Sigríður Björk Jónsdóttir claims for instance in a newspaper article in 1998 that the art of Icelandic architecture does not have a long history (Jónsdóttir, 1998: 10). We can link the persistence of such views to what has been widely reported about the evaluation of local cultures in colonial and postcolonial contexts. In postcolonial countries, it is widely documented, there is often a prevalent suspicion among the native populations that they lack a distinct culture, or a culture worthy of the name, in particular in comparison with the culture of the colonial elite. This phenomenon is commonly known as cultural cringe (Smith, 2007: 112).

While the cultural cringe is a general phenomenon, characteristic of postcolonial societies, we want to place it here in the context of the archive, on the one hand, and state formation, on the other. Thus, we invite a reflection on the extent to which cultural cringe may contribute to the exclusions the archive inevitably enacts. In other words, are there particular exclusions that happen in postcolonial contexts powerfully shaped by cultural cringe? Second, staying then also with the link between power and the archive, the form of power and archival logics and practices, we indulge questions about the interplay between modern state formation, as in the Icelandic context we speak of, cultural cringe and the archive. What follows necessitates discourse on the history of power and state formation in Iceland, on house building and architecture in the country with particular references to the turf house as archive.

Commonwealth Period

When Iceland was first settled, tradition provides 874 as the year, was a time of the consolidation of sovereign power in Scandinavia. But a previously unsettled country, Iceland was largely without such power to begin with. Politically the first centuries of the history of Iceland have described it as a Commonwealth, a free state of a land and a people without any ruler government or executive (Jakobsson, 2009: 1) and as such a spectacular anomaly (Veblen, 1919: 12). Thorstein Veblen famously argued that Icelandic society was founded "without coercive authority [...] and without a sense of subordination or collective responsibility among its citizens" (Veblen, 1919: 14). He argued that this "Icelandic anarchy" was formed on the basis of …

> … the received scheme of use and want; and this received scheme had come down out of pre-feudal conditions, without having passed under the discipline of that régime of coercion which the feudal system had imposed on the rest of Europe.
>
> (Veblen, 1919: 13)

The power relations during this era were built on reciprocity in personal relationships, network of friends and personal followers. The social commitments of Chieftains towards their neighbours were few but more towards their individual

followers (Jakobsson, 2012). The appropriation of land and the building of houses was not subject to any general authoritative rules, it appears, other than seeking the consent from neighbours for the settlement of the land. There was no centralized authority to decide on settlement or building but good relations with neighbours were emphasized. There are examples in the *Icelandic Sagas* (*Íslendingasögur*) that display this principle. One example comes from *Vatnsdæla Saga* where it says in one place:

> My advice is that you try to get along with those who live nearby you there, Thord the farmer at Hofdi and Uni in Unadal and other settlers, and ask permission to make a home.
>
> (Hreinsson, 1997: 24)

This de-centralized, anarchic we might call it, feature of Icelandic society changed markedly in the 13th century with the annexing of Iceland into the realm of the Kingdom of Norway (Jakobsson, 2016). The King of Norway became the ruler of Iceland with the assistance of Icelandic chieftains. With this change ensuring tax-collecting, law enforcement and obedience to the royal government became the executive tasks of royal officials in Iceland (Jakobsson, 2020). Hence, politically the stateless, or anarchist politics of the Commonwealth period, gradually disappeared.

Native State Formation

Turf houses reigned as the main building tradition from the settlement period to the beginning of the 20th century. From the perspective of the colonial power turf houses were seen as primitive. Danish architects, engineers and labourers were sent to Iceland to educate the local population in building techniques and in how to work with building material like timber and stone considered superior and more civilized than the turf. The colonial perspective was appropriated by local Icelanders, as we can see in the following words by the general surgeon of Iceland around the turn of the century:

> We have close to two hundred priests to take care of the salvation of the country's people, several lawyers to manage these 70,000 inhabitants, … many doctors, who only partly can become useful because of the difficult state of the nation, but in this building-intensive cold country there is not a single person who knows how to build a house. Not a single one. Not even in the capital!
>
> (Hannesson, 1899: 77)

This became something the Icelandic state sought to amend as soon as political power moved to the country as part of the gradual move to independence. During this period, we begin to see how regional and state authorities act much more decisively towards controlling the way Icelanders build their houses, but this trend is

mainly through growth in urban areas, as town authorities gradually implemented rules and regulations for their infrastructure. Before we attend to that tendency let us illustrate the freedom with which individuals previously constructed their buildings by paraphrasing a description of how people in Eyjafjörður during the mid-20th century crafted entire cowsheds using turf. They skilfully erected turf walls to separate the stalls and fashioned a unique dome-shaped structure out of turf clods to cover the stalls and dung channel. The external appearance of these cowsheds resembled lush hills adorned with grass, devoid of any wooden elements except for the entranceway. Remarkably, these "cowshed columns" endured for up to a century. There were even instances where individuals repurposed barn doors, situated above the cowshed, to create storage spaces when the cows were brought in during autumn. Inside the cowshed, the residents had loose boards on the floor of the living area known as the baðstofa, as mentioned before. They would lift these boards when transitioning to the cowshed, descending by hand as there were no stairs available (Hannesson, 1924: 1).

This rather unplanned manner of building houses becomes the target of government intervention in the course of the 20th century. In 1904 Akureyri is the only municipality with a specific policy in planning matters (Líndal, 1982: 84). Páll Briem (1904: 1), then mayor of Akureyri, wrote an article in 1904 in *Norðurland* to explain the need for such policy:

> I have been to all towns and majority of trading places in this country. In most of them, houses and streets are so badly arranged that it is downright painful. These young up-and-coming towns in this country can expect untold damage in the future, if people do not create plans for the layout of the houses and the streets. It can prevent growth in the future and it will cost them a lot of money to correct what has been done wrong, if it is otherwise possible to do it. In some places, the layout of the houses bears witness to savagery. Once I was standing on a mountain above one of the towns and looked over the houses. Many of them stood amiss. When the mailman has unloaded his trunks swiftly, there is usually not much order to his trunks. The layout of the houses was somewhat similar to that of the mailman trunks.

Concerns of a similar nature were expressed by Knud Zimsen, an engineer who became the mayor of Reykjavík. In 1903, he was tasked with drafting building regulations for the city. Up until then, the town officials had relied on an outdated "open letter" from 1839 as their guide for construction, which had resulted in a situation where "people had excessive freedom in the design and completion of buildings" (Kristjánsson, 1952: 81). However, when the new building regulations were officially approved in 1904, many individuals encountered difficulties in conforming to the new rules and the stricter limitations imposed. Zimsen viewed this resistance as a testament to the challenging nature of instigating change in a deeply ingrained tradition of anarchistic practices. In 1939 the situation was still unclear around the country as can be seen by Arnór Sigurjónsson's study, *Hvernig skal byggja landið?* (*How shall the land be built?*). There he presents

his ideas about the structure of Icelandic society in times of social change and states that towns in Iceland at that time were struggling with various problems. Among them, he says, "The planning of the construction of the town is most often forgotten, it is forgotten to secure the necessary land for the town or the townspeople, streets are hardly laid, sewage and water are in short supply" (Sigurjónsson, 1939: 20).

In 1916, Bogi Th. Melsteð penned an article that delved into the anarchic legacy of Icelanders. Melsteð argues that Icelanders lack a term that directly translates to "organizer" in Icelandic, highlighting to historical inclination towards a different concept. This observation, he states, indicates that the notion of "organizing has received relatively little contemplation in our society, as we have seemingly been bestowed with a superior alternative" (Melsteð, 1916: 87). This example illustrates how "disorganization" has long been perceived as unsightly or contrary to a particular notion of aesthetics. However, this assessment of "disorganization" aligns with what we call the tradition of anarchism that persisted in Iceland well into the 20th century. As the example related above suggests, there is a long history of people in Iceland building their own houses in accordance with their own means and needs, unrestrained by official regulations and legislation. Still, the ideas about the detrimental effects of "disorganization" gained traction as the centralizing state of Iceland sought to cast its authority over the whole of the country.

Consequently, this served as a driving force behind the implementation of municipal regulations and later state laws (such as building codes and fire safety regulations), eroding the anarchic tradition among Icelanders to construct homes according to their own preferences. As we entered the 21st century, the role of authorities expanded, resulting in the complete transfer of building authority to the public sector, and especially when it came to turf houses.

Along with the emerging intervention of state and regional power in building architecture negative strand towards turf-houses became influential discourse. The elimination of turf houses became a moral mission of modernization of the country to improve hygiene and the general well-being of the population. Consequently, the turf-house was identified as a national problem, associated with shame and its elimination and replacement of timber, stone and concrete-based houses became part of a state-led nation-building projects. As such the turf-house gradually became an emblem of "old ways of living" incompatible with modern society.

This attitude culminated few months after the emancipation of Iceland from Danish colonial rule in 1944 at a conference in the nation's capital and served as a *coup de grace* for turf houses and the anarchist tradition. The conference was held by the National Association of Skilled Workers and the Planning Committee for Employment, which was an inter-parliamentary committee whose task was to prepare practical works after the Second World War and review the organization of "large industrial operations in the country." The issues of the conference were to discuss the state of buildings in the country, assessment of the need for residential buildings in the near future, health issues and financing of housing buildings, and

the value of domestic and foreign building materials. The underlying urgency of these topics is apparent in the words of one conference participant who stated that:

> For a long time, the Icelandic nation lived in dire housing conditions. She had become so sluggish and mentally woeful due to poverty and harsh justice, that it could be said that she had no ideals in this matter or any other for a long time. She accepted the most disastrous house encounters, without dreaming of anything better, let alone more. In the last few generations, especially the last few years, this has changed a lot, although it cannot be denied that there are still some remnants of the ancient frugality of poverty, which had to accept everything.
>
> (Sæmundsson, 1946: 171)

Here the perceived importance of architecture in people's lives and rhetorically underline the urgency of modernizing the living conditions of Icelanders because of the alleged negative psychological and social effects of turf houses on the population, the effects are articulated further in the words of the organizer of the conference, who stated that:

> A bad home advantage is still accompanied by a sense of inferiority, which inevitably reduces work endurance, while a good home advantage is accompanied by a sense of self-confidence, which increases a person's courage and determination. Because of all this, it can be firmly assumed that the nation will quickly return the money it invests in an improved housing option.
>
> (Sigurjónsson, 1946: 67)

With this the turf house was being excluded from the national archive of Iceland. Excluded or certainly relegated to a status of simply embodied, signifying the past that was to be left behind. As part of this process, whereby the emerging state sought to cast its authority ever wider, building and planning regulations worked to eclipse the anarchic tradition of people collaborating to build houses with materials at hand, according to their own means and needs. What becomes part of the archive, as we now turn to detail somewhat, is the turf house itself, its form, rather than the skills, the social relationships, the reciprocity, the collaboration that built each individual house. Moreover, the turf house becomes part of the archive now as an example of the difficult circumstances the country and its people have overcome since and through the means of its own state power.

Turf Houses Become Heritage

Once turf houses had practically be erased from Iceland, they became special objects of heritage conservation. "Rescue operations" were carried out by the National Museum of Iceland and regional museums around the country. In the period 1990–2001 the concept of cultural heritage emerged as key in cultural policy (Hafstein and Skrydstrup, 2020). Certain elevation in status for turf houses followed

these developments, and claims were made that they should be seen as being part of world heritage in a way similar to the Icelandic Saga manuscripts (see Hafsteinsson and Jóhannesdóttir, 2015). The Museum Act the Cultural Heritage Act and a report on Icelandic culture and culture-related tourism by the then minister of education and culture, Tómas Ingi Olrich (2001), further entrenched the definition of turf houses as cultural heritage that authorities should intervene in the protection of. Together with efforts at the conservation of old houses, the construction of new turf houses became subject to increased official scrutiny. We see this for example in cases such as the building of the turf house Þorláksbúð by the Skálholt Cathedral. There the ideas of individual builders involved in the project clashed with the ideas of authorities about if and how turf houses as cultural heritage should be built (Gunnarsdóttir, 2013). The previously described anarchist tradition whereby people built their own houses, in collaboration with others and according to their local circumstances, were dismissed by heritage authorities as at odds with the turf house as example of authentic Icelandic cultural heritage. In preservation the emphasis became the form of the house, in each preserved instance. The house as home, as second skin, built, maintained, extended, changed according to circumstances, people's means and needs, has in the process been overlooked. What is marked as heritage, as that which belongs to the archive, is the form itself rather than the living the form allowed.

With the advent of neoliberalism in Icelandic politics and government in the 1990s onwards, the state came to redefine its duties in relation to culture and heritage. A new cultural policy aimed to reduce state initiatives and seek strategic alliances with private enterprise and municipalities to take the initiative in forming official cultural policy and the implementation of state-supported cultural projects. This meant, for instance, that the Ministry of Culture, Education and Science allocated within the cultural sector some of its centralized power to institutions and agencies that became, as the rhetoric of the time stated, "active participants" rather than "passive recipients" of policy decisions. The new cultural policy framework had profound ramifications for cultural production and cultural practice in Iceland. For example, the number of museums and museum-related activities mushroomed. Many such new establishments became an integral part of the discourse throughout official channels that emphasized entrepreneurship and regional development. Correspondingly, the Icelandic government redefined its cultural borders and actively deployed various governmental bodies in an attempt to integrate and position Icelandic culture within the emerging global scene (Grétarsdóttir, 2015). In 2001 the Museum Council of Iceland was established as a legal entity, a gesture on the part of the Parliament that confirmed the structural and cultural policy change. Ideologically, these changes were supposed to serve several functions nationally and culturally, to strengthen economic development, to participate in increasing globalization, to preserve distinctive national culture and cultural identity. The neoliberal scheme managed successfully both to change the scene in terms of its policy and to restructure the financial economy of the museum scene. The government introduced, as part of contract managing (Kristmundsson, 2009), a new funding system intended to allocate funds to regional institutions and other cultural and

heritage activities. Interestingly, previously established museums, like the National Museum of Iceland, were also officially encouraged to diversify in their financing, and consequently, they joined the more newly established museums and cultural initiatives in the market for private sponsorship. In the wake of these structural changes acting museum professionals reinforced their position by underscoring their professional commitment through the development of professional codes of conduct, as well as of definitions of concepts like *museum* (*safn*). Politicians and ministers became part and parcel of the endeavour and echoed such commitments in the House of Parliament and the media. In the language and the work that these shifts entailed the turf house became part of the national archive again but here as an object, an item and specifically as an example of the adversity the Icelandic nation had overcome. The work of creating, building, maintaining, enhancing, changing turf houses, with the embodied skills, the personal social relationships, the collaboration and mutuality on which that work rested, was forgotten, neglected, excluded from the national archive. The state and its authority, through collaboration with private enterprise and local government, assumed for itself the credit for the movement that had allowed simultaneously the move out of the turf houses and their heroic conservation as cultural heritage.

The change in the material, construction and knowledge economy when it comes to Icelandic turf houses created a challenge for the heritage industry as safekeepers of this architectural legacy. With the Icelandic State-led eradication of turf houses in the mid-20th century (Hafsteinsson and Jóhannesdóttir, 2015) the intangible knowledge and skills in building and maintaining them gradually faded, creating practical problems for the heritage industry in sustaining remaining turf house heritage. "The technical skills necessary for the maintenance of turf buildings have been gradually disappearing" states, Margrét Hallgrímsdóttir (2016: 278), echoing what her predecessor as director of the National Museum of Iceland, Kristján Eldjárn, was already struggling with in the 1960s (Eldjárn, 1966, 1967). Despite the realization of the gravity of the situation for the preservation of the turf house heritage, research about the immaterial manifestations of turf houses has been scant. Intangible practices in the construction and maintenance of turf houses were vital and the omission of this intangible heritage of turf houses has had implications for historical memory (no tradition), the built environment (eradication) and representation (overemphasis on materiality instead of emphasize continuation of practices).

Conclusions

We have suggested here the importance of the exclusions of the archive when understanding the fate of the Icelandic turf house. We have claimed that to understand the place the turf house has had in the archive; we need to keep in mind how the turf house came to embody and symbolize the loss associated with the collapse of the Icelandic Commonwealth. We have suggested, furthermore, that the turf house thus became associated with decline and stagnation that the nascent state in Iceland sought to overturn as it emerges in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As

a consequence of this process the turf house, we have argued, emerges as cultural heritage, an object to be preserved but preserved primarily as an example of the adversity "Iceland" had to overcome in achieving its current prosperity.

While emphasis on the importance of power in the constitution of the archive has been key to our argument, in particular pointing out the exclusions through which the archive does its political work, we finish here by noting how the field of critical archival science has questioned the metaphorical use of the concept of the archive in humanities, wherein "the archive" emerges "as an abstract, depopulated space, untouched by human labor and laborers" (Whearty, 2018, cited in Agostinho et al., 2019: 425). Critical archival scholars have urged humanities researchers to consider "actually existing archives," as well as to acknowledge the intellectual contribution of archival science scholars, in order to advance critical work on archival reason (Caswell, 2016). We have suggested here how the fate of the Icelandic turf house has been its eradication by the hand of the centralizing local state, and its later rescue as cultural heritage by that same state. What has been lost, what has been excluded from the archive so constituted, is the tradition of work, of skill, of cooperation through which turf houses were built, the locally embedded agency that allowed people such construction. The Icelandic turf house was a second skin hewn from the land by the collaboration of the people who by and large already shared skin (see Tasia, 2023). It was skin held together by those practices of cooperation, practices that are deadened by their weight as heritage.

Note

1 Italics by the authors.

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10 The 'Archive'

Things to Consider

Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon

Photographs as an Archive

My grandfather collected photographs of strangers. This photographic collection was made by my grandfather Helgi Magnússon (1872–1956), a blacksmith and merchant in Reykjavík, who over decades accumulated photographs of vagabonds and outsiders, individuals who were well known in Icelandic society for their unconventional life styles and behaviour. The collection grew over the years to be quite considerable. My father, Magnús Helgason (1916–2000), the managing director of an industrial firm in Reykjavík, told me that Grandfather Helgi had been in the habit of sitting over his collection for hours and enjoyed leafing through the pictures. He had 12 children and around the home were a lot of people who were either related to the family or worked for them. He enjoyed the time for himself, with his photographic collection, away from the daily routine of the family. This was his pastime.

This 'archive' was passed on to me in 1980, at the time when I was commencing my history studies at the University of Iceland. My father probably saw it as appropriate that the pictures should be committed to my care, since I was pursuing such study; he himself had an interest in Icelandic 'local tale tradition' and drew no firm distinction between such informal learning and formal historical scholarship.

From time to time, I thought about the collection, but did not have the imagination to come up with an idea of how I could use it. One day, in the early years of the 21st century, I made the decision to try to write about one of the photos. I knew immediately what photograph I would choose. It was from my grandfather's collection: a photograph of a man known as Rottu-Petersen or Rat-Petersen (Figure 10.1).

Rat-Petersen

> Is it the madness or the beast that captivates you more? Or perhaps it is the revulsion entailed by both? History tells us that the rat and the mad one stuck together. They were kept on the ship of fools through the centuries.
>
> In 1946 radical action was taken to exterminate rats in Reykjavík. They vanished, mostly. The same applies to the mad. Probably they went underground like the rats—or has modern science attained such perfection that everybody thinks the same, behaves the same, expresses themselves the

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Figure 10.1 Rat-Petersen.
Source: Private collection. Photo: Unknown.

> same—just as is required of them; or is life just one mass derangement? Rat-Petersen was one of those people who appear to have found their place in life and do their job well. But then the year 1946 came along.
> (Magnússon, 2021: 72; see also Magnússon, 2004: 32-33)

The text I wrote about 'Rat' Petersen would be the beginning of something more: at that point I started to understand the value of the photographs; I felt I grasped my grandfather's motivation better than before. That was at the time when the grand narrative approach to history was on the brink of collapse; its importance, at least, was greatly reduced, and many scholars within the humanities started to consider where their research stood in the scholarly context (Hoffer, 2004; see also Magnússon, 2003; Wilson, 1999). That process sparked a development in my

thinking which opened my eyes to the opportunities my grandfather's photographs offered. I started writing about more of the pictures, and in due course that formed the backbone of the book *Snöggir blettir* (Eng. *Soft Spots*), published in 2004 (see also Magnússon, 2021).

Ideological Sequence of Events

There was something in the air at the beginning of the 21st century that triggered my interest in my grandfather's photographic collections. In the last two decades of the 20th century the emphases within history and most other areas of the humanities started to shift under the influence of the linguistic turn and then later the cultural turn. Scholars started to pay more attention to cultural dimensions and these began to play a larger part in the findings of academic research. The ideologies of various grand narratives rose and fell during the course of the century and the assumptions that had underpinned learning and scientific research crumbled away with the end of the Cold War. A changed world picture crystallized in the events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and this influenced the ways in which scholarship approached the past. It was thus not only the self-image of individuals that underwent radical changes but also the image the scholarly world had of its tasks and subject matter.

After the initial step in this new direction, i.e. from the sociological emphases of social history towards more culturally based research, some scholars, notably in the USA, went still further and started looking at new ideas that were emanating from France (not for the first time), and in particular to the work of the philosopher Jacques Derrida and the poststructuralists. With the emphasis now on culture, the obvious questions arose of what it was that held culture together, of how the concepts used in analysing people's actions and behaviour had arisen and of who stood to gain from the ways in which they were defined. So, in the late the 1980s and early 1990s many started to apply the methods of deconstruction in their analysis.

Poststructuralism became a kind of symbol for the linguistic turn, which might perhaps be termed 'the textual revolution' in history and historical thinking (Crew, 1997). This turned on the idea that language was a tool exploited by those in power to get their messages into currency, among other ways through the definition of concepts. To understand the nature and context of power, the most promising approach would be to investigate the tradition of the discourse which underpinned and supported power. These ideas led to major changes in the thinking of many historians and their approaches to their sources. Taking a broad view, it is fair to say that the postmodernist condition (or whatever we choose to call the cultural flow of the present moment) exerted an enormous influence on historians, especially those of the younger generation—though it needs to be borne in mind that the great majority of social historians and other historians have been happy to turn a blind idea to these ideological upheavals, while others have striven avowedly to oppose and demolish them (Bertens, 1995; Harvey, 1990; Jenkins, 1991, 1995, 1997; White, 1973).

The cultural turn and the changes it brought with it called for the direct testimony of people from different levels of society and advocated a historical method that aimed deliberately at directing the focus on the actual participants in history. People's own experience of the events and phenomena that had shaped their lives was held to be worth its weight in gold, particularly if their accounts were preserved in complete and original form. This provided a means of analysing people's understanding of the unfolding of life, the workings of the institutions that formed part of their day-to-day condition and their relationships to other individuals in their immediate environment.

The linguistic turn, however, put this idea of the individual as an independent unit of expression into a state of considerable turmoil. In what way could the validity of the individual's testimony be justified when their expression was so bound up with the systems of language that there was no possibility of communicating experience of the past that was built solely on the thought and emotions of the person involved? Poststructuralists have attempted to answer this question in a variety of ways, but to some extent it can be claimed that the methods of microhistory offer an approach to the analysis of discourse in which meaning is read into discrete accounts of phenomena, events and people that would otherwise be difficult to investigate. By examining all the strands of such discourse in as close detail as possible, microhistorians find themselves in a position to deconstruct courses of events and ideas that would otherwise remain concealed behind the smokescreen of the 'official' or public discourse of the grand narrative with its imagined connection to the truth of the past. This is because microhistorians are always seeking ways to approach their research materials from some direction other than the one offered by the public discourse—to provide a platform for the many and varied voices that can always be heard on any matter, and be prepared to grapple with the contradictions and inconsistencies that echo within the text. The so-called 'singularization of history' that I have been advocating in recent years is aimed specifically at defining the possibilities that sources give scholars to talk about the past in a varied manner without becoming trapped in the received categories of the grand narratives (Magnússon, 2010; Magnússon and Ólafsson, 2017; Magnússon and Szijártó, 2013).

The cultural and textual revolutions and the ideas associated with them provided a powerful incentive for a new use of the methods of microhistory, and to a certain degree it may be said that microhistory lent itself well to the aims of discourse analysis. These methods consisted of a close examination of the symbols and imagery of the text and attempts to bring out connections that were not discernible at first sight. It is precisely on such terms that microhistory can be applied to discourse in the kinds of texts we find in archives, such as the photographic collections that belonged to my grandfather.

Historians have paid little attention to the perceptual qualities of their source material—'textural embodiment.' Scholars in other areas of the humanities and social sciences, however, have shown themselves readier to work with them in a variety of ways. By 'perceptual' what I mean are the emotional effects, i.e. associations and influences, that individuals come under, directly or indirectly, from their environment and carry through into the realm of experience. A distinction is postulated

between the perceptual and objectified feature of sources, and it is this aspect that provides the main subject of discussion when I deal with my grandfather's collection, in particular the logical and discursive structure of particular categories of sources. It is possible to speak of photographs, texts or works of art as things with a logical structure that it is important to identify and recognize, but it is equally possible to speak of the same things as aesthetic artefacts that call for the active involvement of people's emotional responses. In the latter case it is necessary to apply all the various organs of sense and perception if one is to bring out the emotional effects that the work demands or has to offer (Magnússon, 2020; Plamper, 2010; Rosenwein, 2002). The approach, then, of whoever handles the source must be personal and, in many instances, autobiographical. A photograph, say, of someone like 'Rat' Petersen on the shore potentially calls up memories that evoke a redolence of the shore in people's senses and influence the way in which they perceive and interpret the work. The evaluation of the contents and effect of the material is largely bound up with the personal experience of the user in question. But the interpretation of any source or piece of subject matter can be divided between two aspects: on the one hand, there is the affect or emotional response that works primarily on a sense level within each individual, though with unequal power from time to time and from person to person; on the other, this interpretation is shaped by experience that is constrained and bound within language and as a result amenable to the discursive methods of science. There is often an attempt to objectify the affect or emotional response by transforming it into the form of thought, which is then mediated as experience in different activities and functions of human life. But the emotional responses can also remain outside of and separate from language, while still having an effect on the reality associated with them. This is the perceptual world that scholars have started to work with in their research in recent years.

The crucial point here, to my mind, is the poststructuralists' avowed declaration that no single person can monopolize and control the discourse, however powerful they may be. The meanings are so many and varied and the possible interpretations so astronomically diverse that it is an illusion to try to read the symbols and imagery through the thick-lensed glasses of the advocates of positivism who wish to endow every symbol with one and only one meaning. Any ideas that symbols and images can reveal reliable information about the external reality—that they are mirror images of life as it was—I reject utterly. As I see it, the concept of 'perceptual mediation'—the textual embodiment—has the potential to open up for many scholars a means of bringing out the multiple ambiguities within texts vis-à-vis their readers and their dynamic understanding of them. They need to use their sensory perceptions in their attempts to grasp meanings that are perhaps concealed from the eyes, ears and touch of others who engage with the material.

The 'Slow' Process of Life

The book *Archive, Slow Ideology and Egodocuments* … takes account of one aspect of the 'Slow' ideology. In it I explore the circumstances which imbued with meaning the 'soft spots' in people's personalities. The approach is a fiction from

start to finish: a historian's fiction, grounded in my feel for the subject, and the focus I deemed necessary in order to display the conclusions I had reached—conclusions which must be deemed quite unscientific, but fall within the framework of the 'evidential paradigm' (Ginzburg, 1989). I cast my ideas in the form of autobiography, a form I have been working with in the scholarly context in recent years, in the field of egodocuments.

My idea for the collection (quite apart from my obvious personal perspective on my grandfather's 'archive') was quite simply to explore what kind of knowledge can be applied when a single source—an archive (document, letter, illustration, etc.) —is examined, and whether the knowledge derived may not be quite as good in its own context as in the broader perspective. This methodological experiment of my thinking was assuredly part of my microhistorical development and approach, especially that which compels the scholar to scrutinize the subjective context, to temper the researcher's grandiosity, slow down the research process and give oneself time to consider factors which generally make no impression on the person analysing and exploring. In that sense my study was an improvisation based on the materiality of the photographs and the effects they produce.

My thinking is an ode to certain conditions that go to shape the world—possibly peripheral cultures or the boundary between different worlds. Which individuals find themselves excluded? And what is the contribution of people in that situation to the society which in some sense rejects their existence? What is the relationship between scholarship and people in this context? What is the impact of researchers' priorities on our perception of society? I realized that this particular archive—the photographic collection of my grandfather—offered me the opportunity to consider the above-mentioned questions and on entirely different premises from my previous work.

What have we, in the present day, lost of the vision of such individuals who lived between different cultural worlds? Their perspective clearly differed from that of the majority of their contemporaries, and their interpretation of such concepts as freedom, justice, time and speed was unlike that of those who pursued a conventional bourgeois life—those who were constantly hurrying from A to B, and whose philosophy of life would lead the way to fast food, freeways and modern consumerism.

Some of this appears to have made its impression on my grandfather, the pillar of the community, who apparently gave it some thought in his own quiet manner. For myself, on the other hand, I did not properly grasp the importance of the pictures until I walked one day down a corridor of my workplace and contemplated large pictures of vagabonds (around 50 of them), hung on the wall by artist Birgir Andrésson as part of a work of art (see Hobbs, 2022). Like my grandfather, Birgir was interested in this group of outsiders, and their values informed his art. As I walked down the 78-meter-long corridor, where photographs of vagabonds had been lined up along the walls, I grasped for the first time in earnest the significance of these people, and the emptiness that the speed of modern life tends to induce. Each photograph was displayed at more than life size, and I had the sense of being in the middle of a tale of eccentrics—one form of the 'local tale tradition' in Iceland. The reason why I had not previously noticed their significance is that the concept of sensitive points has never been on the agenda of those who follow the model of the

Figure 10.2 Eyjólfur Pálsson.

Source: Private collection. Photo: Unknown.

grand narrative—the big structures that govern perceptions of reality. My thinking is an attempt to capture that emotional journey in words and pictures (Figure 10.2). It is grounded in 'Slow' principles, i.e. allowing oneself the indulgence of exploring the crumbs that have fallen from the scholarly table, where the focus has been on sharpening the outlines of scholarly knowledge. But what pictures were featured?

Relative

> My great-great-uncle Eyjólfur Pálsson began life on a little farm to the east of the mountains early in the second half of the nineteenth century. In time he became a smallholder in the same district, but in due course he decided to leave the land and move to the capital. He was employed as a dock worker, but suffered a stroke at his work. But he had many more years to live, and from that time he worked as a newspaper-seller on Bankastræti and Lækjartorg in downtown Reykjavík, where this photograph of him was taken. He

> gave my mother a fine cut-glass bowl when my elder brother was born. As a child I often stood in the parlor at home and gazed at that gorgeous object cleave the sunrays into innumerable flashes.
>
> (Magnússon, 2021: 72; see also Magnússon, 2004: 38-39)

All these photographs have led me to think about my ancestors—about the past in which they existed and about myself. The significance of the archive for me is entirely different from its meaning for my grandfather—or I suppose, at any rate, that my place in the present time prevents me from putting myself in his place and understanding what drew him to these contemporaries. My own contemporaries, like my father, have understandably been as ambivalent about the significance and value of the archive as I was. After years of consideration, the book emerged, based on the interplay of the images from my grandfather's collection and texts that I wrote relating to them. Cast in the autobiographical mold, this chapter in the book—this 'non-autobiography'—is an attempt to understand the chain that the generations forge between past, present and future.

The Archive as a Phenomenon

Antoinette Burton, editor of *Archive Stories*, wrote in her introduction to the book, about collection and storage of sources:

> Of course, archives—that is, traces of the past collected either intentionally or haphazardly as 'evidence'—are by no means limited to official spaces or state repositories. They have been housed in a variety of unofficial sites since time immemorial. From the Rosetta stone to medieval tapestry to Victorian house museums to African body tattoos, scholars have been 'reading' historical evidence from any number of different archival incarnations for centuries, though the extent to which a still quite positivist contemporary historical profession (both in the West and outside it) recognizes all such traces as legitimate archival sources is a matter of some debate.
>
> (Burton, 2005: 3)

My grandfather's photographic archive is indeed an excellent example of the problem stated here by Antoinette Burton: What may be deemed an archive? One of the contributors to the book under Burton's editorship clearly establishes that the meaning of archive is variable from one time to another.

While history can indeed be found in the 'archive,' the place and shape of that history was imagined differently at different times; the institution of the Archives was itself a testament of particular regimes of power and knowledge, each marked by particular commitments to and rhetoric of secrecy of publicity (De Certeau, 1992; Milligan, 2005: 177).

Is the assemblage of photographs—the archive—with which I have been working, an archive of the kind described by Burton above? We, the representatives of three generations—my grandfather, my father and I—certainly each approached this specific archive differently—each in his own way. The trick is to understand the mirroring that takes place every time the archive is examined and analysed. The archive is a reflection of some reality, which often has

nothing to do with the material of which the archive apparently consists when it is examined in toto: the photos are of different provenances; they are taken at specific moments, capturing events which vary in significance for the people depicted. And for the readers of this article and the books I have written about it, my grandfather's archive acquires an entirely new meaning for each person who examines the photographs and considers their significance (Magnússon, 2020). The reason is simply that we observe the world through our own eyes, and we each see different things in each snapshot. Each image is, certainly, a world of its own; the details of the images provide material for our thinking and narrative; and as we connect that narrative to other images and their content, a vision of past reality takes form. The pictures that constitute this archive of my grandfather give rise to endless textual cogitation (Barthes, 1981; see also Batchen, 1999, 2001).

I chose to address this specific archive because it had significance for me, and by chance, possibly the readers of my books. Hence I succeeded in evading the purposive power of the formal archive: how they have been compiled, the principles on which items were collected, etc. US historian Peter Fritzsche (2005: 186) puts this issue well when he points out:

> The archive was not simply constituted as a powerful way to contain the past but developed in relationship to a past that was regarded as fragmented, distant, and otherwise difficult to hold on to. The archive produced certain histories, but, at the same time, certain ways of looking at and believing to have experienced history also produced archives. If most conceptions of the archive emphasize how the archive has shaped history, I want to examine how history has shaped the archive.

My method is that sometimes I recount only what I think I see, creating a narrative from the picture—a microhistorical narrative—while at other times I consider what is happening in the photograph, and I may even place it in a historical context. Occasionally, the text has little or nothing to do with the photograph, which becomes a kind of backdrop for my own personal thoughts—but often grounded in some small detail in the picture. The outcome is texts which conform with Jane Bennett's (2010) ideas, when she asks what 'things' may be concerned with, instead of an analysis of exactly what they are. We may say, in fact, that the text that accompanies the photographs is first and foremost in a dialogue with the poetical or subjective to be found there—'the perceptual mediation' and that material is certainly a striking element of each picture, and an important source for our inspiration. The dialogue is between the person residing in the heart of the writer (or reader) and the people and the 'things' in the photographs.

The Past as a Problem

In another world—and now we come to the authors of the book *The Archival Project* and their understanding of the archive—is the idea that the archive does in fact

have an important role to play in guiding our knowledge towards the objective of illuminating the past, applying the tools of academic knowledge.

> Ethically and intellectually, we conclude with some firmness that what matters are the lives and events of people of the past (and the present) and making some kind of sense of these. Relatedly, we see the feelings and experiences of researchers as largely irrelevant except in relation to how understanding and knowledge are produced, and here we think the analytical and interpretive processes involved are certainly important and to be taken critically appreciative note of.
>
> (Moore et al., 2016: 24–25)

Here they refer to the situation that, due to the prior arguments that archives are simply an assemblage of fragments which are hard to understand and piece together, scholarship has increasingly turned to what may be termed 'archival stories.' These are based upon the researcher's experience of the material—an anthropological study of a kind, where the scholar recounts their experience and feeling for the sources (see Farge, 2015). The approach is based upon the assumption that the archive is so fragmentary and limited that the researcher must put him/herself in the position of both exploring what comes into his/her hands, and at the same time working with the gaps in knowledge. The gaps are, in other words, no less important than what is known. The authors of The Archive Project (Moore et al., 2016: 24), on the other hand, reach a different conclusion:

> As this indicates, we are certainly not against either ethnography or reflexivity as such, but find the valorization of feeling and a heroic version of the researcher's subjectivity unhelpful.

The authors take the view that it is one thing to address the limitations of the archive, in whatever form, and another 'to remain immersed in self.' Their idea is that it is important never to take one's eye off the people and events the researcher intends to study; that the scholar's objective must surely always be to strive to understand what people's lives were like in the past. Hence Moore, Salter, Stanley and Tamboukou may perhaps be classified as 'documentarists,' i.e. scholars who take the view that the past is past and cannot be recreated, while knowledge of it may be structured and approached by the study of documents—traces of diverse kinds (Kates, 2014). The question that remains unanswered is how such study is best pursued.

So, archives are storage places of knowledge and understanding, in the view of those involved in *The Archive Project*—and scholars strive to approach them, using their academic tools, to gain an opportunity to grapple with the past. Arlette Farge (2015), author of *The Allure of the Archives*, asks on the other hand: What is the past that is revealed by present-day scholars? An archive as a historical phenomenon is primarily a storage place for knowledge of the formal and regular; they are generally connected with the formation of a nation-state, and the dominant holders of power in society. The status of an archive is set at odds with the above-mentioned ideas, however, when scholars get to work in countries which are former colonies,

or when they focus on the powerless, in whatever form (AHR Roundtable). Then new ways must often be found to study the past and the existing sources—ways which conventional history has not always recognized as valid.

It is precisely this gap in knowledge—this lack of sources—which compels historians to rethink their research; to acknowledge that the sources have, in the end, little to say about the past. The gap in our knowledge thus becomes an important starting-point in all thinking about the past. The gap in knowledge become as essential as the fragments of knowledge that survive.

Arlette Farge considers precisely this: what is the reality that historians confront when they enter 'temples of the past,' as manuscript archives are often called? Most scholars take the view that archives hold the keys to the past, and Farge considers what that feeling is premised upon. Her approach in her book is to describe what is seen when one enters a typical archive—in this case 'her' archive, the *Archives de la Bastille* at the *Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal* in Paris. Her account is precise and interesting. Her understanding of the complex web of this phenomenon is striking, as she weaves together the human factors in the archive's work and the sources themselves, and the world within them. She steps into the world of the archive, so to speak, describing first the odor, with which historians are familiar when they enter such institutions, where documents on old paper are conserved. She describes the manner of the archivists who cherish 'their' documents and have their doubts that those who ask them questions should have access to the contents of the archive. At last the visitor is directed from one room to another—apparently to test their patience—probably primarily in order to fill out forms requesting access to certain manuscripts. Next they are seated, according to certain rules. Then there is a prolonged wait for the documents requested. The facial expressions of the staff are described, and they are not always amiable.

Finally, Arlette Farge gains access to her documents and begins to page through them. For days she digs through papers—court documents and police reports—which have hardly been touched by human hand for decades or even centuries. When she feels she may be going out of her mind, she comes across something that she thinks may be something. She finds herself revitalized, and before she knows it she has spent hours, forgetting her own physical needs entirely. She is overcome with excitement when she gets within reach of the daily lives of marginalized people, about which she wants to learn more. Narratives arise, spun by her from these documents about people who had no formalized history, yet were fraught with emotions that surged up in their daily lives. She finds endless inspiration in the details, in her quest to explore the lives of this unstoried group.

Her descriptions of the manuscripts she is working with are interspersed with texts that capture delightfully the atmosphere of the institution; she observes a woman scholar entering— utterly confused and almost distraught over the reception she has met—and how she is finally assigned a seat in the reading room and can, at last, get to work. This is all absolutely familiar, yet the account belongs to past times. At the same time Farge gives an account of the world of the manuscripts, how multifaceted they are, and how the worldview of the scholar informs how the sources are understood. The anguish consequent upon grappling with the archive, so well captured by Farge, is not only an inevitable feature of public collections: it can be experienced in real life, too.

A well-known Icelandic publisher died recently, leaving an extensive library. His son—a writer and book-designer of about 40 years old—hardly knew what to do with the books, so he wrote a book about his dilemma called *My Father's Library* (Icel. *Bókasafn föður míns*; Ólafsson, 2018). He felt little connection to the library, which was the property of another. Yet he felt that there was a link; that some part of it was, in an undefined way, his. In the end he stepped into a world that belonged to the 'local tale tradition' and discovered a gateway he had not even known existed (Magnússon, 2010, 2021; Magnússon and Ólafsson, 2017). That experience is not unlike my own when I suddenly understood the true value of my grandfather's photographic archive—not only for him but also for me. The Archive as a phenomenon had a story to tell which was hard to understand, for the object itself—the archive—reflected a past that I did not know existed.

The Archive has provided the three of us—my grandfather, my father and me—with a reason to mirror ourselves in the past; and that experience forms a thread that runs through all our lives. In the two books, *Soft Spots* (*Snöggir blettir*; Magnússon, 2004) and the *Archive, Slow Ideology and Egodocuments* (Magnússon, 2021), that experiment acquires new meaning for those who examine the archive—whether our family members or the general reader. In the chain that constitutes the Archive, every link is broken and worn out, so one must apply all one's efforts in order to establish a continuity (Figure 10.3).

Figure 10.3 An old man with a watch chain.

Source: Private collection. Photo: Unknown.

Chain

The watchmaker sits all day at his work, putting something of himself into the objects he makes. He is reluctant to sell the products, for it gives him the feeling that his heart is being torn out.

Cheerfully, the customer leaves the watchmaker's premises. The fine timepiece goes into the vest-pocket of the new owner, where it ticks in time with the heart, until it stops.

At the 11th hour, it is decided that the watch is not to be buried with its owner, but handed down to the next generation. Everyone appreciates its beauty and fine craftsmanship. The relative, who is young, is enormously proud of the prized possession, feeling that he has acquired a share in the time of the deceased.

Regardless of changing fashions, and garments that were no longer suitable for such an object, he decided to handle the watch every day, and he adapted his clothing to it, to the delight of all. The beauty of the thing was in no way diminished by the course of years: its simplicity kept it going, in the rhythm of time.

In a cupboard in my home, I have a pocket watch that belonged to my grandfather and then my father. Somehow, it has never crossed my mind to use it to tell the time.

(Magnússon, 2021: 110; see also Magnússon, 2004: 120–121)

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11 Buried Archives

The Multiple Curators of Waste

Ágústa Edwald Maxwell

The exploration of deposits is the bread and butter of archaeology. Studying the way material has accumulated, been gathered, laid down or removed is what archaeologists are trained to do. The strange sensation of re-excavating a ditch dug thousands of years previously is one professional archaeologists quickly become accustomed to. Archaeological stories are ultimately about narrating episodes of extraction and deposition, the removing and adding of material to the earth's crust.

Depositing waste is a routine act performed by humans, commonly by means of scattering, sinking or by burying. Waste, therefore, has long been of interest to archaeologist. Waste deposits consistently contain a high artefact count, as well as providing a rich data source on subsistence methods through floral and faunal remains. Archaeologists take it for granted that waste can provide important information about its creators, be they prehistoric societies (cf. Květina and Řídký, 2017; Shillito and Mackay, 2020) or our even ourselves (Rathje and Murphy, 2001; Reno, 2013). In addition to giving away clues on subsistence methods and technological development the way waste is deposited is understood to be a cultural variable, a result of complex social and cultural relations.

An archive of the life of its creators, a cultural signature from the time of deposition, is how waste appears in archaeological narratives. Common concerns on the accuracy of this archive revolve around preservation conditions, considering what may have been thrown away but did not preserve, and the cultural or social conditions that controlled what goes where, what was recycled and reused. Landscape features and soils, within which waste is embedded, play a crucial part in its preservation. Geological features such as lava fields and ponds hide waste from human eyes and animal scavengers. Water and wet soils oxidise metals but preserve leather, skin and hides. Poorly drained, acidic soils melt bones as the solubility of hydroxyapatite, a major component in bone and teeth, rises with increased pH levels (Kibblewhite et al., 2015: 250). In North Iceland, at Hofstaðir and Skútustaðir, bones from a Viking Age meal were well preserved in midden deposits excavated in the early 21st century (Edwald et al., 2008; Lucas, 2009). However, in Reykjavík, by Tjörnin (The Pond), a 20th-century midden was devoid of such remains when excavated in 2019 (Edwald Maxwell, 2021).

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Waste assemblages are made up of different materials, organic and inorganic. They include things deliberately deposited and those accidentally embedded. The preservation of these assemblages is complicated and involves a host of varied actors. Different materials effect the decomposition and survival of each other, some invite new habitats for spores or insects, others draw in dogs, rats, birds and other scavenges. Gnaw marks on bones and the presence of seagull bones on a waste mount excavated in the centre of Reykjavík testify to this (Harrison and Snæsdóttir, 2012; Pálsdóttir, 2008). Smaller-scale interactions include events such as when metallic salts, which are created through the oxidation of copper-alloy, prevent the dissolution of organic material, preserve textile fragments and organic material next to metal objects, i.e. inside brooches and clothing fasteners (Tubman, 2015).

Acknowledging these multiple curators, it is possible to look at waste deposits as more than an archive of past events but an active archive of a multispecies network. Here I am going to attempt to mobilise these most common of archaeological deposits to make three interrelated points, each to be illustrated with a case study. Together, I hope, these will go some way of addressing the current waste crisis and in particular throw some suspicion over future-oriented, technocratic solutions to it. Together these case studies are intended to undercut the cooperation of the central actors that such solutions are forwarded by—anthropocentrism, modernity and capitalism.

The first case study considers waste in water. It highlights the relationally of waste and emphasises how it is not simply a human creation but a product of inter species teamwork. It takes its lead from the long-standing and expanding theoretical work in the humanities that seeks to decentralise the human and take seriously other animal and thing relations (see Bangstand and Pétursdóttir, 2022; Sterling, 2020). The second example discusses waste in pits and other negative features and depressions. It takes its inspiration from discussions on human-as-strata (Clark and Yusoff, 2017) and the conceptualisation of the archaeosphere (Edgeworth et al., 2015), and attempts to explain the time transgression of waste and how it destabilizes our understanding of it as being inert and of the past. The third and last case study questions the severance between traditional and modern understandings of waste. The case study shows how a medieval practice was hailed as a modern invention in 19th century Iceland, when the use of human excrement as fertilizer was introduced.

Ponds and Bogs

The sea has long served as a depository for human waste. The practice of leaving unwanted material on the coast for the tide to wash out has undoubtedly been a part of human/sea interactions since the dawn of time. While organic things can cause water to be so full of nutrients that organisms suffocate, other material floats and forms large rafts which pollute ecologies and encourage the formation of others, less diverse. Waste in water can carry species across barriers and between

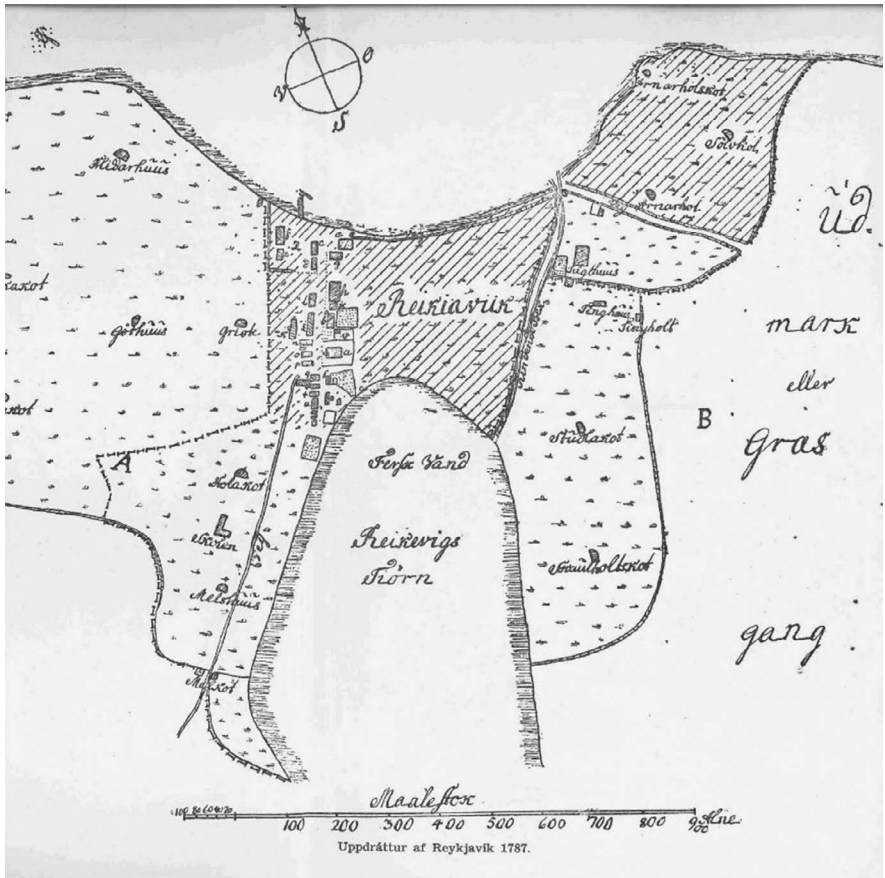

Figure 11.1 Map of Reykjavík 1787 showing the buildings built near the pond (Lievog, 1787).

ecosystems which they could not otherwise transverse (Keswani et al., 2016). Water in other places than the sea has also long been a primary recipient of things no longer wanted. The magic of something sinking out of sight is one a child will play at almost instinctively. Bogs and ponds swallow things in this way and curate a particular type of assemblages (Figure 11.1).

The Pond (Tjörnin) in Reykjavík and the bog around it are a place where people have deposited waste from the 9th-century AD. It was on the banks of the pond that a series of families built their long houses in the 9th and early 10th centuries. It is the densest known Viking Age settlement in the country, and the most densely built area in the 21st century. Before the hotels and administrative buildings which now dominate the area were built, archaeologist strategically placed their right-angled trenches within their footprint to retrieve past histories of deposition and extraction.

Excavations at the start of the 21st century revealed that the first settlers built a wall along the banks of the pond and a walkway next to it. They used area

immediately adjacent to the water for various activities, such as iron making and food preparation. Waste from these activities was thrown over the pond wall into the boggy, wet area beyond which archaeologists discovered: fish, whale, sea bird and seal bones as well as the remnants of domesticated animals, i.e. cows and sheep (Garðarsdóttir, 2009). For a millennium this waste has interacted with the biosphere, geosphere and hydrosphere of downtown Reykjavík.

The pond is thought to have formed at the beginning of the 9th-century AD, about 70 years before the first settlers built their homes on its banks. Sediment cores suggest that the rate at which sediments formed increased significantly after 1200 until the present. Several other environmental changes can be detected in the cores such as the decline of woodland in the area and the increase in grass pollen. The sediment analysis suggests two major changes occurred to the pond after humans arrived on its banks: the nutrients increased and the pond became saltier. The build-up of nutrients was considerably accelerated in the 17th and 18th centuries. Folk tales, which recount that due to neighbours quarrelling over rights to the abundant fishing in the pond, the fish turned into bugs and sticklebacks, highlight how these changes may have affected people and animals. It is postulated that this acceleration is due to the amount of organic waste material being deposited in the water (Einarsson and Bjarnadóttir, 1992). One of the main categories of waste dumped was peat ash. Peat was excavated from the bogs around the pond, used as fuel in the town and then the ash was deposited into the pond.

Regulations issued by city authorities in the beginning of the 20th century banned the disposal of waste into the pond, which was clearly still a common practice. Several documentary resources lament the state of the pond and in the city archives mention multiple clean up missions. It is likely that dumping was finally stopped when the city authorities centralised waste pickup and disposal in specific places in 1910 (Gjörðabók heilbrigiðsnefndar, 1906; 1909). One of the earliest designated dumping places was the bog on the south side of the pond.

The idea that the dumping the waste into the bog rather than the pond itself would circumvent its pollution shows the lack of concern or knowledge of the work done by other actors in this assemblage. A trench in this area excavated in 2020 revealed large amounts of iron objects, light bulbs, fuse plugs, crockery, glass from jars and bottles, broken toys and fragments of textiles along with considerable amounts of building debris and fuel waste (Edwald Maxwell, 2021). As the ground is very wet in the area organic material does not preserve. Elements and chemical compounds from rotting food will have drained back into the pond.

Bodies of water preform magic and make things disappear. Waste sinks, muck dissolves. archaeological excavations on the banks of the Pond in Reykjavík and sediment cores from its base show that these materials continue to interact with the environment. This material has a long-term effect which can be studied through the deep time scales archaeologists are good at employing. The key to such an inquiry is to consider these assemblages as being populated by more than just discarded objects but also the landscape, i.e. the water, the microbes, the nutrients and the energy released. These agents curate and construct these assemblages and an enquiry into this teamwork decentralises the human. The waste that was deposited by

the people of Reykjavík from the iron age to modern times in or around the pond is a prime example of an archive of nature-culture activities (cf. Harrison, 2015) which may help diffuse the problematic distinction between natural history and human history (cf. Chakrabarty, 2009: 201–207).

Pit Groups and Depressions

One can imagine a depth beyond which there are no human traces. In an excavation the deposits below this horizon are called sterile—void of human disturbance or simply the natural horizon. Sometimes this horizon is very obvious to the eye, i.e. bedrock. At other times it is defined by the lack of human disturbances, artefact inclusions or negative features. There may not be any reason for the archaeologist to dig below the bedrock or to keep excavating into culturally sterile soil horizons, but this is an imaginary line between culture and nature.

Mark Edgeworth et al. (2015) have called the totality of archaeological strata, which they define as humanly modified ground, the archaeosphere. The archaeosphere is not solely made up of broken artefacts but of all the negative features, all the infills, all the foundations of the built environment. They describe its boundaries with other spheres, the atmosphere, biosphere and geosphere as being permeable. By thinking of humanly modified ground as the archaeosphere we can diffuse the solid line between cultural and natural deposits, which enables us to investigate waste as a different type of assemblage "[which is] not confined to the past but extends to the present and on into the future" (Edgeworth et al., 2015: 51).

Archaeological assemblages are often found in pits and depressions. A particular type of such assemblages are referred to as pit groups. Those are sealed deposits, marking deliberate depositional events into dug out features. In prehistoric contexts pit groups have been interpreted as structured deposits related to ritualistic practices (e.g. Pollard, 2001). Pit groups from the post-medieval period, however, tend to be related more simply to waste management and clearing practices (see Morris and Jervis, 2011). After the pit has been sealed the archive is closed until the archaeologist comes along. The material in the pit, however, does not cease to exist, and the archive is continuously being curated. This involves the dissolution and corrosion of materials leading elements to rebind with other things, the fragmentation of artefacts through processes of frost and thaw, the growing of fungi and proliferation of bacteria. The assemblage has an effect on the structure of the soil around it, its hydrology and physical integrity. It has the power to interrupt new human projects, i.e. by halting building work. It is not a sealed archaeological assemblage, an archive of past events. It is of the present and under continuous curation. Exploring these aspects brings forth the time transgression of waste assemblages.

The archaeological record shows clearly that negative features, deliberately dug or natural, invite accumulation. Some of the earliest waste deposits in Iceland, which date from late 9th and early 10th centuries AD, are fills of abandoned buildings. Small, sunken feature buildings are fairly common on early settlement sites and often appear to have been the earliest structures erected upon arrival. After their abandonment their ruins were frequently the recipients of waste (see Simpson

Figure 11.2 The lava crack, which was filled with waste in the household midden at Skútustaðir, excavated in 2008.

Source: Photo: Á.E. Maxwell.

et al., 1999). When archaeologists first encountered these types of buildings they were, in fact interpreted as refuse pits (Bruun and Jónsson, 1909).

An example of a geological curator of waste assemblages is a crevice in a lava field at Skútustaðir in Mývatnssveit, North Iceland (Figure 11.2). Skútustaðir is on the south side of lake Mývatn in a landscape of pseudo craters, which formed as molten lava flowed over wet ground over 2700 years ago (Þórarinsson, 1979). While the lava is mostly covered in vegetation today the first settlers occupied a more rugged landscape, at least in parts. In the late 9th century, the farmers at Skútustaðir filled deep cracks, outside the farmhouse with animal bones (Edwald et al., 2008; Hicks, 2013). The nutrients released from rotting organic material aided growth at the same time as the waste made the surroundings more even and less of a hazard for people and animals. In a similar way the settlers at Hofstaðir, a few kilometres northwest of Skútustaðir, used construction waste to fill in natural gullies, created by cycles of frost and thaw, when they built their first turf house on the site (Lucas, 2009: 62). The crust on which human activates take place is in this way levelled by the debris of human activities. Deliberately dug pits, abandoned buildings and geological features draw in assemblages and form an archive, which is active and transgresses periodic boundaries. The bones at the bottom of the lava crack at Skútustaðir were of animals who were killed over 1,000 years ago and

cooked by their human contemporaries. The maggots crawling amongst them in the soil were of the present, so was the loose silt excavated and recorded by the archaeologists. The well-drained lava surrounding the Viking waste preserved it perfectly.

This time transgression becomes clear when buried waste affects human projects in the present, such as in the case of a halted building project upon the discovery of buried archaeology or surviving decease vectors. In the summer of 2004 three horses were killed on a farm in southwest Iceland. They had congested spores from a cow carcass deposited in the field they grazed 130 years previously (Directorate of Health, 2004). Multiple effects, reactions and metabolisms are continuously occurring in the archive. Many are either too small in scale or benign to be noticed. We should, however, pay closer attention. As the time transgression afforded by various geological and biological actors demonstrates the curators of buried waste do not prioritise human concerns in the present.

Fertilised Fields

In Ridley Scott's film The Martian, Matt Damon plays an astronaut who gets stranded on Mars. Faced with the prospect of starvation, the astronaut mixes the sterile Martian soil with vacuum packed human excrement from the space station and successfully manages to grow potatoes. Although the Icelandic landscape is not as hostile to humans as it is on other planets the problem of fertilisation is one that will have been on the minds of the first settlers. Archaeologists have given this matter some attention and research into soil quality and productivity in the past has been undertaken (Amarosi et al., 1998; Simpson et al., 2002). The chemistry of soil reveals the nutrients added to it, and it can even be determined what type of fertiliser was used for nutrient enhancement. In Orkney scientists have discovered, by analysing lipid biomarkers, that pig dung was the primary fertiliser used in the infields during the Viking Age (Simpson et al., 1999). The general story, in Iceland, is that from the settlement period at the end of the 9th century onwards the practice of fertilising fields became increasingly common and that around 1100 AD it was a part of the farming calendar in most parts of the country. However, the practice is thought to have been abandoned in the 13th and 14th centuries—not to be reintroduced until the 19th century.

A turning point in the development of the discipline of archaeology in Iceland occurred in 1939 when an international team of archaeologists visited the upland valley of Þjórsárdalur to conduct fieldwork (Stenberger, 1943). The valley had previously been recognised as the site of several abandoned farms, believed to date to the Viking Age. The expedition's major aim was to locate a missing architectural link between Scandinavian iron age buildings and early medieval farm buildings in Greenland. Several farm buildings were excavated and a new architectural form was revealed. The archaeologists concluded that the typical long house of the iron age had been adapted in the northerly climates of Iceland and Greenland to include more small spaces. To this effect smaller buildings were attached to the long house, buildings which were easier to heat and had smaller roofs. The cold climate and the

scarcity of wood were thought to be the primary causes for this change. The function of the rooms was not always entirely clear to the archaeologists. However, buildings which had round, negative features were interpreted as pantries. The holes believed to have hugged sunken barrels of preserved food. Rooms with gullies in the floor and an indication of benches above them were interpreted as latrines.

It is the latrine that is of relevance here. It is reasonable to conclude that the toilets were built so the excrement could be used as fertiliser. It is unlikely due to decreasing temperatures that a separate house was built for such activities, these rooms although providing shelter from the wind will not have been heated. However, to make an infield from which you can harvest enough grass to feed a milking cow you need fertiliser. If fuel poverty was leading to other dung being used as fuel the need to collect and spread human waste will have been paramount, much like it was for potato farming on Mars.

There are a few examples of Viking Age latrines, which have been excavated, e.g. at Hrísheimar (Edvardsson and McGovern, 2006) and Hofstaðir (Lucas, 2009), and some medieval examples such as Sámsstaðir (abandoned 1104), Gröf í Öræfum (abandoned 1362) and Kúabót in Álftaver (abandoned c. 1490) (Sigurðardóttir, 1998: 71). Lavatories are also mentioned in some of the Icelandic sagas written in the 12th–13th centuries (e.g. Laxdæla; cf. Hannesson, 1943; Sigurðardóttir, 1998). However, there are no examples of latrines in the archaeological record from the post-medieval period. The evidence of latrines and fertilised fields are thus roughly contemporary.

How this change from medieval toilet buildings and fertilised fields to the use of chamber pots and buckets and decline in fertilisation practices occurred is not entirely clear. Dung, manure and excrement are all valuable resources due to their ability to enrich soils and feed fire. The knowledge of these qualities influences daily practices, seasonal work and the architecture of buildings. In the Viking Age and medieval period this understanding was not based on science, but on experience.

In the middle of the 18th century one of Iceland's enlightenment figures, Magnús Ketilsson, built a large latrine at his farm to collect excrement as fertilising material. This was noted at the time as being particularly forward thinking, even modern (Þorsteinsson, 1935). The improvement literature recommending these building projects drew on Liebig's teachings on soil chemistry and the cycle of nitrogen in soil, plants and humans. The reconnection of excrement to environmental metabolism thus had all the hallmarks of modernity. It was attributed to scientific discoveries and how the breaking down of particular chemicals created other ones, which were necessary for a healthy crop to grow. The practice, which had been abandoned centuries before, was resurrected and made into a human discovery, scientific knowledge to be distributed amongst literate, forward-thinking farmers. Even if the archive of activities in the ground was the same, the rift between the metabolism of humans and the grass had been severed by science.

With nascent urbanisation in Reykjavík at the start of the 20th century outhouses were built in the back gardens of most dwellings. These were emptied by night men and collected into mounds or pits in specific places. The establishment

of a company to undertake this work and sell the excrement on to farmers and gardeners further links these metabolic cycles to modernity—through capitalism. By applying labour, a new value could be extracted from the material: a capital profit. The company Áburðarfélag Reykjavíkur (Eng. The Reykjavík Fertiliser Company) (Áburðarfélagið, 1904) remained in business until the further scientific discoveries, in particular those relating to decease vectors, discouraged the participation of human waste in the growth of crops and grasses.

Fertilised fields are an assemblage of latrines, fuel use, flora and fauna and a prime example of how human bodies interact with the environment. Bodily waste is more-than-human and it is what connects us most obviously to the metabolism of the earth. Skin flakes of us every day and forms dust, which settles and degrades, nail and hair clippings likewise and in the end our bodies are either burnt to dust or buried in the ground to decompose. The manufacturing of excrement, however, is the most common and frequent of human depositional acts. The material is very energetic and source of nutrients for many other species. Archaeological work undertaken on assemblages such as fertilised fields highlight ruptures and continuities in how people have understood these interactions and importantly how this understanding is not linear and progressive—from ignorant people in the past to more knowledgeable people in the future.

Conclusion

Archaeologists deal in events of extraction and deposition, cuts and fills. The curators of these events are cultural and natural agents. They belong to the archaeosphere with its blurred, fuzzy boundaries with the atmosphere, biosphere and the geosphere. The fertilised field, the abandoned building, provides a new habitat and interaction with various curators, left overs sunk into water trigger its eutrophication. Just as a cut into the crust of the earth transgresses its stratigraphy, so do these assemblages defy linear time. They are not simply of the past, a heritage preserved, but of the present as they draw in new materials and species. They are also of the future; a filled crevice affords a structure on top of it, a fertilised field affords nourishment to a cow.

The heightened awareness of humans' place in the ecosystem, the realisation that peoples' actions have consequences for the planet and all its varied assemblages of particles, has initiated a search for beginnings. When did people begin to ruin their world? Were our ancestors more environmentally friendly? And if so was it because they understood the impact of their actions or simply because they hadn't yet developed the methods of causing harm on such a scale? Graphs produced by climate scientists commonly highlight specific spikes around, varied and complex (pre) historic events such as the origin of farming, European colonialism and the industrial revolution (Lewis and Maslin, 2018).

The problem with this search for origins is that it suggests a linear development with times before and after. It obscures the complexity of the varied consequences of human occupation and importantly serves up the stark options of either (a) going back to an imagined, more environmentally friendly past or (b) accelerating into a hyper modern, technologically advanced future. In between those two time periods

is the unsustainable present. Waste assemblages, sites such as fertilised fields, filled depressions and ponds are not complicit in this periodisation of time. These assemblages defy a separation of innocent people in the past, who did not know what they did, of greedy, dirty people in the present and clear sighted and knowledgeable people of the future.

Looking at waste as more than an assemblage of human detritus, regardless of whether it is defined as a valuable archaeological record of the past or a polluting problem in the present, acknowledges that it is not solely a human concern. While this should not deflect from human ambitions to reduce, reuse and recycle it is a reminder that we cannot proceed as the self-inscribed stewards of the earth. Ponds, gullies and agricultural fields all play part in the ongoing metabolism. Our lives as extractors from and depositors into the earth is intimately dependent on other organic and inorganic things. The economic incentives and scientific discoveries of the present may help reduce the waste we bury or help us dissolve its recognisable form more quickly (or most often simply further away from our gaze) but does not neutralise its effects. As we now note that the deposition of waste into bodies of water and gullies in the early modern period disregarded the multi-species work at play, we should be alerted to the work of inorganic things as plans to pump carbon dioxide into strata are advanced (cf. Ratouis et al., 2022).

It is vitally important to illuminate the relationship between modernity and climate decline, but the criticism has to do better than narrate yet another linear story of decline. We should complicate and illustrate the multiple trajectories of human participation in the world´s metabolism. The wrongly assumed linear relationship between carbon emissions and global warming, as an example, provides the base for solutions such as the global carbon market. You can buy a ticket to fly across the world and be guaranteed that your "carbon footprint" will be reduced or even erased. The plane, however, still runs on fossil fuels and newly planted trees have multiple effects on their environments (Berthrong et al., 2009).

Buried assemblages of waste are more than an archive of human culture. As the above case studies demonstrate waste is curated by multiple actors. Their work and concerns need to be realised and considered as we rethink our future deposition and extraction activities.

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12 *In the Nude, without Archive*

Recollecting Traces of Holmegaard Glassworks

Tim Flohr Sørensen and Þóra Pétursdóttir

Never the Less

On three occasions, in November 2016, December 2017, and January 2019, we visited the discontinued Holmegaard Glassworks together. The former factory was lingering in a state of waiting, having been a site for glass production since 1825, being converted into an entertainment centre and an arts and crafts outlet in the early 2000s, and, at the time of our visits, on its way to being redeveloped into a culture-historical museum. We walked through the large industrial complex, covering roughly 15,000 square metres, distributed across three stories, where we made observations of lingering things, while taking photographs along the way. We went there to explore the place as a potential site for a project on archaeological "traces" (in collaboration with our colleague Anna S. Beck), which resulted in a series of applications for research funding. While the applications were all unsuccessful, the glassworks was converted into a museum in 2020, rendering impossible future field campaigns in the discontinued complex.

Even though we only experienced the glassworks together on three occasions, the place has left a lasting trace in our common frame of reference. Several times, over the past years, our conversations have drawn us back to Holmegaard Glassworks, and we wish to use this traction to the place as our framework for exploring how we may recollect our experience of the glassworks. Since we never succeeded in funding a proper research project, we have not accumulated a database of formalized documentary "evidence." Instead, our "archives" consist of photographs captured as snapshots or visual notes, in addition to being aesthetic engagements with the things to which we were drawn. Through our images, we here explore traces that have disappeared from the glassworks in the course of the redevelopment of the site, acknowledging that such traces are unlikely to be included in a more conventional archaeological collection or historical archive. What we attend to in this essay are the lesser things of the factory: things that nevertheless were part and parcel of the glassworks in all their unassuming triviality, banality, or humility, and thus things tending to escape archives and lasting attention. This beckons the question why such trifles left a trace in our shared mnemonic and photographic repository of Holmegaard: why do they make us pause and re-call? And how do they make us re-collect?

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We invoke a passage from Gertrude Stein's poem *Sacred Emily*, composed in 1913, to frame our attempt at recollecting things so unassuming they approximate nothing (Stein, 1993: 179):

> How do you do I forgive you everything and there
> is nothing to forgive.
> Never the less.
> Leave it to me.
> Weeds without papers.
> Weeds without papers are necessary. Left again left again.
> Exceptional considerations. Never the less tenderness.

While *Sacred Emily*, consisting of 367 lines of staccato poetry, deserves to be read in full, the fragment above compels us to think about the things to which we rarely pay attention: the "less." The "less" are the undocumented things "without papers," and the trifling weeds; things abandoned not once but again and again, and which may require "exceptional considerations" even to be noticed. These things demand a special form of "tenderness" to be cared for and to be noticed as traces. Taking this reading of Stein further, we want to see what happens when we try to trace experiences of things that escaped the formal, institutionalized archives of Holmegaard Glassworks. These traces are so abundant yet characterized by so little impact and so much triviality that they do not form part of the history or heritage of the institution. Instead, they remain a trace of our encounter with the factory, occasionally captured in photographs.

Yet, our challenge is that we visited Holmegaard Glassworks together on three occasions, walking for hours in the vast complex without a predefined purpose: searching without looking for something in particular, without documenting specific observations. We did not always walk together, nor did we always follow the same path through the glassworks during our visits. Presumably, we did not even see the same things. Nor do we, necessarily, remember the same encounters with the place. What, then, does the exchange of our respective mnemonic archives do—if anything at all? What recollections do the lesser things in the photographs labour to produce, despite their idleness? Is there anything to remember, or will our encounter with the images only lead to silence? And, if accepting this potential silence, what forms of expression should we opt for when sharing such quietness and the "lessness" of things?

This is our point of departure. We are, in other words, interested in exploring an approach to archives that may seem to run counter to the very premise of the conventional archive as an institution of safeguarding or keeping things. Instead, we address the ephemerality of certain forms of traces and our drifting encounters with them. This way of being related to traces, through transient, aesthetic encounters, is difficult to contain within the archive in a traditional sense, signifying a place where something worth keeping is conserved and curated, held or secured; maintained and stabilized.

More than that, to us, this way of thinking through traces spells out a tension between the archaeological encounter and the archiving of things. In the words of Derrida (1995: 58),

> (…) there is an incessant tension here between the archive and archaeology. They will always be close the one to the other, resembling each other, hardly discernible in their co-implication, and yet radically incompatible, *heterogeneous*, that is to say, *different with regard to the origin*, in *divorce with regard to the* arkhē (…). The *arkhē* appears in the nude, without archive (…). The archaeologist has succeeded in making the archive no longer serve any function. It *comes to efface itself*, it becomes transparent or unessential so as to let the *origin* present itself in person. Live, without mediation and without delay.

Allowing for the relatedness of traces that no longer serve any function in terms of honouring the moment of their origin requires a form of archive welcoming metamorphosis, fragmentation and instability, passing and temporality. It is, perhaps, even an archive without memory because we see Derrida's notion of "origins" as referring to the moments of encountering traces, and not to anterior pasts or subsequent reconstructions of meaningful causalities. Rather, the "origin" refers to a situated, affective moment of encountering a trace, constituting a fragment of meaningfulness and a nude beginning, opening towards yet unknown destinations. The question is, what is left behind in and by this archive that serves no function, and which "comes to efface itself" (Derrida, 1995: 58). We consider this to be a challenge at the heart of archaeology as a discipline of *encountering traces* (Pétursdóttir and Sørensen 2023; Sørensen, 2021b; see also Crossland, 2021).

Just as fragmentation can be said to be a basic human condition in the material realm, so is memory characterized by incompleteness and lacunae, bordering on forgetting. This notion of memory, and what Benjamin (1968a) refers to as "involuntary recollection," may have much in common with the notion of the trace in its capacity to both emerge and dissolve at the same time. Or, as Benjamin asks (1968a: 202): "Is not the involuntary recollection (…) much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory?" Following this line of reasoning, residual elements can act as triggers for a recollection of the past, while the entirety of a past episode may always be filtered, prioritized, or marked by a combination of decay and interpretation. At the same time, as an existential condition, fragmentation may also imply that the recollections we are granted are not always wanted or even our own.

The experience of the *déjà vu* may constitute the most extreme example of such an involuntary memory trace; an instantaneous affective experience of recollection; as if having lived a situation, place, or sensation before without being able to define in that very moment—or perhaps ever—where the sense of familiarity derives from. As such, the *déjà vu* can be seen not only as fragmented, discontinued, or involuntary recollections, but perhaps even more so as a memory that is traceless through and through.

With our recollected encounters from Holmegaard Glassworks, we thus point to tracelessness, absences, and to the dead ends of archives; to the instances where traces seem to be circumscribed by an entire lack of origins, pasts, or history. Here, we encounter things emerging to our attention unexpectedly and purposelessly, heading nowhere, yet retaining the feeling that they must come from somewhere.

Such experiences may be common to most people on an everyday basis, but many scholars are probably more likely to feel inclined to argue that an academic—let alone "scientific"—interaction with the seemingly traceless only calls for harder work, more systematic observations, more detailed data, and better analytical methods. However, we want to suggest that another way of dealing with the traceless—or the untraceable—is to accept things on the basis of their epistemological and ontological obscurity (Sørensen, 2016). It is—admittedly—difficult to deal with this obscurity because it exposes the researcher to a counterintuitive acceptance of what is otherwise, especially within the science discourse, seen as a deficiency—a problem in the data, in the methods applied, in the analytical approach, or in the interpretation. Challenging such academic dispositions may be the very significance of the obscurity or opacity of uncertain traces. They force us to consider the ontological status of the trace and reconsider the academic imperative to look behind the trace to unravel its "true" meaning. We thus open ourselves to the possibility that it makes more sense to deal with the trace through its immediate effects—"live, without mediation and without delay" in the words of Derrida.

In the following section, we want to take on this challenge by experimenting with our recollections of traces and encounters at Holmegaard Glassworks. We devised an experimental method for exploring this challenge, inviting things back into our frame of vision. We tasked each other with making a gross selection of ten images each from our respective archives of photographs from our three visits together at Holmegaard Glassworks. We then exchanged these images and left it to the other person to choose five of the images and write a title and a caption for each of them, recollecting the encounter with the glassworks years back. In the engagement with images and captions, we "pluck fibres" (Haraway, 2016), tracing mnemonic fragments without knowing in advance where they might lead or what it is all good for. We share with the reader a return to the encounter with Holmegaard through photographs that were taken without referring to a certain purpose or usefulness. In short, the encounters we revisit do not necessarily have anything in common.

We thus question if traces can retain a future if they are asked to point to a particular meaning or if defined by their retrospective points of reference. This challenges us to approach the trace in its tracelessness because how do we get in touch with the traceless or even notice the untraceable upon its re-entry into our lives?

The Trace of Holmegaard Glassworks

Holmegaard Glassworks opened in 1825 and would become a flagship for the industrial era in Denmark, growing in the course of the 20th century and turning into the largest glass-producing company in the country. By the end of the 20th century, Holmegaard glassware was a household name in Denmark; allegedly, it was the most widely recognized brand in the country. It was also the pride of the local community, being a major employer with many workers inheriting the jobs of their parents or grandparents. By the turn of the millennium, however, the factory was struggling financially, and a new era began. In 2004, a group of investors took over the factory, transforming it into an entertainment centre called "The Living Glassworks." In 2008, a design group bought this centre, wanting to revitalize the glass industry in the form of "Holmegaard Entertainment," yet three years later, this initiative was sold by foreclosure. In 2011, the factory reopened as an outlet, under the name "Holmegaard Park," selling arts and crafts, and opening for customers to visit the active glassblowing section. In June 2012, the outlet was left bankrupt, and later the same year, a bank purchased the insolvent estate, while creditors claimed some machinery, furniture, glassware, and other valuable items. In 2015, Næstved municipality, Museum Southeast Denmark, and RealDania (a redevelopment fund) pursued the potential for recreating Holmegaard Glassworks into a culture-historical museum, focusing on crafts production and the local archaeology and history, eventually opening in 2020 (see also Beck and Sørensen, 2017).

We visited Holmegaard in collaboration with Anna S. Beck from Museum Southeast Denmark, planning a project on the post-industrial archaeology of Holmegaard in the years between the foreclosure in 2012 and the reopening in 2020 as "Holmegaard Værk" (*The Holmegaard Works*). At the time, the glassworks was a massive complex with 15,000 square metres under roof and an extensive area around the buildings themselves. The various parts of the factory offered very different kinds of experiences. Parts of the upper level were open, spacious, and bright, while the basement, for most of the time, remained completely dark, as there was no electricity in the building.

What follows below is a selection of our images and recollections from these spaces. As explained earlier, photographs taken by Þóra are accompanied by titles and captions written by Tim, while Þóra has composed titles and captions for Tim's photographs. One might perceive this an exercise in attending to the "afterlives" of things. The expression has been invoked in many readings of Benjamin's essay on "The Task of the Translator" (1968c). However, as Caroline Disler (2011) observes, Benjamin does not himself use the expression, or a German equivalent, and "afterlife" is an interpretation—or mistranslation—into the English. Rather, Benjamin uses the term *Fortleben*, which implies a transformative dissociation from the past as an "origin," denoting instead an encounter with things as they are "forth-living." Our question is where re-collection is located in the place of the forth-living; when not *looking back on* but *carrying on*.

Fortuitous Composition

Source: Photo: Þ. Pétursdóttir; caption: T.F. Sørensen.

The colours on this vertical surface are so dramatic: two solid black arcs in the top left, the crispy green splodge below the arcs, and then two shades of red on their right; a bright red underneath an earthy, blood-red. It appears the bright red had been splashed on the wall first, then followed by the darker red superimposing it. Then, they probably added the green colour to the left, and finally painted—or threw—the two black arcs. The scene stands out very clearly in my recollection of the glassworks, and I took several photographs of it myself. There was something about the composition of the piece that captured me every time I visited Holmegaard Glassworks. Maybe, it is this combination of something deeply random or hurried, and at the same time methodical and thoughtful. The composition and the colours do not seem to have been planned as such, nor are they completely random. It somehow makes this work incidental, or fortuitous. I remember wondering where the artists (or vandals, depending on perspective) got the paint. Did they bring it to the place themselves, or did they happen to find it somewhere in the glassworks? At any rate, they did not bother tidying up after completing their work, and the buckets and lids on the floor seem to be part of the piece, making it a sculpture altogether.

Graded Beddings

Source: Photo: T.F. Sørensen; caption: Þ. Pétursdóttir.

It is no coincidence that Holmegaard Glassworks was initially established exactly on that very spot, on the plains just outside of Næstved town. Clearly visible on aerial photographs, radiating out from the cluster of buildings, are the now waterfilled scars cut deep into the surrounding marshland to retrieve the peat feeding the everlasting fires of the factory furnaces. From that scale of the bird's-eye view to that of our human gaze, the close relationships between the natural and the cultural are brought to view through such entangled constellations everywhere you look—if you only care to see them. Nature invading the buildings, plants slowly settling in, animals and insects taking over spaces abandoned by humans. But beyond such plain images, an ambiance of nature-culture also seemed to characterize the way materials behaved in the Holmegaard complex. The quantities of glass fragments and glass debris all over the buildings and premises made the entire factory resemble a natural outcrop, harvested to the bone by humans through decades and centuries. And the peculiar ways in which these fragments of glass seemed to naturally organize into graded beddings on floor surfaces, along walls, through hallways and doorways, invited you to imagine an underground riverbed cut deep into the bedrock and now abandoned by water—rather than an industrial superstructure established and left by your own kin.

Collectibles

Source: Photo: Þ. Pétursdóttir; caption: T.F. Sørensen.

Really, this could have been anywhere in the upper floor of the glassworks. I remember there was a clearing at some point, where some authority had ordered a clean-up of parts of the facility. The floor was swept and litter collected and bagged in black plastic garbage bags. This was prior to a visit by some high-ranking politicians and officers from a redevelopment agency. The glassworks was later converted into a culture-historical museum as office and exhibition space, and I think the people behind the redevelopment project found it appropriate to make the complex look less vandalized, so as to be more appealing to the decision-makers and potential donors. In this picture, there are several recognisable items. There are stone wool insulation batts with edges peeling off; broomsticks and other wooden tools; at least four forks and a spoon, wall plaster, glass sherds, bird droppings, and paper and plastic bags with unidentifiable material. There is also the wall, of course, covered in mould and kicked-in, and with what seems to be holes made by tools poked through the surface. But this could have been a picture from various places in the glassworks. I do remember witnessing a scene like this, but not the specific situation.

In the Shadow of Fragments

Source: Photo: T.F. Sørensen; caption: Þ. Pétursdóttir.

Common for most horizontal surfaces in Holmegaard Glassworks was that they were covered in things, fragments, and dust. Every room, every hallway. Never a possibility to navigate in silence. Always the sound of things moving, glass crushing. The vibe of the whole place beset by visual, textual, audial indications of fragmentation, flaking, and break-up. Completeness seemed utterly absent and unattainable. Even the tiniest of fragments would cast long, dark shadows in the beams of our flashlights. Thinking back, I would like to claim that the thick shadows of these small glass fragments represent more than metaphors for loss and discontinuity. Rather, they invite reflection on the authenticity of disintegration, the representativity of fragmented stories, and the wealth of knowledge always impending, just out of grasp, when moving in the shadow of fragments.

Workstation with Wings

Source: Photo: Þ. Pétursdóttir; caption: T.F. Sørensen.

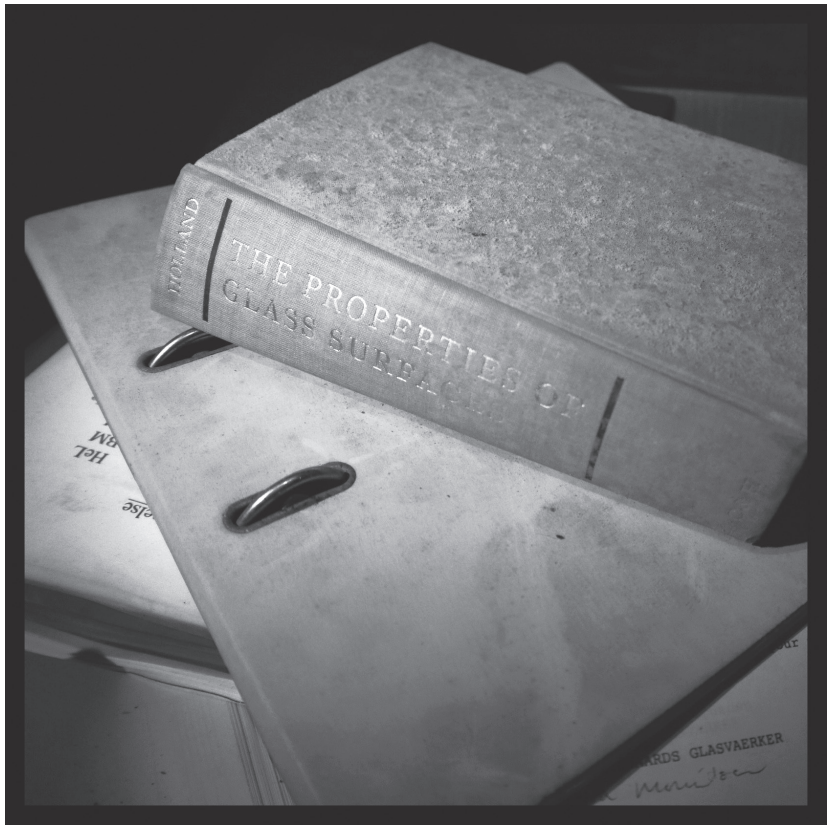
It is strange not to have any recollection of this installation, but I don't. It looks like a rather memorable piece of equipment, which ought to have caught my attention, making a trace of lasting presence in my memory. Does this qualify as the opposite of a *déjà vu*? There is a term for such experiences: *jamais vu*. It is the feeling of unfamiliarity with something well known or with an object known to be familiar (Moulin et al., 2021). *Jamais vu*: "never seen." So, instead of taking me back to Holmegaard Glassworks, this installation, or figure, leads me elsewhere. It reminds me of Benjamin's (1968b) musings on Paul Klee's painting *Angelus novus*. Literally the "new angel," but for Benjamin, the "angel of history." Its face is fixated towards the past, and its eyes are staring, restless, and anxious; its mouth is open, its wings are spread, forced wide open by the violent storm of progress, leaving everything smashed (Benjamin, 1968b: 249). This workstation looks like spreading its wings, too, but as to embrace someone. It seems it is blasted into our present past in all its stillness. I do not know where this past comes from, nor what it wants with me. This is the image of new history: a history without recollection, without words, without archive. Here is just the trace. I have never seen it before.

Echoes of Emptiness

Source: Photo: T.F. Sørensen; caption: Þ. Pétursdóttir.

Walking through the rooms and hallways of the enormous Holmegaard glassworks I recall feeling almost exhausted by the overabundance of impressions. Wherever you turned, there were things lying around, stacked, thrown about, tumbled over. Nearly every image was so exceedingly dense, so difficult to grasp, so ruthless to the senses and to our sensemaking mechanisms constantly churning in the subconscious. Utterly exhausting. Hence, the few spaces that contrasted this trend and which appeared more or less empty, invited a welcoming rest. Eyes closing, blinking in relief. Steps slowing down, halting for a moment. Breathing in the cold enclosed air and watching the mist hanging as you exhale. Each sound reflecting the emptiness of the room. Nothing going on except paint flaking from walls in a leisurely manner and dust sweeping surfaces at the occasional movement of the air. An echo of emptiness enveloped in this enormous concrete and brick structure.

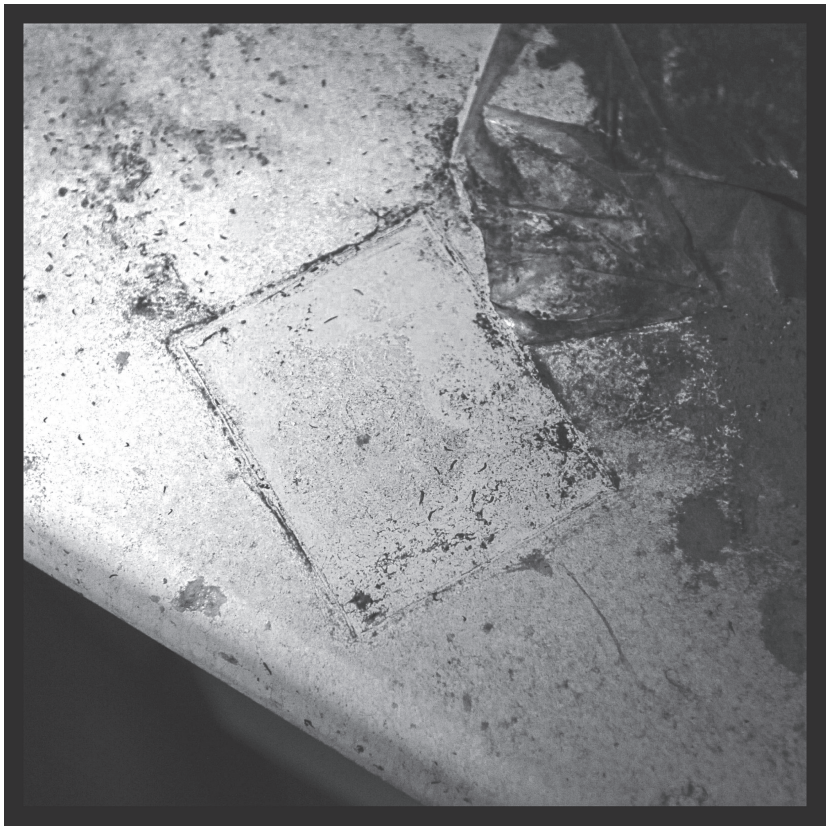
The Properties of Glass Surfaces



Source: Photo: Þ. Pétursdóttir; caption: T.F. Sørensen.

I do not remember seeing this book—*The Properties of Glass Surfaces*—but I assume from the ring binder underneath the cloth bound book that the photograph was taken in one of the few, small storage rooms in the basement. These rooms were amongst the few where the floor was not covered in glass sherds. It strikes me as somewhat ironic, but also poetic, that this book on *The Properties of Glass Surfaces* was sitting in a room without glass on the surface of its floor (that is, if the book was indeed resting in one of the rooms, I assume it did). After the bankruptcy of the glassworks, various people illegally entered the facility, and much of the glassware left behind had been thrown around and smashed. This had created an almost ever-present scatter of glass sherds. Evidently, the book was not about that kind of glass surfaces, yet fragmented, vandalized glass was the most frequent form of glass surfaces in the glassworks in the years 2016–2019. It means I always associate visiting the place with the feel and sound of the crunch of broken glass under the soles of my boots. *The Properties of Glass Surfaces* seems not to have been anywhere near glass sherds. I may vaguely recall which room it was occupying, but I do not remember seeing the book.

Trace as Historical Withness



Source: Photo: T.F. Sørensen; caption: Þ. Pétursdóttir.

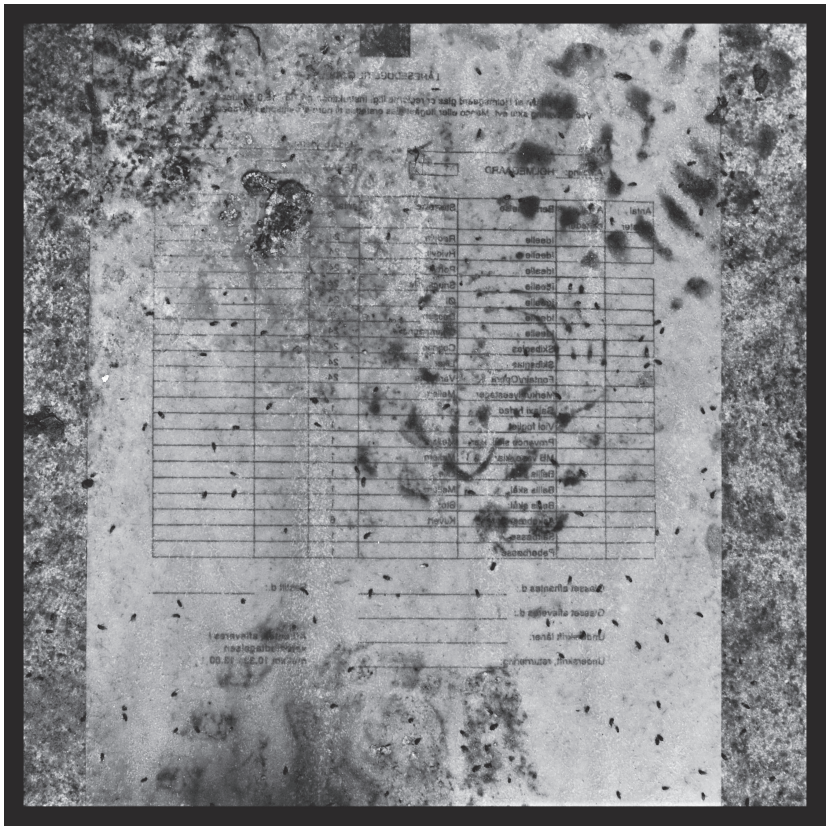
Material traces constitute archaeology's archives: outlines, cuts, deposits, fragments, imprints, scars, shadows. On scales as large as the Holmegaard factory complex and as minute as these faint outlines of an object no longer present, they linger on to account for stories already unfolded and lives already lived to full. Such traces are often spoken of in terms of historical witnessing—a description that, while telling, fails to grasp the utter humility and deeply relational nature of the phenomenon. Because, you see, the trace cannot be separated from the phenomenon it is made to account for. In the case of this image, its being is as much represented by the absence of the object as the object's absence is accounted for by the trace. The being of the object and the trace evolved together, and one of them was never really there to observe or witness the becoming of the other. Hence, the humility and coincidental nature of their historical accounting is much rather grasped by *withness* than witness; by their loyalty to the becoming, being and unbecoming of the other. Unlike history, which is a retrospective practice, the trace is not. It does not knowingly witness, structure, and retell a story as it passes—it is the story in the passing.

Postproduction

Source: Photo: Þ. Pétursdóttir; caption: T.F. Sørensen.

The landscape presenting itself in this image is remarkable. I remember various forms of documents, resembling this one, in different parts of the factory; registration sheets, often, many of them partially filled in, otherwise blank, like this one. It seems completed documents were consigned to the archive. On the head of the document, it says, in Danish, "Timesheet for Postproduction"; it seems to be a form for recording working hours and calculating salary. It may serve as a reminder of the life once unfolding at the glassworks. It was, of course, a workplace, employing generations of glassworkers, whose careers and lives suddenly changed when the company—in various incarnations—went through a period of turmoil from the first closure in 2004 until the final cessation as glassworks in 2012. When the place—as *Holmegaard Entertainment* (an arts and craft centre with glasshouse)—went bankrupt in 2008, the main furnace was turned off, and the molten glass inside gradually started to cool off, until it solidified, turning into a colossal, immovable 45 tonnes glass fossil. Today, the glass fossil still rests in the facility, but I am sure the timesheet and its coarse layer of dust and dirt are long gone. The glass monument—or glass monster—is a very different kind of landscape than what we see in this sheet. Nevertheless, their silences equally echo the discontinued workplace.

Life in the Archive



Source: Photo: T.F. Sørensen; caption: Þ. Pétursdóttir.

Pressed into the damp subsurface, trodden over by boots passing, upside down or printed in mirror script, it is near impossible to gather the totality of historical information initially invested in this paper document of the Holmegaard archive. Amongst the fragments I am able to retrieve are *Låneseddel, Navn, Holmegaard, Antal, Øl, Kuvert, Hvidvin, Port, 24, 1.* Strange. Possibly this is a remnant from the workers' cantina or from the visitor centre's café. Maybe alcoholic beverages, food, glasses, and cutlery could be purchased and borrowed from the café for gatherings organized by the staff, privately or by the workers' union. Convenient. Twenty-four bottles of white wine and 24 of port? I wonder what the occasion was. What was being celebrated? It seems impossible to know. But while holding back much of this initial information, the document has become a surface for other imprints. A palimpsest obtaining other, independent, stories; a building aging. Tiny organisms settling into spaces left by humans. Mould growing on damp and cold surfaces. Boots with rough soles passing, exploring. Lives continuing to evolve in the archive.

Object Lessons

What we have tried to do above with our juxtaposition of images and words is to attend more carefully to things that do not do much to make themselves known to us, and which bypass our usual compasses for navigating in their midst. These compasses, we contend, are devised in ways that are prone to make us identify the things that share a resemblance with humanity, assimilated to our sensibilities by caring for the things that are meaningful, useful, causal, effective, sympathetic, representative, or downright anthropomorphic. What we argue is that the nonhuman ontology of things requires us to preserve some sense of otherness in our narration of these very things; they deserve "our recognition of their nonhuman cultures, subjectivities, histories, and material lives" (Haraway, 2008: 162). While we do not deny the agency or vibrancy of things, we aim also to sustain their alterity, instead of explaining it away, and move towards them on their own terms (see also Pétursdóttir, 2012: 578; 2014: 347), responding to their traction (Sørensen, 2017: 141; Sørensen, 2021a: 146–147). This includes attending to and welcoming the idleness of things and their un-agency, their un-vibrancy, their unruliness-by-passivity, and their occasional tracelessness.

The things in the images above are thus all characterized by a combination of inertia and latency. Each of them represents a situation that does not transpire clearly in the recollection of the co-author who did not take the photograph, and they make present situations or things that escape self-evident or striking meaningfulness or effects. One of us took the photograph at a time where we were lured by the situation or thing, perhaps by the sensory appeal of the constellation of surfaces, colours, and shapes, or perhaps because it seemed important in the given moment. Or, perhaps, the photograph was taken for no particular reason—simply to witness the situation or to be with the things encountered in the glassworks.

Today, the things in our photographs no longer exist in The Holmegaard Works, in the refurbished glassworks. Just like we argue here that the situations and things we photographed consist of the humblest traces, the redevelopers of the glassworks deemed them unfit for conservation or representation in the new culture-historical museum. This makes us wonder about the destiny and destination of more or less random observations of unassuming and ephemeral things (Pétursdóttir, 2020; Sørensen, 2021a): what is the future of the trace of the insignificant, the idle and the "less"?

Over the past 40 years or so, studies of material culture have shown the importance of objects in human life. Whether pointing back to the centrality of objects in performing reciprocity (Mauss, 2002) or to the crystallization of order through matter (Douglas, 1966), scholars have demonstrated how objects are not mere epiphenomena but assume a formative role in human life. The so-called material turn has allowed for ways of appreciating the role of things in the shaping of human social relations, the concretization of otherwise immaterial and transcendental phenomena, and sustenance of value (e.g. Miller, 1987).

As studies in this tradition have demonstrated, the labour of things is undeniable, including the ways in which things are brought to bear on human (and more-than-human) suffering in the world by allowing things to take precedence over people or by objectifying or commodifying them (e.g. Kopytoff, 1986; Nussbaum, 1995). As Daniel Miller has shown in various contexts, the importance of things is not necessarily a conspicuous aspect of our daily life but may transpire as a result of their "humility." As he argues, "The less we are aware of them the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour, without being open to challenge" (Miller, 2005: 5).

While the material turn has indeed given texture and context to previous idealized notions of "culture," "systems," "economy," or "ideologies" as the driving forces of social relations by insisting on the influence of material infrastructures in society (e.g. Buchli, 2000), it has mostly revealed otherwise ignored material catalysts without calling into question the very structures themselves. In other words, things have been added, nuancing historicized narratives, yet without challenging or changing the narratives fundamentally. In this way, the classical materialism has shed light on the human use of things as instruments of power, formation of identity, and negotiation of social relations, yet the ways in which historical and archaeological accounts have issued forth tend to reproduce existing narratives irrespective of things being included or not.

What we want to argue is that it is not enough simply to invite things into already existing modes of narrativity. If things are to be taken seriously, they must be taken seriously on their own premises, potentially altering the form of narratives, since things tell different stories than those of historicized human discourse (Pétursdóttir, 2012). Over the past decades, studies along the lines of Actor-Network Theory, New Materialisms, and Vital Materialism have moved in the direction of object-orientations that give things their due with respect to the power they can exercise on their surroundings (e.g. Bennett, 2010; Olsen et al., 2012; Witmore, 2014). Such studies have helped redirect some of the attention towards a receptiveness to the agency of things in their own right, adding independence to objects rather than seeing them as set in motion by human intentionality.

In a very crude summery, this is represented in the redirection of Gell's (1998) notion of agency within the material turn, famously distinguishing between the "primary," intentional agency of humans and the "secondary" agency of things as something invested by humans. In the tradition of Gell, things can act on behalf of humans as distributed presence-effects or mechanical causations, yet what things do always hinge on human agency and will. Actor-Network Theory (e.g. Latour, 2005) adds a different approach to things by seeing them as unshackled from the binds of human intentionality, represented perhaps even more manifestly in the notion of "things as things" in New Materialisms (Witmore, 2014) or the "thing-power" of Vital Materialism (Bennett, 2010). In these perspectives, things—or matter—cannot be reduced to social constructs but must be acknowledged as independent of human representation (Braidotti, 2022: 110), participating as emergent and "unruly" phenomena (Olsen and Pétursdóttir, 2017).

Altogether, in quite different ways, studies within the traditions of the material turn, Actor-Network Theory, and New/Vital Materialisms have helped showing that things are not mere epiphenomena, nor is their agency necessarily always derived from, or secondary to, that of humans. Despite these pertinent redirections, we want to return to an aspect of Gell's meditations on the agency of things, which we believe usually goes unnoticed in the reception and repetitions of his work, where the focus is mainly on the labour of agency and the effects produced in human-thing relations. However, as Gell observes, not all objects are heavily imbued with intentionality or force, nor are they necessarily made to take noticeable effect on their surroundings. Objects may but they are not bound to have secondary, non-intended effects. Following Gell, "agency" is not a constant, produced by all agents—whether persons or objects, whether primary or secondary—indiscriminately, nor do all things all the time have impact on their surroundings. Agency, for Gell, is contextual and "for a time" (Gell, 1998: 18), when an agent "causes events to happen" (Gell, 1998: 16), and agency is observable after the fact (Gell, 1998: 20). Hence, the agency catalyzed through things is a temporal and situated phenomenon, meaning that things do not trigger responses incessantly, and that some things do not cause events to happen at all. Some things do not do anything. Even though "objects always hold something in reserve," their potential may "never get actualized" (Lucas, 2012: 167). Things may be idle or remain latent, and this delay, impotence, and insignificance, we believe, too often become overshadowed by an automatic attention to the causality, meaningfulness, forcefulness, or vibrancy of things, whether within the tradition of functionalism, the material turn, Actor-Network Theory, or New Materialisms.

The Tenderness of Traces

From this brief review, there seems to be a stern focus on the "important" and the "vibrant" in various approaches to the world of things and the object lessons that may be gathered from them. Usually, archaeologists take pride in being able to collect and store any kind of things, regardless how humble and seemingly insignificant they might be. Yet, we rarely see this all-inclusive, non-discriminating approach to things represented in the ways such archives are made public, perhaps because some archaeological things tend to be messy, "often refusing to be labelled and identified" (Olsen, 2012: 76). Accordingly, there seems to be a need for things to be useful somehow, to show an analytical point, to be representative of something other than themselves. These are qualities that are at odds with the mess of things that remain idle—things that not only resist being labelled and identified but also refuse to do anything and hardly remain memorable.

This is where we want to return to Stein's "exceptional considerations," urging us to attend with care and tenderness to the lesser things. In this perspective, it takes precisely an unusual sensitivity even to muster a tenderness for the lesser things. What we have tried to do with this essay, is to pursue such a responsiveness or what might in another vocabulary be described as the "arts of noticing" (Tsing, 2015). This moment of noticing is not in the singular, it is not just one moment.

Our juxtaposition of photographs and recollection—and indeed the limits of recollection—shows that noticing can occur in passing without looking for something specific (also Pétursdóttir, 2020; Sørensen, 2021a). Furthermore, noticing can be reactivated on a later return to images of that initial encounter, even though the two instances may stir different responses. What we have done is to extend the first encounter to another person, who may in turn arrive at a new moment of noticing and getting in touch with traces. Importantly, this exercise was not undertaken as a measure against overlooking a hidden meaning or purposefulness in each image; it was not a paranoid device against a fear of failing to be able to explain or understand Holmegaard Glassworks retrospectively, nor was it the ambition to discover an otherwise ignored vitality of things. Rather, the ambition was to instantiate a moment of seeing how scenes of idle things may carry on and engender a response to their traces.

Stein's poem *Sacred Emily* is probably best known for its proclamation, "Rose is a rose is a rose" (Stein, 1993: 187). The meaning of this line, as well as the poem in its entirety, might be said not to be self-evident, and Stein claimed to have been confronted numerous times with questions about what it was meant to say. Her response was: "But what's the difficulty? Just read the words on the paper. They're in English. Just read them. Be simple and you'll understand these things" (Stein cited in Wilder, 1947: v–vi). She further elaborated:

> Now you have all seen hundreds of poems about roses and you know in your bones that the rose is not there. All those songs that sopranos sing as encores about "I have a garden; oh, what a garden!" Now I don't want to put too much emphasis on that line, because it's just one line in a longer poem. But I notice that you all know it; you make fun of it, but you know it. Now listen! I'm no fool. I know that in daily life we don't go around saying "is a… is a… is a…". Yes, I'm no fool; but I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years.

We invoke Stein's line of reasoning here as a prism for our confrontation with images of things encountered at Holmegaard Glassworks years ago; things that have now vanished without a trace and that are left with us only in photographs and in partial, fragmented recollections. It recalls what Derrida describes as the incessant tension between the archive and archaeology, where archaeology marks the raw and unmediated confrontation with things, before things are archived by becoming labelled, categorized, and made meaningful. Yet, this is precisely a tension; it is only briefly situated in the moment of unmediated encounter, on the way to being made sense of, which our exchange also suggests. Each of us have been struggling to find a way of grasping and wording what we see in the other person's photograph, soon describing something sensible rather than an encounter with traces in a manner that is wholly "live, without mediation and without delay." This is also the reason why we hold the encounter with traces to mark a tension between archaeology and archive: being tender and delicate. And difficult, too. Fleeting, precious.

Our mode of re-collecting traces—by pursuing new encounters rather than producing retrospective reconstructions—can be seen as a wish for making things present again; not as representations of an anterior meaning, a purpose, value, efficacy, or vibrancy, but simply enduring as traces. Perhaps, this may seem unproductive or strange, which only brings us to ask: what's the difficulty? Just look at the things in the images. They're visible. Just look at them. Be simple and you'll understand traces.

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13 Icelandic Cake Fight

History of an Immigrant Recipe[1]

L.K. Bertram

Introduction

This article explores the history of *vínarterta*, a striped fruit torte imported by Icelandic immigrants to North America in the late nineteenth century and obsessively preserved by their descendants today. When roughly 20–25 per cent of the population of Iceland relocated to North America between 1870 and 1914, they brought with them a host of culinary traditions, the most popular and enduring of which is this labour-intensive, spiced, layered dessert. Considered an essential fixture at any important gathering, including weddings, holidays, and funerals, vínarterta looms large in Icelandic-North American popular culture. Family recipes are often closely guarded, and any alterations to the "correct recipe," including number of layers, inclusion or exclusion of cardamom or frosting, and the use of almond extract, are still hotly debated by community members who see changes to "original" recipes as a controversial, even offensive sign of cultural degeneration. In spite of this dedication to authenticity, this torte is an unusual ethnic symbol with a complex past. The first recipes for "Vienna torte" were Danish imports via Austria, originally popular with the Icelandic immigrant generation in the late nineteenth century because of their glamorous connections to continental Europe. Moreover, the dessert fell out of fashion in Iceland roughly at the same time as it ascended as an ethnic symbol in wartime and post-war North American heritage spectacles. Proceeding from recipe books, oral history interviews, memoirs, and Icelandic and English language newspapers, this article examines the complex history of this particular dessert.

Vínarterta, a fruit torte imported to North America by Icelandic immigrants in the 1870s, still inspires heated debates among their descendants (Kwong, 2012). Often referred to as a "Christmas cake" in English, this five-, six-, or seven-layer torte usually features almond flavoured dough and cardamom-spiced prune filling and is aged for a period of time to create a dense, moist consistency (see Figure 13.1). As an enduring symbol of Icelandic North American identity, it often appears as an essential centrepiece at major celebrations within the community. However, vínarterta (pronounced vee-nar-ter-ta) is as much a symbol of tension as unity among Icelandic North Americans. Many community members possess unusually strong opinions about the "correct" recipe for the torte and view the preservation of a particular recipe as a powerful symbol of cultural integrity. Those

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Figure 13.1 Seven-layered, frosted vínarterta prepared by Arden Jackson.
Source: Eyrarbakki Icelandic Heritage Centre.

who produce (and consume) vínarterta often strictly oppose any alterations to the recipe, and even small changes or variations in preparation, including the inclusion of thicker layers or icing, can incite fierce debate, criticism, and judgement. As Minnesota poet and writer Bill Holm (2000: 217) attests:

> Say Vínarterta in a room full of the descendants of North American Icelandic immigrants and quarrels begin. In Canada, Vínarterta is in six or seven layers, flavoured with almonds, frosted with butter cream—wrong! One lady (with a Norwegian half in her family) used apricots instead of prunes between layers—wrong! Some leave out cardamom—oh-so-spicy, you know—wrong!

This article explores the history and meaning of vínarterta as a distinctive immigrant tradition and culinary time capsule that declined and virtually died out in Iceland (Gillmor, 2012; Gunnarsson, 1978: 2; Helgason, 2007). It begins with an introduction to the vínarterta debate before analysing the transnational origins of the dessert and its significance in late nineteenth-century Icelandic society during the era of mass migration. It then describes its survival in a North American immigrant community profoundly shaped by antiethnic sentiment and Anglicization. Vínarterta and a number of other material traditions associated with the private sphere survived in Icelandic homes; however, "Vienna torte's"

transition into a symbol of Iceland is poorly understood. This article sheds new light on that transition, revealing the hitherto unacknowledged wartime and Cold War roots of its rise as an ethnic symbol in campaigns that promoted Icelandic-North American "friendship" during Allied and NATO military campaigns in Iceland. It was during the 1940s and 1950s, I argue, that this particular dessert became a popular public symbol of Icelandic-ness as the appetite for palatable ethnic difference grew in North America. And yet, this history does not fully explain the vínarterta cult that endures within the immigrant community itself. How can we explain its intense popularity and the heated debates it inspires? This article closes by discussing the dessert's powerful, more complex meaning for Icelandic North Americans. Oral history interviews, cookbooks, newspaper articles, and obituaries reveal that community members value the torte so dearly and guard it against alteration in part because it embodies the time and experience of migration and absent family members, often women. For a community that has experienced tremendous cultural change, transformation, and language loss, vínarterta has come to act as an unaltered, accessible, virtually sacred bond across generations.

This study has benefitted significantly from a wealth of North American scholarship on immigrant food, the sensory dimensions of immigrant memory, and histories of twentieth-century heritage spectacles and ethnic expression (Bégin, 2016; Gabaccia, 2009; Iacovetta, 2006; Sutton, 2001). It brings this scholarship into conversation with Icelandic community archives, gendered wartime and Cold War politics in Iceland, and important advances in Icelandic migration scholarship. These include Daisy Neijmann's fascinating analysis of the gendered connotations of Cold War Icelandic hospitality and Jón Karl Helgason's seminal work on contemporary vínarterta culture (Helgason, 2007; Neijmann, 2013, 2016). By so doing, this article offers an Icelandic case study that will be of interest to food scholars exploring transnational migration and the role of immigrant foods in military campaigns while illustrating the clear benefits of how a food history lens enriches our understanding of Icelandic immigrant history.

Cake Fight: The Vínarterta Debates

The power of the vínarterta tradition is quickly evident in encounters with Icelandic North Americans who resist almost all alterations to whichever they consider to be the "original" recipe. Initially, this seems like a strange position for Icelandic North Americans, a community that otherwise embraced almost total acculturation to blend in and achieve affluence in North American society, as this article describes further. Yet even the slightest variations in vínarterta recipes and preparation can cause disruption. Jennifer Miller (pers. comm., February 15, 2010) recalled the torte's ability to quickly generate controversy and criticism in her own family when it appeared at Christmas and other special occasions:

> One Auntie's layers were thicker than Amma's. One had too much almond extract in the icing. Another used a lot of cardamom. Yet another

> produced cake layers that were more brown than white … it was always a big deal to see a plate put out with coffee, but it was always a bit unsettling too.

Oral history interviews and discussions of the dessert in the Icelandic immigrant press reveal a seemingly endless supply of strong opinions among community members—and searing attacks against "incorrect" vínarterta. Some focus on the correct number of layers. Maxine Ingalls of Hecla Island, Manitoba (pers. comm., June 30, 2011), recalled her father's firm stance on seven layers as the most authentic "Icelandic" number of layers. "He used to say, 'If it hasn't got seven layers, then it's just Viennese torte!'"

Others focus on the inclusion or exclusion of icing. W. D. Valgardson joked, "There are sides (in the Icelandic community) … like Irish Catholics and Protestants, but the sides aren't political or religious, they're whether you eat your vinarterta iced or not iced" (Valgardson, 2012). Perhaps the most controversial, however, are more ostentatious alterations, particularly the use of non-prune-based fillings. In Gimli and Winnipeg, Manitoba, on the Canadian Prairies, some entrepreneurs decided to omit the traditional prune filling and sell vínarterta in a range of flavours, including blueberry and raspberry, but, asserted one interviewee, "I just think it's wrong."[2] These debates reflect the special place occupied by vínarterta at major events in the community, including weddings and funerals, its almost sacred status in the lives of many community members, and the "spell-like" ritualism that surrounds its production (Connerton, 1989: 59). As Louise Kahler explained, "vínarterta is like a religion in our house. You don't mess with vínarterta, and it is served with an expectant hush. We keep our family recipe closely guarded."[3] Indeed, recipes and a strong position on the inclusion or exclusion of certain ingredients are often invoked as proof of the strength of a family's Icelandic identity, while real or imagined deviations from the "original" recipe are taken as a sign of cultural degeneracy.

Origins

Recipes for vínarterta arrived in North America at some point after 1870 by a proportionally huge wave of Icelandic immigrants. These migrants represented roughly one quarter of the population of Iceland and they and their descendants are known in Icelandic as *Vestur-Íslendingar* (Western Icelanders). They settled mainly in the Canadian and American West on both sides of the border. In Canada, major settlements included Winnipeg, the colony of "New Iceland" (roughly 500 miles northwest of Minneapolis), and others in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. Icelandic Americans established farms and community centres across the Midwest including those in Wisconsin, North Dakota, and settlements farther west in Washington. While the Icelandic language may have declined and died out in many of these immigrant districts during the twentieth century, this labour-intensive torte (which arguably takes up to a decade to perfect) can still easily be found in most.

Vínarterta's complex history and meaning offers insight into the changing conditions that faced the nineteenth century generation of Icelandic immigrants.

Elizabeth Zanoni (2018: 8) and other scholars encourage us to attend both to the place and time of migration in considering histories of ethnic food cultures. This attention to time is central to understanding the powerful affiliations that vínarterta came to represent. The popularity of vínarterta with the immigrant generation signalled its origins in an Icelandic society in which Denmark, their ruler, still often set the standards of style and sophistication (Rögnvaldardóttir and Leaman, 2012: 278). Fine, continental style baking was most commonly associated with the households of Danish merchants and officials in Iceland, as well as the Icelandic elite, a number of whom had been educated in Denmark. The circulation of early cookbooks likely also contributed to the arrival of the recipe in Iceland. As Carol Gold (2007: 20) has well documented, the publishing of cookbooks designed for housewives and households flourished in Denmark in the early nineteenth century. These newly printed collections of recipes from Copenhagen's kitchens tightened the culinary links between Iceland and Denmark and introduced households on the edge of the Arctic Circle to a range of exciting new foods including "Portuguese cake," *karrý* (curry), and fashionable Austrian desserts. Recipes for *Wienertærte* possibly arrived in Iceland first through early Danish translations of major texts like Louise Beate Augustine Friedel's *New and Complete Confectionary Book* (1795) or one of a growing number of female Danish cookbook authors (see, for example, "Wienertærte" recipes in Eibe, 1849; Rostrup, 1844; Schmidt, 1843).

Coffee served with fashionable confections was a sign of status in Copenhagen social circles at a time when the popularity of Viennese style sweets production and baking was growing in Europe (though Vienna had been a recognized center of quality pastry production since the thirteenth century). Although its larger origins are unclear, recipes for Vienna Torte increasingly reached a wider European audience in the late eighteenth century. The torte's ingredients, particularly the use of almonds in the dough, reflected conditions in Austria during the early eighteenth century when Viennese bakers and confectioners faced the strict regulation of their trade from royal officials (Haslinger, 2015). During this period guilds strove to maintain lucrative monopolies. Confectioners in particular faced significant opposition from bakers' guilds, who were successful in preventing them from using wheat flour until 1748 (Haslinger, 2015: 770). To compensate, confectioners often turned to ground almonds as a replacement ingredient and relied on a host of candied fruits and jams to create beautiful, artful confections. The imprint of this tradition is clearly visible in the almond flavouring and dried fruit components of Icelandic vínarterta recipes (and many other kinds of layered and/or almond and fruit-based tortes with roots in Vienna). Yet the 1795 Danish translation of Friedel's recipe reflected the more elaborate, eye-catching nature of earlier versions of the torte in continental Europe. Her recipe encouraged experimentation that showcased status and creativity, including the use of different fruits between each layer like cherry, apple, raspberry, and currant (see also Fristrup, 1840). She also instructed women to make an elaborate topping using icing made with orange blossom water and create a floral image on top using "flowers from black cherries, preserved rose hips, and green plums" (Friedel, 1795: 6).

Vínarterta and Nineteenth-Century Icelandic Society

In Iceland, initially, fine continental style baking was more common in the households of Danish merchants and officials and the Icelandic elite. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, fashionable continental goods and styles had become more accessible for more Icelandic households as economic conditions improved following the lifting of a restrictive Danish trading monopoly in 1854 (Magnússon, 2012: 32). Short growing seasons and unpredictable, expensive shipping rates previously restricted Icelandic access to wheat flour, but the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a new era of access to finer ingredients and the growth of continental style baking on the island. This shift must also be understood in connection with the larger growth of an intensely popular coffee culture in Iceland in the nineteenth century as Icelanders embraced the hot stimulant to help them endure an often cold and challenging climate (see also Bertram, 2020). Together, coffee and baking, as it had in Copenhagen, became a fixture in nineteenth-century social life, since many Icelandic women believed that something sweet should always accompany coffee. Icelandic coffee culture remained a mainstay among migrants, even as they struggled to find quality beans in isolated new settlements where local English-speaking merchants and agents usually only offered economical tea (see also Bertram, 2020; see Figure 13.2).

More than a familiar comfort food, vínarterta was affiliated with status. Imported continental style baking could be expensive to make and signalled that the

Figure 13.2 Icelandic immigrants worked hard to reestablish coffee culture in often tea-centric rural North American markets. Coffee in a turn-of-the-century Icelandic farmhouse in Brownbyggð, Manitob.

Source: Eyrarbakki Icelandic Heritage Centre.

households who offered the torte could afford the imported ingredients and spare womanpower required to make the layers and filling. It was also a sign of Icelandic women's culinary sophistication and ambition, one that showcased their engagement with much larger transnational culinary networks. Similar layered cakes could be found throughout continental Europe and the Danish Empire in particular, including the now iconic "Crucian Vienna Cake" in the Danish West Indies islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. This Virgin Islands' Vienna Cake is brightly coloured and uses preserves made from fruits like guava berry and lime (Bastian, 2003: 58–9). Vienna Cake, a separate recipe that appeared alongside vínarterta in early Danish cookbooks, is also always served in five or seven layers and remains an important link between the past and present at celebrations in the Virgin Islands.

Beyond a simple copy of a Viennese or Danish recipe, Icelandic makers left a distinctive imprint on vínarterta recipes, evident in the use of prunes and almond flavouring. Isolated in the North Atlantic, Icelandic women often had to replace the elaborate fillings called for in Danish language recipes because they were simply not available or were far too expensive. Instead, they turned to prunes, one of the most accessible and affordable imported fruits available. Prunes were originally a luxury item in Iceland but became more accessible in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Rögnvaldardóttir and Leaman, 2012: 278). These shipped and stored well and by the late 1880s and 1890s, as many migrants were departing, prunes had begun appearing much more frequently on the shelves of Icelandic stores. Many early Icelandic bakers also replaced almonds, another costly ingredient. Friedel's (1795) recipe called for relatively expensive dough made of one pound of almonds, one pound of sugar, one pound of flour, and six eggs. Trinhe Hahnemann writes that the popularity of almonds in Nordic/Scandinavian baking was rooted in their affiliation with prestige in the late 1700s, when almond-based delicacies offered members of the aristocracy a chance to "show off their wealth" (see Goldstein and Mintz, 2015: 598). Although some Icelandic immigrant recipes maintained the use of ground almonds, by the middle of the nineteenth century it is clear that often Icelandic women omitted actual ground almonds. Many of the Icelandic immigrant generation continued to replicate the original flavour with almond extract.

Vínarterta's association with the immigrant generation reflected its popularity and significance during the era of Icelandic mass departure. While Icelandic women engaged in new baking trends during the second half of the nineteenth century, this was a contradictory period also punctuated by extreme weather, volcanic eruptions, poverty, and hunger. In Iceland land shortages and a stringent social hierarchy left little room for mobility for the working poor, many of whom began to consider migration to North America to better their circumstances. Even relatively affluent families were subjected to a series of climate emergencies on the northern island. The arrival of pack ice in northern harbours not only thwarted the arrival of imports but also fishing and even farming during cold summers. As Sveinn Þórarinsson in Eyjafjörður recalled in the summer of 1869, "everywhere news of people near death … no fish to be caught, the nets drag nothing. Hunger closes in on us, rich and poor alike."[4]

Icelandic Immigration, Status, and Food

During this period, many Icelanders on the margins, including ambitious women trapped in lives of servitude, read reports of wealth and reinvention in North America, and began to depart *en masse* in the 1870s after two smaller migration movements to Utah and Brazil. Following their arrival in North America, improved finances and access to new markets transformed Icelandic kitchens, enabling many to acquire previously unimaginable goods, including cast-iron stoves. Vínarterta recipes endured during this transition. In addition to offering a familiar taste of home, the torte was a popular nineteenth-century Icelandic symbol of togetherness and hospitality—as well as success, ambition, and upward mobility. Although their kitchens modernized, many of the other foods immigrants prepared retained the imprint of the styles *en vogue* at the time of their departure. The ingredients for popular foods like *rúllupylsa* (rolled lamb) and *harðfiskur* (dried fish), still produced and consumed around New Iceland, remained accessible in North America, but other foods like *hákarl* (cured shark) usually became a distant memory. Baking traditions also survived, though they retained the imprint of the homeland open stone hearths commonly found in Icelandic turf houses. Although they might own new, manufactured North American ovens, the culinary repertoire of the immigrant generation was dominated by foods and baked goods that could easily be made over an Icelandic open hearth in a pot or pan, fried in oil, or baked in a Dutch oven, including *pönnukökur* (pancakes), *kleinur* (knotted donuts), and the thin baked layers required to make vínarterta.

The survival of such foods in the Midwest and Prairies is no surprise to scholars familiar with the large Scandinavian communities who settled there. Indeed Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish neighbours also continued to produce homeland favourites. The Norwegian flatbread *lefse*, for example, can still easily be found at local bakeries, markets, and even gas stations in northern North Dakota and Minnesota. Indeed, baking traditions in particular are some of the most enduring and prolific food practices in these communities. According to popular lore, another staple, "the Danish," earned its name from its affiliation with Danish immigrant bakers (National Park services, 2018). Like vínarterta, however, these pastries were actually rooted in a larger historical influx of Viennese baking into Copenhagen, where they are still known in Danish as *wienerbrød* (Vienna bread).

Following their arrival in North America, Icelanders collectively benefitted from their ties to these older, more established Scandinavian immigrant communities. Both the Canadian and American states viewed Scandinavians as relatively desirable, white, Protestant, and hardy Northern farming stock who could play a central role in securing claims to contested Indigenous territories on the Western frontier. Their affiliation with these Scandinavian groups helped Icelanders secure a block settlement from the Canadian government, "New Iceland," that they settled in 1875, as well as encouragement and support from American officials who welcomed them into other areas like the Dakota Territory shortly afterwards.

The precise status of newly arrived Icelanders, however, was more ambiguous—especially in the eyes of many English-speaking settlers. While educated

state officials understood Icelanders' ancestral links to Scandinavia, ignorance about the North, as well as Iceland's wintery name, led many to believe that Icelanders were actually a colonized "Eskimo" class of people who had come from the "savage" North (Björnsdóttir, 2004; see also Bertram, 2018). A smallpox epidemic in the colony of New Iceland in 1876–77 and the grinding poverty visiting officials encountered on the newly formed reserve helped underscore the questionable quality of Icelandic settlers in the eyes of some critics (Eyford, 2006: 75). In response to this racial ambiguity as well as larger waves of intense anti-immigrant sentiment (including during the First World War), many Icelanders launched intensive personal and collective Anglicization campaigns, often erasing all outward signs of Icelandic difference. Frequently, Icelanders changed their names and numerous material practices, including the wearing of customary Icelandic clothing, and avoided speaking Icelandic in mixed company (see also Bertram, 2016: 281–83).

Within this larger context, the Icelandic-North American obsession with ferociously protecting a torte is remarkable, considering the fate of so many other homeland traditions abandoned to deflect anti-immigrant sentiment. So too is the survival of many other distinctive Icelandic-North American traditions that survived because they were associated with the home, where assimilative pressure was slower to permeate. As Elizabeth Peterson (2018: 81) contends in her study on Danish immigrant food and language in Utah, such survival was made possible when traditions were "embedded within micro-rituals carried out in the home." As long as they did not interrupt or contradict the Canadian and American façade, Icelandic material traditions could enjoy longevity in private. As oral history interviews revealed, the children and grandchildren of Icelandic immigrants might have donned Anglo style clothing in public, but they still wore Icelandic woollen underwear (Carlon (Thorarinson) Hryhorchuk, pers. comm., May 21, 2009; Agnes Bardal, pers. comm., May 10, 2009).

Beyond the home, a range of Icelandic businesses capitalized on migrants' often private but enduring homeland tastes. Immigrant bakeries met the demand for households too busy to bake specialties like vínarterta, especially around the holiday season. G. P. Thordarson's in Winnipeg's Icelandic neighbourhood did a brisk trade in vínarterta and other Icelandic delicacies at Christmas, as did Geysir Bakery in the 1930s and 1940s. Bake sales at Icelandic churches and in Icelandic communities also regularly provided homeland favourites for an eager consumer base throughout the twentieth century. Purchasing from quality, reputable vínarterta makers was (and continues to be) important for community members. Renowned vínarterta makers enjoyed special status in the community, including Aðalbjörg Benediktsdóttir Brandson, who won recognition for her vínarterta recipe both in the *Winnipeg Free Press* as well as in an influential cookbook published by the Ladies' Aid of the Icelandic First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg in the late 1920s. She had immigrated to Canada at the age of four in 1878, during a period of heightened debates around the "suitability" of Icelanders to North American settlement. All her life she and her family pursued Anglo style, respectability, and acceptance, though, like many Icelanders, her embrace of these customs stopped short of the kitchen (Figure 13.3).

Figure 13.3 Women pose with vínarterta at a Christmas bake sale in Winnipeg's West End Icelandic neighbourhood.

Source: "Santa's salesmen," *Winnipeg Free Press*, December 9, 1961: 11.

In a compelling shift Brandson and other renowned vínarterta makers began to enjoy new public visibility as Anglo-North American interest in Icelandic immigrant food expanded in the 1930s. By 1936, many non-Icelandic Winnipeggers had grown to love the little dessert, according to Mrs. Madeleine Day, a food columnist with the *Winnipeg Free Press*. By this time "the fame of Vinarterta (was) not confined to the Icelandic people," she asserted, "most of us have tasted it and know just how delicious it is" (Day, 1936) The feature was one of a growing number of articles and recipes that began to promote the torte in earnest to English-language audiences in the 1930s and 1940s. How did the image-conscious children of the immigrant generation become public culinary ambassadors of immigrant difference?

In her work on the cultural gifts movement, Diana Selig cautions against the assumption that cultural pluralism was an exclusively post-war phenomenon, arguing instead "the origins of what we call multiculturalism date to the social and cultural ferment that followed the First World War" (Selig, 2008: 3). Indeed, it is clear that from 1920 to 1939 a substantial body of both American and Canadian community leaders and heritage planners actively promoted the retention of some ethnic cultural practices, particularly picturesque rural folk traditions, to help celebrate the "socially valuable contributions of immigrant communities" (Selig, 2008: 13).

Such depictions of immigrant culture, including folk music concerts and craft shows, could be limited and problematic (Henderson, 2005), but they challenged Anglo North Americans to think about how "cultural difference could be a source of strength for the nation" (Selig, 2008: 17). Other initiatives focused specifically on immigrant food in the late interwar period. As Camille Bégin (2016: 5, 7) explains of this time, ethnic food acted as a tolerable sign of immigrant difference, one that was important to document before it disappeared as communities Americanized.

Although it enjoyed a few early tributes in the 1930s, vínarterta increasingly became a public symbol of traditional "Icelandic" foods and intercultural friendship in the propaganda campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s. During World War Two state officials and immigrant community leaders modified pluralist campaigns to curb notions of cultural separation and sympathy with the racism of the Third Reich (Caccia and Kristmanson, 2003: 21; Selig, 2008: 235). Although anti-ethnic sentiment had flourished during the First World War, a range of campaigns that celebrated the culture of loyal, "freedom-loving" ethnic immigrants flourished during the Second (Selig, 2008: 236). Ethnic foods offered wartime propaganda campaign-makers a colourful, yet containable way of speaking about immigrant difference. The National Film Board of Canada (NFB) issued a series of expensive colour films on ethnic culture, featuring scenes devoted to immigrant food with subtle wartime messages where, for example, special Ukrainian holiday dishes were served under the smiling gaze of a Winston Churchill portrait (Boulton, 1942; see also Boulton, 1941a, 1941b; Jones, 1943). Such pluralist wartime campaigns showed everyday "freedom-loving" North Americans with names like "Henry" and "George" pausing to celebrate the quaint holiday traditions of their grandparents' generation. The NFB 1941 film *Iceland on the Prairies*, produced in cooperation with patriotic Icelandic-North American leaders and the Canadian federal minister for National War Services, featured similar footage. Smiling, happy daughters and a gracious hostess with a coffee pot in hand offered audiences a tour of slowly pronounced Icelandic delicacies, including "vee-nar-ter-tuh." Such a scene would greet any guest in an Icelandic home, the narrator assured. "Hospitality is a tradition with the Icelanders. At the head of the table, the lady of the house ensures that her guests are well provided for. Friends are continually invited for meals or cof- fee" (Crawley, 1941). Similar wartime American films like *Swedes in America* featured neighbourly Swedes baking homemade bread and making traditional textiles, while describing their loyalty to country and devotion to freedom. American discussions of Icelanders echoed this pattern of praising ethnic communities for their devotion to democracy while providing audiences with a local, tangible (and edible) bond to distant populations affected by the war. As Kathleen B. Gilbert (1942: 58) explained to readers alongside a recipe for delicious "veena terta" in 1942, Icelandic immigrants made wonderful, hospitable American neighbours in North Dakota and their freedom-loving relatives at home deserved American protection (Figure 13.4).

More than a colourful footnote in the history of World War II, ethnic food campaigns were a serious part of the war effort.[5] The new wartime focus on ethnic fare reflected food's larger powerful political significance as well as attempts to cultivate political and military "friendships" with the home communities of North

Figure 13.4 Famed vínarterta maker Aðalbjörg Benediktsdóttir Brandson was born in Iceland but grew up in the image-conscious urban Icelandic immigrant community.

Source: Winnipeg, Best & Co., 1880s (Eyrarbakki Icelandic Heritage Centre).

American immigrants. Campaigns celebrating immigrant food and intercultural understanding promoted the stability of vulnerable military installations, including the Allied and NATO bases in Iceland, which were considered essential to North American military defense. Their occupation of the island was motivated by fears that a Nazi (or later Soviet) airbase in Iceland could put enemy bombers within a striking distance of major North American cities (Bittner, 1982: 16). Although Iceland asserted its neutrality and sovereignty, British forces landed in Reykjavík harbour on May 10, 1940. The occupation briefly changed hands between Britain and Canada before the United States assumed control in 1941.

"Cold" Women and Hungry Soldiers: Food and the Allied Occupation of Iceland

Food and what was referred to as "hospitality" represented a serious source of tension between Icelanders and foreign military personnel in the 1940s. Having very recently declared total independence from Denmark, Icelanders were strongly opposed to a foreign military presence and expressed this opposition in a range of ways, writes Daisy Neijmann (2013: 155) in her analysis of gendered relations during the occupation. On the streets of Reykjavík, soldiers could face open resistance, including locals who heckled, spat at them, and engaged them in brawls (John McLure, pers. comms, July 21, 2010; see also Bittner, 1982: 95). In 1949, when news spread that the foreign military presence would be made permanent, massive Icelandic protests in Reykjavík were dispersed with teargas and violence. It was, however, the more subtle campaigns of resistance from women that fuelled fears about the stability of military installations in Iceland and initially made life miserable for foreign military personnel.

Particularly troubling, soldiers reported, was that everyday resistance often took the form of "coldness," particularly from the many local women who shunned all contact with these lonely, isolated men, from dinner invitations to romantic attention (Gates, 1944: 14). This coldness, critics believed, undermined the health of soldiers. In January 1941, *Time* magazine published reports received from 16 Canadian soldiers made "unfit for active service (mostly stomach ulcers)" after their stay in Iceland. Restrictions on food, hospitality, and female companionship, announced *Time*, made their Icelandic posts unbearable. Soldiers were limited to mutton and deprived of "proper" meat and they "were not admitted to Icelandic homes" (Iceland: A Hard Life, 1941: 23).

Soldier nutrition was a rallying point in Allied wartime campaigns, which emphasized civilian sacrifice and rationing to divert better food and resources to fighting forces. Reports of Icelanders withholding food from soldiers were serious. As the 1941 film *Food: Weapon of Conquest* reminded civilians, "the modern fighting man deserves a menu twice as high in food value as that of a civilian… In World War Two, as in Napoleon's time, a nation marches on its stomach" (Legg, 1941).

To help improve the situation in Iceland, Canadian and American governments began to craft tailored propaganda campaigns, using the support of patriotic Icelandic-North American immigrants and their descendants. These campaigns included English-language educational manuals and books on Icelandic language and culture,

pageants, enlistment campaigns, and films like *Iceland on the Prairies*. A copy of the film was translated into Icelandic and sent overseas to remind Icelanders at home of their obligations to their new "guests." After the United States assumed control of the occupation in 1941, a series of American films tackled reports that servicemen were struggling to adapt to life there. "Strictly for Eskimos," a film report on Iceland for servicemen, offered enlisted audiences footage of military personnel dancing with local women and local bakeries to buy delicious local pastries (*U.S. Army Screen Strictkly for the Eskimos, Blessed Event 72702*, n.d.). 20th Century Fox joined the "melting the ice" campaign with the 1942 musical romantic comedy, *Iceland*. The film followed a lonely American GI interested in "Eskimo love rituals" and Olympic figure skater Sonja Henie as his "friendly," often scantily clad Icelandic girlfriend. Though it was designed to promote the occupation, the film's gross cultural inaccuracies and obvious endorsement of sexual relationships with American soldiers caused a major uproar in Iceland, illustrating for officials the importance of using immigrant cultural insiders to create more sensitive, tactful, and effective campaigns.

Friend Torte: Vínarterta's Cold War Career

Following the end of WWII, food endured as a politicized symbol of hospitality during NATO's continued occupation of Iceland during the Cold War. North American state agencies and embassies continued to strategically promote intercultural "friendships" in this climate in ways that complemented their own political and military goals. At home in North America, Franca Iacovetta and Valerie Korinek (2004: 192–93) write that Cold War planners believed that positive pluralist campaigns featuring ethnic food and pageantry could also counteract Communist sentiment by strengthening ethnic loyalty and bonds to Canada and America. Overseas, American agencies crafted and deployed a range of cultural programmes designed to promote support and cooperation with Cold War American military campaigns in the Nordic countries during this period (Danielsen, 2009: 181; Osgood, 2006). A series of Cold War initiatives, including 38.7 million USD in funding between 1948 and 1953 and strategic educational, literary and arts exchanges, promoted the image of a benevolent, vibrant cultural relationship with Iceland (Jónsson, 2004: 69). It was within this context that the popularity of vínarterta grew as a symbol of Icelandic friendship and hospitality (conveniently in part because "vínarterta" could also be mistranslated into English as "friend torte"). While news of the troubling massive Icelandic protests against American military "guests" may have reached American news outlets in the spring of 1949, as many as four million *McCall's Magazine* readers read a very different story about Icelandic hospitality by December. In the special holiday edition of the famous magazine, well-known food columnist Miss Helen McCully had bestowed a special honour on the Icelandic immigrant community by inviting McCall's readers to add "Iceland's Christmas Cake" to their baking repertoire in her popular column, "The Best Cook in Our Town" (Jónsson, 1949: 12) For the Christmas edition, McCully travelled all the way to Bottineau, North Dakota, to visit the humble kitchen of Mrs. Svein Peterson (aka Jóna S. Goodman), a 56-year-old Icelandic-American welfare office caseworker, to try her famous vínarterta. Her

report from Bottineau provided readers with Peterson's recipe and described her warm Icelandic hospitality, a tradition with all people "from that bright and shining land, Iceland." Directly contradicting reports of the anti-NATO riots that spring in Reykjavík, McCully assured North American readers that they could always expect a warm welcome in the home of the "friendly and comfortable" Mrs. Peterson. This kindly Icelandic housewife always kept her door open to "guests" and "a pot of coffee brewing on [her] old fashioned range and, almost certainly, her fabulous Vinarterta, ripe and ready for slicing" (McCully, 1949: 72).

Vínarterta was a politically useful tool for Cold War pluralists who embraced it and other immigrant foods in larger ethnic spectacles after World War II. Alongside "German sauerkraut, Polish pierogi, Ukrainian holubchi, (and) Jewish honey cake," Icelanders' little torte became a new addition in North America's peaceful, bountiful, post-war "ethnic buffet" (Ethnic Smorgasboard at Winnipeg Beach Set for August 3rd, 1970: 12). This shift also offered Icelanders unprecedented external recognition and praise for previously private food traditions and Icelandic immigrant newspapers celebrated vínarterta's new-found fame and subsequent profiles inspired by the 1949 feature (Jónsson, 1949: 12). Mrs. Peterson's "vinsæl vínartertu uppskrift" (popular vínarterta recipe) further cemented the torte's existing popularity—not just as a special dessert but also as a symbol of the community itself in the now more appreciative, curious eyes of Anglo North Americans (Figure 13.5).

Figure 13.5 Politicizing friendly women, food, and hospitality. Still from *Iceland* starring John Payne and Sonja Henie, 20th Century Fox, 1942.

Source: Author's collection.

As an Icelandic "Miss Canada," Margaret Sigvaldason asked attendees at the 1951 Canada Day celebration in Hnausa, Manitoba: Who can deny that "vínarterta (has) not added to our Canadian way of life?" (Sigvaldason, 1951: 5).

"Queen of the tertas": Authority, Memory, and Intergenerational Bonds

Just as vínarterta was cementing its place as the public culinary *pièce de résistance* in Icelandic North America (Walters, 1953: 77), overseas in Iceland it was rapidly being replaced with the more modern Americanized foods that arrived alongside the military presence there. Homeland tourists, the children, and grandchildren of immigrants, who visited Iceland in the 1970s noted with significant disappointment that they could not find any vínarterta. Strangely enough, many Icelanders had not even heard of the dessert so popular a century ago (see Gillmor, 2012). Geir H. Gunnarsson (1978: 2) explained in 1978 that vínarterta had long since passed from fashion in Iceland. "Icelandic eating habits have drastically changed since the last century, especially since World War II when Iceland actually became de-isolated and new foreign habits were introduced," he wrote. Hot dogs, hamburgers, and milkshakes, he reported, "have become to modern-day Icelanders what *rúllupylsa* was to their grandfathers." Visitors to Iceland still might find *randalín*, a layered cake made with fewer layers and featuring store-bought jam, and even some tortes labelled "vínarterta" at special events or markets for Icelandic-North American guests and tourists, but for the most part, "the old vínarterta is no longer existent" in modern Icelandic society (Gunnarsson, 1978: 2).

The demand for vínarterta and disappointment of Icelandic North Americans with the culinary offerings of their ancestral homeland poses interesting questions. Significant political and cultural developments in the first half of the twentieth century help to explain how vínarterta was not only preserved, but transformed into a major community symbol in North America as the same recipe died out at home. And yet, this genealogy does not fully explain the powerful, particular meaning "Vienna torte" had assumed within the Icelandic immigrant community itself beyond wartime and nationalist narratives. Its particularly intense popularity *is* curious. Icelanders imported many different foods, but only vínarterta recipes generate such heated debates among their descendants. Moreover, many if not most community members know of the dessert's Viennese roots and its ambiguous suitability as a traditional, national symbol of "Iceland." Its mid-century fame also fails to fully explain the vínarterta debates. Most Icelandic North Americans do not possess any memory of vínarterta's wartime and Cold War career, and campaign materials like "Iceland on the Prairies" and Jóna Peterson's vínarterta recipe have long passed from popular memory. Indeed, vínarterta's tangled relationship to Icelandic, Canadian, or American nationalism explains little about what the torte means to community members themselves.

Elizabeth Zanoni (2018: 4) contends that scholars should acknowledge the ways that nation-states have co-opted and shaped migrant foods but work to "dislodge research on migration and food from exclusively nation-based perspectives." If this

Icelandic cake fight both pre- and postdates the nationalist spectacles of the 1940s, how can we account for vínarterta's enduring power within the community? Oral histories interviews, memoirs, obituaries, and special tributes reveal that inside and outside of the Icelandic community, rather than a national symbol, the dessert functions as a representation of skill and (often female) authority. As many inexperienced and disappointed North American housewives may have discovered after experimenting with the *McCall's* recipe for "Iceland's Christmas Cake" in 1949, vínarterta preparation usually takes years, even decades, to perfect and requires perseverance and many attempts. Elizabeth Dorey noted of her own experiences learning how to perfect the torte that "my first few times I was overly generous with the filling and the cakes slipped, slid, and slithered when I was trying to cut the 'tower'" (Elizabeth Dorey, pers. comm., December 17, 2017). Indeed, many of the best-known vínarterta makers have been older women who have spent decades perfecting their techniques. As Terri Gilson (2016) reported of her early attempts at the recipe, "Apparently, I need another 40 years to perfect it. Hopefully I'll live that long!"

Family or community members, like Aðalbjörg Brandson, who practised for decades to produce excellent vínarterta, have often enjoyed special status in the community. While some, like Jóna Goodman and expert maker Helen Josephson, gained fame and recognition for their publicized recipes, others protectively guard their "authentic," time-honoured versions of the recipe (as several futile calls for recipe submissions for this study can attest). Personalized obituaries of Icelandic North Americans who were skilled vínarterta makers also regularly mention this as a special accomplishment. For example, when Kristín Gunnlaugson died in Winnipeg in 1983, a special tribute to her in *Lögberg-Heimskringla* described her expertise in producing the torte. Kristín, who was born in Akureyri in 1893, produced exceptional vínarterta "that was recognized as a form of art." According to the tribute, her friends and family referred to Kristín as "Queen of the tertas" (Kristín Gunnlaugson, 1983: 7).

While several accomplished bakers are men, it is this frequent association with older women, and especially the *Amma* or grandmother, that has also made the torte an important symbol for commemorating female generations within Icelandic families, while also creating a point of contact with seemingly abstract and distant roots in nineteenth-century Iceland. From the Ukrainian *Baba* to the Italian *Nonna*, numerous ethnic immigrant communities use food to evoke the image of the grandmother figure (see Swyripa, 1993: 240–48). A similar fixation characterizes Icelandic retellings of the past. As "Sunna" Pam Furstenau of Mountain, North Dakota, writes, her identity and connections to Iceland come from many places, "but the heart of it is my Amma" ("Sunna" Pam Furstenau, pers. comm., November 4, 2011). The Amma has also, to some extent, emerged as a popular public symbol in community celebrations and histories. Since the 1990s, community biography production has been characterized by multiple family publications of Amma-themed biographies, and in 2004 local women in Gimli began selling "Amma dolls" (gray-haired women dressed in traditional Icelandic clothing) at the newly opened Amma's Teahouse to fundraise for heritage

projects (Guðbjartsson, 2004: 8–9). Since the 1980s, Icelandic food stands and restaurants have also used the image of the Amma to attract customers in search of vínarterta, including the "Amma's Kitchen" food stand at Gimli's annual Icelandic Festival. The very endurance of the Icelandic word for grandmother within the Anglicized post-war community further speaks to her exceptional role.

As an embodiment of both absent generations and a distant place and time of origin, the preservation of vínarterta recipes also performs a kind of genealogical function that reminds descendants of earlier generations. This affiliation is due, at least in part, to the central place of vínarterta to intergenerational gatherings when family stories were and are often recounted, including Christmas, weddings, and funerals. As baker Alice Gudmundson explained to a *Winnipeg Tribune* reporter in 1978, vínarterta usually appeared when children listened to stories from their grandparents at Christmas time. After eating dinner and opening presents "we'd spend the rest of the day talking and singing and listening to Grandpa's stories about coming to Canada in 1879. And of course, enjoying all of the wonderful Icelandic baked goods that my grandmother had made" (Gillies, 1978: 34).

The passing down of vínarterta recipes and the assumption of vínarterta-making duties within a family also reveal how the torte acts as an intergenerational binding agent. The death of a family's designated vínarterta maker can compel younger generations to take up the responsibility, often making the process a deeply commemorative and meaningful way of connecting to absent generations. As one woman wrote to a food columnist in 2012, the torte represented her late mother, who was previously responsible for making the torte at Christmas. After her mother passed away, she recalled, "she wept into the dough as she started the annual *vínarterta*," noting that now her mother "is always present every year when I make this" (quote in Gillmor, 2012). Other women similarly noted that they began to attempt to master the torte often when their mothers or another designated vínarterta maker for the family passed away (A Member All Her Life, 2005: 11). Jennifer Miller (pers. comm., February 15, 2010) similarly wrote of the last vínarterta made by her Amma, the importance of the torte in part coming from its ability to stand in, sometimes in profoundly powerful ways, for the older generations of women who made and perfected the recipe. Her Amma always provided her family with a whole vínarterta each year until 2009, but by then …

> (…) [i]t was clear that her health was declining rapidly. She managed one last *vínarterta* for the reunion, but there weren't any extras, and we all knew no more were coming. I had *vínarterta* at breakfast, lunch, and dinner that week, but I've had none since. Amma passed away in fall. I'm down to half a cake in my freezer, and I just can't make myself cut it. I need to eat it soon, or it won't be good any more (and Amma wouldn't like that, either), but I just can't let it be gone.

Rather than a symbol of nations or national belonging, it is vínarterta's powerful role as a representation of nineteenth-century Icelandic migration experience and absent family members that helps account for its weight within the community. As

Donna Gabaccia explains, ethnic food was a medium through which immigrant communities could speak about histories that strayed from more celebratory public renditions (Gabaccia, 2009: 176). Marlene Epp (2016) similarly makes clear in her work on Mennonite food that certain dishes might appear in public as a quaint symbol of immigrant origins or even in cookbooks that celebrated the multicultural nation, but they might also serve to preserve and transmit more complex, personal stories. This process is not just important for personal reflection or observation—it is fundamental to the futures of ethnic communities. Such symbols feed living generations while reminding them, often in a very personal way, of past generations. David Sutton similarly argues that recalling and preparing food ritualistically, as in the vínarterta tradition, instructs younger generations in how to mentally store and recall narratives, mental landmarks, past meals, and past generations. "Food is equally important in creating *prospective memories*, that is, orienting people toward future memories," he writes, helping to transmit and potentially curate the narratives of the past that will be used by future generations. Rather than "loud" public events or formal ways of transmitting knowledge, memories attached to the senses can be some of the most powerful and enduring (Sutton, 2001: 28).

Conclusion

Understanding the origins and meanings of vínarterta culture in the Icelandic-North American community is complex. Indeed, the torte's history reveals so many often radically different chapters of the immigrant past. And yet, this is what arguably makes it one of the most effective representations of the complex and sometimes conflicting personalities and forces that have shaped the community. From its eighteenth-century journey from Vienna to Copenhagen and on to status-conscious nineteenth-century Iceland, it began as a symbol of refinement and ambition that showcased Icelandic women's engagement with Danish and international culinary trends. Entrenched in the Icelandic baking repertoire during the period of mass migration to North America, the torte regularly appeared in immigrant kitchens and bakeries as Icelanders reestablished themselves in the new land. Beyond a larger range of surviving food traditions, vínarterta in particular was transformed into a consummate symbol of "Iceland" and Icelandic ethnicity in spectacles that encouraged support for Allied and Cold War military installations in the 1940s and 1950s.

Beyond public spectacles, however, private vínarterta culture, or the ritualistic production and many arguments that surround the torte, is a compelling phenomenon, and one that largely only exists in North America. Although the torte declined and virtually disappeared in Iceland in the second half of the twentieth century, its popularity grew in North America, alongside a rigid baking tradition that often-shunned alteration. It became, in many respects, a culinary time capsule of nineteenth-century Iceland and a migration era, one that was rigorously preserved within a community that had otherwise undergone a series of radical cultural changes since the 1870s. As one of several material cultural traditions that survived the pressure of Anglicization in Icelandic immigrant homes, vínarterta

became both a positive symbol of Icelandic immigrant culture in public as well as a memento of more complex immigrant family histories in private. Rather than acting as a symbol of nations, it is clear that many community members use vínarterta to preserve family stories of origin and reiterate the bonds between present and future generations of Icelanders, often with a focus on grandmothers and women. Indeed, the assumption that the torte simply represents loyalties to or origins in a particular nation-state misses the density of the torte's history—and some of the main reasons why Icelandic North Americans still fight about vínarterta.

Notes

1 Originally published in *Gastronomica 19*(4): 28–41.
2 Written response from a community member, name withheld, February 10, 2010, 1.
3 Louise Kahler, comment on Valgardson (2012) (reproduced with permission).
4 Sveinn Þórarinsson, Diary. 1869, June 6. *Héraðsskjalasafnið á Akureyri*. Nr 68C, 8vo, 673–679.
5 By November 1949, the US Department of State officially launched "Program to Decrease the Vulnerability of the Icelandic Government to Communist Seizure of Power" to "raise the prestige of America in the eyes of Icelanders." US Department of State, "Program to Decrease the Vulnerability of the Icelandic Government to Communist Seizure of Power," November 25, 1949, in *Foreign Relations 1950*, vol. III (S/S-NSC Files: Lot 63 D 351: NSC 40 Series), 1457–59, on 1458, 1459.

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14 Collecting Bald Cypress Knees

An Exercise in Symbiotic Interaction[1]

Ewa Domańska

For many years already, I have observed the emergence of a paradigm of knowledge that is post-anthropocentric, post-Western, post-secular and post-global (perhaps even post-planetary). I do believe that we need a scholarly mobilization that would help to build in the future a form of integrative and holistic knowledge that includes (human and natural) sciences, as well as various indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing. In my attempts to contribute to processes of building such knowledge, first, I am interested in experiments that neutralize the dominance of the Western type of knowledge as manifested in science as a privileged (and dominant) type of knowledge (knowledge organization, production and representation). Secondly, in my view, art (and art-based research) plays an important role in the process of building such knowledge. Art manifests an anticipatory potential of knowledge and helps to enhance various mechanisms (also capacities) of adaptation and resilience. As W.J.T. Mitchell (2005: 196) writes: some images "go before us," manifest certain cosmologies and are "condensed world pictures." As such, as I would say, (some) pictures, as well as texts and ideas, belong to what I call "prefigurative humanities," and "prefigurative art," by which I mean art that is capable of preshaping the future "ahead of time" (Domańska, 2021: 158). Such art prefigures the impending future while at the same time participating in building various scenarios of the future. Thirdly, I am interested in bridging human and non-human perspectives, in biocommunication, phyto-, and zoo-semiotics and in challenging epistemic privilege to knowledge building by humans. Finally, I treat seriously the idea that non-humans (non-human animals, plants, things) should be treated as persons (new animism), also as elders who are (or might become for Westerners) our teachers (as it is in indigenous cosmologies).

This condensed and declarative introduction aims at providing background for my chapter. Here I will focus on the bald cypress tree (*Taxodium distichum* (L.) Rich.), considering both the function of its specific root formations known as "knees" and also their role as commercial goods, artworks, and objects in collections. I will argue that the presence in the surrounding environment of objects made from the knees of the bald cypress, as well as this tree's place in parks and gardens, can trigger humans' chemical memory, thus evoking the atavistic aspects of their current existence. Such an approach enables me to reflect on the problem of symbiotic interaction with plants and reflect on how humans could "develop a sense of botanical belonging," as Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013: 216) has put it. I will

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speculate about chemical and physical plant communication as a decisive aspect of life, growth and death of living beings (including humans). I will locate my reflection on collecting bald cypress knees in the context of knowledge obtained from scientific literature on this tree its habitat, deep history and behaviour, the functions of the knees, as well as plant communicative competences. I will also challenge an anthropocentric perspective and consider people as something that happens to trees and not the other way around (cf. Latour, 1999: 146).

The Kórnik Arboretum (a Note from Autoethnography)

My story begins with my geographical and ecological location as an inhabitant of the city of Poznań in Poland and with personal experience of working as a tourist guide. One of the most visited tourist attractions in the area is Kórnik Castle, whose history dates back to the fifteenth century, together with the arboretum attached to it. The Arboretum in Kórnik is the largest and oldest in Poland, as well as the fourth largest dendrological garden in Europe. It was founded in the first half of the nineteenth century (1826–1860) by Tytus Działyński (1796–1861). His son, Jan Kanty Działyński (1829–1880), was a well-known philanthropist and trained biologist, who not only created a wonderful art collection in Gołuchów (together with his wife Izabela Czartoryska), but had a particular interest in dendrology, which led to one of the richest collections in Europe being located in Kórnik (Instytut Dendrologii, n.d.).

Each time I have visited Kórnik, I am fascinated by one of the most interesting trees that can be admired at the Arboretum—the bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum* (L.) Rich.). It was first introduced to Polish territories in 1816, while the largest and oldest specimen in Poland was planted in Kórnik in 1828 or 1834 (inventory number 190, section XIV of the park), meaning that it is now at least 187 years old. It is an isolated tree that is often described as "the park's most unusual attraction" (Stecki and Kulesza, 1926: 86). It grows in a boggy meadow and has spawned numerous cypress knees (those on the western side are up to 40 cm tall and have disseminated some ten metres away from the tree, while those on the eastern side, where the soil is drier are less numerous and poorly developed). The tree currently measures 515 cm in diameter, while in 1926 it was 239 cm (Browicz, 1960: 212).

I had a feeling that I was being "summoned" by the aboveground bald cypress roots, that they were "calling" me, demanding my attention, and "wanted to be" recognized (Figure 14.1). They manifested what I would associate with the uncanny, the formless, the abject (Figure 14.2). I associated their appearance with preserved (fossilized) decay, and I was trying to recognize in their formless figures' familiar shapes (some of them resemble heads painted by Francis Bacon; or metamorphosized human and non-human remains—necromorphs, necrophores—that are emerging from below the ground). After years of research, I have become aware that all these studies I have done on this phenomenon were merely a strategy for domesticating the presence of these strange organic formations that seem to come from another

Figure 14.1 Bald Cypress, Kórnik.
Source: Photo: E. Domańska (2016).

world—from a deep past, as "connectors" that link what is below and above, what is gone and what is in front of us.

The Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum* (L.) Rich.)

Bald cypress is a relict species and is among one of the oldest trees on Earth as well as the oldest-known wetland tree species on Earth. Bald cypress trees are conifers, which have seeds borne in cones, and are sometimes called "a living fossil." Fossilized traces of it dating back as far as the Mesozoic period (65 million years ago). It was in the Miocene epoch (5–24 million years ago), when the landscape was dominated by swampy forests, that the cypress flourished. Recent research has shown that the oldest-known living specimen can be found along the Black River in the state of North Carolina: at 2,624 years (in 2018) it is the oldest known living tree in eastern North America (Dasgupta, 2019). The bald cypress was one of the first "New World" trees to be transplanted to the European continent, reaching it around 1640 having been brought from Virginia to England by the botanist and gardener John Tradescant the Younger (1608–1662). It was then described by John Parkinson in his *Theatrum Botanicum* under the name *Cupressus Americana* (1640) (Watson, 1985: 507). It is first mentioned in historical sources in a journal published in 1709 by the English explorer, naturalist, and writer John Lawson (1709) in *A New Voyage to Carolina*. A century later it had been reclassified and is since then known under its current taxon, *Taxondium distichum* (*Annales du Muséum d'histoire naturelle*, 1810: 298).

The bald cypress is native and characteristic of the wetlands of the southeastern USA (including those around the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi Delta and Florida's swamplands) and it is alternatively called the swamp cypress (Brown and Montz, 1986). It might also be called a hydrophyte—a concept used to identify plants that are adapted for life in water, saturated soil or mud (Tiner, 1991). The most favourable ecosystem for this species is the swamp forests that are typical of Louisiana, which is home to the largest volume of bald cypress trees, as well as North and South Carolina, and Florida. In 1963, the bald cypress was declared the state tree of Louisiana, while in some states, including Florida, the unlicensed removal of bald cypress knees is illegal. It plays an important role in ecosystems, including surface water storage, helping to reduce downstream floods, maintain hydrophilic plant communities, retain sediments and nutrients, and maintain habitats for other species of flora and fauna. It is also used for the restoration of wetlands (Parresol, 2002: 4).

The bald cypress is resistant to hurricane wind, water, salinity, pathogens and pests. It is a hardy, durable and water-resistant tree. Native Americans called it the "old man of the water" while also using it for piles in constructing houses. The Seminoles native people of Florida called cypress hatch-in-e-haw, which means "wood everlasting," and they used it for making dugout canoes. Timucua, Seminole, and Mikosukee peoples used cypress wood for fibres, houses, cooking tools, toys, drums, ox bows, and coffins (The Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). Owing to the tree's aerial roots (known as knees) often being hollow, Native Americans also used them as beehives. White settlers used cypress for making railway sleepers, jetties, boats, fences, barrels, doors, furniture, and coffins, as well as in bridge construction. Bald cypress was a particularly important construction resource for the southern US plantations that were located near rivers and swampy areas. The trees were harvested to clean swamps for rice crops and used to make log boats and canoes for transporting cotton, rice, and other goods (Brown et al., 2011: 94). In his *A New Voyage to Carolina* Lawson (1709: 96–97) observes:

> Cypress is not an Ever-green with us, and is therefore call'd the bald Cypress, because the Leaves, during the Winter-Season, turn red, not recovering their Verdure till the Spring. These Trees are the largest for Height and Thickness, that we have in this Part of the World; some of them holding thirty-six Foot in Circumference. Upon Incision, they yield a sweet-smelling Grain, tho' not in great Quantities; and the Nuts which these Trees bear plentifully, yield a most odoriferous Balsam, that infallibly cures all new and green Wounds, which the Inhabitants are well acquainted withal. Of these great Trees the Pereaugers and Canoes are scoop'd and made; which sort of Vessels are chiefly to pass over the Rivers, Creeks, and Bays; and to transport Goods and Lumber from one River to another. Some are so large, as to carry thirty Barrels, tho' of one entire Piece of Timber. Others, that are split down the Bottom, and a piece added thereto, will carry eighty, or an hundred. Several have gone out of our Inlets on the Ocean to Virginia, laden with Pork, and

> other Produce of the Country. Of these Trees curious Boats for Pleasure may be made, and other necessary Craft. (…) This Wood is very lasting, and free from the Rot. A Canoe of it will outlast four Boats, and seldom wants Repair. They say that a Chest made of this Wood, will suffer no Moth, or Vermin, to abide therein.

Probably one of the most interesting historical problems has to do with bald cypress forests as a refuge for enslaved people who escaped from plantations and were called Maroons (French *marron* – feral or fugitive; Spanish *cimarrón* – escaped, wild, unruly, or needing to be tamed). They formed small communities in the swamp, healing their wounds and then adapting to life in the swamps. They developed swamp survival techniques, such as knowledge of herbal medicines, shingle riving, basketry, some unusual old-time swamp fishing techniques, outdoor cooking and sometimes building cabins on the cypress trees (Diouf, 2014: 98, 222). Nowadays, the swamps occupied by Maroons have become important heritage sites where people can learn about life on the plantations, the history of escapes, and bravery of enslaved people who fought for "hope, passion, freedom and justice" (Bonala, 2020). As William Tynes Cowan (2005: 163) claims:

> The swamp was a marginalized space for a marginalized population. In a scene such as Cable describes, the swamp becomes the natural habitat for the primitive (grotesque/gothic) African American; it merely adds to the picture of free blacks failing into barbarity. (…) [A]n American swamp becoming an African jungle to which African Americans are "naturally" drawn.

One can say that swamp cypresses living with Maroon communities should be granted the status of ecowitnesses (and/or ecological evidence of slavery). Bald trees can also constitute an interesting (eco)historical source if we pay more attention to dendrography, i.e., writing and symbols etched into trees (sometimes also referred to as tree graffiti or "arborglyphs") (Hartl et al., 2019; Summerfield, 2010).

Bald cypress, Taxodium distichum, was also used for medical purposes, as it was known for its antibacterial and antifungal functions. For example, the resin obtained from the cones of the bald cypress seeds has been used to treat cuts and wounds on the skin. Bald cypress is also valued by scientists who study tree rings in order to monitor past climate changes and build dendrochronology. For them they are "living chronicles of climate variability" (Perkins, 2017: 6876; Stahle et al., 2012) that can be used to reconstruct drought, precipitation, and streamflow.

The Enigma of Bald Cypress Knees

This tree features the species' characteristic above-ground, knee-shaped or conical roots, which have branched off the shallow roots just beneath the soil and then grow vertically, coming out of the soil or water several metres, sometimes even over 12 metres, away from the tree, while reaching up to 1.5 metres in height.

They are called "knees." The term "knee" probably refers to the use of curved knees to support the hulls of wooden ships (The Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). The roots first attracted scholarly interest in the early nineteenth century, with most scholars at the time indicating that "no cause can be assigned to their existence" or "no apparent function for which the knees are adapted has been ascertained" (Lamborn, 1890: 66). In his 1890 article Robert H. Lamborn describes the knees as "protuberances," a "striking peculiarity," with the tree "roots conspicuous protuberances" as well as "the life-saving organ" that "manifest want of adaptation." Furthermore, he cites various other scholars calling the knees "morphological adaptations to life" (Nathan R. Beane), "peculiar conical growths" (Harvey E. Kennedy), "famous attribute of *Taxodium distichum*" and "vertical woody outgrowth" (George K. Rogers), "curious and large (…) woody projections" (Craig E. Martin and Sarah K. Francke) and noting their resemblance to termite mounds (Christopher H. Briand).

Since the nineteenth century, the knees' function has been disputed and many hypotheses have been formed. The oldest and most popular are based on observational evidence and originated in 1848, with Montroville W. Dickenson and Andrew Brown presenting the breathing (pneumatophoric or the aeration) hypothesis that states that the knees' task is to provide air to a tree that lives in boggy territories where oxygen is in short supply in the soil. According to this hypothesis, the knees form a kind of vascular root, also known as aerial roots or pneumatophores (i.e., air carriers—Gr. πνεῦμᾰ/*pneuma*—air, breath, spirit, breathing and φορος/*phoros*—transferring, carriers; a derivative of φέρειν/*pherein*—to carry). As adherents of this theory claim, air reaches the roots through openings resembling lenticels and also through the tree's ground tissue. Pneumatophores thus form part of the tree's vascular system. However, many empirical studies have failed to provide evidence supporting this theory (Martin and Francke, 2015). A second hypothesis, developed in 1992 by William N. Puilliam, states that the Knees enable methane gas emissions (the methane emission hypothesis). In 1890, Robert H. Lamborn presented his mechanical support hypothesis, arguing that the knees' function as an anchor and stabilize the tree in wet and boggy environments. It was also Lamborn who in his study mentioned that cypress knees are vegetative reproduction organs (the vegetative reproduction hypothesis), but he dismissed this idea. Instead, he argued for the hypothesis that the knees store nutrients, later supported by others, such as Clair A. Brown (Brown and Montz, 1986).

As Christopher H. Briand (2000–2001: 24) states in a summary of debates over the functions of bald cypress knees, perhaps it is the case that they evolved in relation to changing environmental conditions and consequently lost their original function (cf. Rogers, 2014; Whitford, 1956). Although their role thus remains a mystery, a recent study by George K. Rogers (2021: 1) concludes that:

> While not ruling out the common perception of knees serving as "pneumatophores" ventilating the roots, the results suggest a critical role aerating the phloem as well as the axial parenchyma, ray parenchyma, and cambium within the knee itself.

Sophisticated anatomical studies of bald cypress knees have shown that they are complex phenomena, as would be expected of such "striking peculiarities."

Bald cypress knees might cause problems to homeowners who have difficulties with mowing the lawn. A homeowner sent the following online request to the AgCenter at the LSU College of Agriculture in 2015 (LSU AgCenter, 2015):

> Is there anything that can be done to remove them chemically without damaging the actual tree? – asks a homeowner. Some of the smaller knees have been hammered below the ground level by me using a large hammer or maul.

He received the following reply from a horticulture specialist:

> The most common way to deal with the knees is to cut them off. Dig down around a knee a few inches deep. Use a pruning saw (check at your local nurseries) to cut the knee off an inch or two below the soil surface. This will not hurt the tree. The hammer or maul would also work but are more damaging to the roots. There are no chemical solutions for this issue.

Dendrologists state that the bald cypress possesses significant adaptive capabilities. Those growing in Poland demonstrate resilience to local climate conditions and are not harmed by harsh winters. Only a few actually grow in boggy ground and possess pneumatophores. Many specimens grow on uplands and/or in dry conditions, which shows that swampy ground is not the only nor necessarily the best location for them. The tree can adapt to a wide variety of soil types. It grows both in light soils (podzol) and in heavy soils (alluvial soil, clay soil), although the best soil seems to be clay-sandy with a constant high level of moisture and in close proximity to water sources (Szymanowski, 1958: 230–234). Polish dendrologists claim that as far as the species growing in the Kórnik Arboretum are concerned, it is only the bald cypress that have become "completely acclimatized," while other exotic trees constitute "dendrological peculiarities" that require care and "find little further uses in Poland" (Browicz, 1960: 216). Perhaps, then, the bald cypress is one of the trees of the future?

Bald Cypress as a Mentor

Robin Will Kimmerer—a botanist and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation in her known book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*—stresses that human people as "the younger brothers of Creation" must look for "teachers among the other species for guidance" (Kimmerer, 2013: 9, 42). "The people were attentive students and borrowed solutions from the plants, which increased their likelihood of survival—writes Kimmerer. The plants adapt, the people adopt." "If plants are our oldest teachers, why not let them teach?"—she asks (Kimmerer, 2013: 229, 232).

As a trained scientist, Kimmerer complains about science that is reductionist, mechanistic, and objective, and thus treats plants as objects. It is only recently

that scientists have begun to recognize that plants communicate. I am interested in scientists that study plant communication from a biosemiotics perspective. As I learned from Günther Witzany and his very informative review of studies related to plant communication, plants are not "passive prisoners of their surroundings" or "growth automatons" but "active organisms" that have "communicative competences" and capable of distinguishing between self and non-self. In fact, as scholars claim, "plants fundamentally depend on successful communication" that happens on different levels (multilevel plant communication): "a) between plants and microorganisms, fungi, insects and other animals [metaorganismc]; b) between different plant species as well as between members of the same plan species [interorganismic]; c) between cells and in cells of the plant organism [intraorgnismic]." Plants communicate via chemical signs (chemical communication) or by electric, hydraulic, and mechanical signs or physical communication (Witzany, 2006: 169). One should also remember that plans are capable of establishing symbiotic relations (with bacteria or fungi, for example—can also feign mutualism) and producing defence mechanisms (they might warn each other). Plants also have memory, and it plays crucial role in their adaptation behaviour. As Witzany (2006: 174) states:

> A wounded plant organizes an integrated molecular, biochemical and cell biological response. (…) Through their life cycles and their growth zones, plants develop a life history of environmental experience that they can pass on to later generations and, should they themselves grow to be several hundred years old, utilize themselves. Even small plants store stress experiences in their memories and then use these memories to coordinate future activities.

For a long time already scholars representing different fields have applied biomimicry to various challenges and problems. Connecting nature and technology, biology and innovation, life and design, it is based on an idea that over billion years of evolution nature developed various strategies, chemical recipes and solutions (adaptive mechanism) to changing environment and thus it might serve as a mentor and inspire approaches that might help to find sustainable solutions to ecological as well as social problems. Thus, biomimicry is about learning from nature and then emulating natural forms, processes, and ecosystems to create more sustainable designs; biomimicry is transformative and supposed to integrate the human species into the natural processes of Earth (Benyus, 1997).

Thus, if we were to ask what we can learn from bald cypress, a botanist would say that we can study how nature manages stasis since one of the functions its complex root system is to anchor and stabilize the tree against water, wind, and other external factors. Scholars come with various ideas of how to apply of this specific adaptive feature. They have reflected, for example, on "the buttressed foundation [that] reinforces skyscrapers against harsh weather events by broadening its base, and dispersing impact" (Lintott et al., n.d.: 76). Architects refer to bald cypresses when designing homes that function like trees (Bark House; McCurry, 2016). I consider this aspect of research on bald cypresses to be of particular importance since it connects science, humanities and art as well as indigenous (traditional

ecological) knowledges that always treat plants (especially trees) as teachers (considered as holders of knowledge and as guides).

The Cypress Knee Museum

Bald cypress knees have fascinated people to such an extent that Thomas (Tom) Gaskins Jr. (1909–1989) founded the Cypress Knee Museum (formerly Cypress Kneeland) in Palmdale, Florida (along US 27, a major tourist route at that time), which was officially opened in 1951 and gained fame as "an eccentric old-Florida attraction" (Williams, 2014).

Gaskins, who is sometimes described as visionary woodsman/woodcarver, had been fascinated by the knees since the 1930s when he moved from Arcadia to Palmdale with his family. He settled by Fisheating Creek and started a cypress knee business (cf. Dale, 2004). In 1937 he became the only person to receive a US patent (no. 2,069,580) for products made of bald cypress knees. He later put his works on display in 1939–40 in the Florida pavilion of the New York World's Fair. The patent entitled "Article of manufacture made from cypress knee" (Gaskins, 1937) states the following:

> This invention relates to an article of manufacture made from a cypress knee or like natural growth. One of the objects of the invention is the production of a vase or pot for growing flowers, particularly designed for tropical or moisture-loving plants, which by its construction maintains a humid atmosphere above the soil in the pot and conserves the moisture of the soil itself.

However, Gaskins produced many different objects. Noting the various shapes and figures in knees, he started making sculptures and everyday items out of them (including candlesticks, clocks, bookends, (wall) vases, pots and thermometers), trying to maintain their natural form to the greatest possible extent. What became of a knee, he stated, depended on its original shape.

Gaskins prepared the materials for production by carefully heating them, removing the bark, or even licking the wood fibres in order to create a smooth surface with a silky shine. The next stage involved leaving the knees in the sun for between three weeks and several months in order for them to acquire a "tanned" colour. Finally, the objects were waxed and polished. This process turned "masterpieces of nature" into "things of beauty" which were then sold for anything between a few cents and thousands of dollars, depending on the amount of labour Gaskins had invested.

Brochures advertising the museum were directed at "collectors of exceptional and artistic" items, with Gaskins comparing the Knees to orchids as he stressed their unique appearance, inimitability and exceptional nature, features all connected to the deep-rooted existence of the forms that had emerged over millions of years of evolution, adapting to the environment and surviving fires, floods and

Figure 14.2 The uncanny, the formless, the abject. Bold Cypress, Kórnik.
Source: Photo: Ewa Domańska (2016).

human activities (Gaskins, n.d. a: 3). The brochures often repeat the claim that "Cypress Knees cannot be duplicated," a message that Gaskins directed at those who attempted to imitate his original idea. This creative American advertised his products in the following way (Gaskins, n.d. a: 7):

> Some day I hope to see you the particular Cypress Knee that fits your need or taste. One grew for you and I shall try to find it for you. From an educational standpoint alone, everyone who admires the beautiful should have at least one of these "Masterpieces of Nature". Better still, start a collection of rare Cypress Knee products. It will give a great deal of pleasure, your friends will admire it and it will be something that should grow in value as the years pass.

Gaskins (n.d. a: 6) was aware of scientific knowledge regarding the function of the knees.

> Many theories have been propounded as to the purpose of Cypress Knees. Some have theorized that Knees act as an anchorage for the Cypress Tree. Some suggest that the tree gets air through the Knee during high water. But some trees have no Knees, and for long periods, all Knees belonging to the Mother tree are entirely covered by water. Then too, trees breathe through their leaves. However, the water level does affect the height of the Cypress Knee. In declivities where the water is deep at times, the Knees grow correspondingly tall, and towards the edge of a Swamp where the ground is higher, the Knees may be only a few inches high. The size of the Knee in circumference and height is also determined by the size of the tree, the size of the root from which it grows, and its age.

He also learned by observation and by experimenting on these objects. In a different brochure from the 1950s he noted (Gaskins, n.d. b: 3):

> Below are pictures of knees which I caused to grow like this. I have others in the swamps which I have been working on since 1937. This is part of the proof that the unusual forms result from damage. The information here and in the Museums is the result of my experiments with cypress knees. These things were not known prior to this work. Prior to 1952, all dictionaries that I could find stated that cypress knees were hollow. Cypress knees are normally solid. I offered to write a definition of cypress knee for two dictionaries, but think I hurt their feelings as one did not reply and another said thanks, but they were going to read up on cypress knees and they could handle it. They did not know that I have written or caused to be written most everything that has been written about cypress knees. If they aren't careful, they will get the definition wrong again. In the Museum, you can see step by step illustrations of how a few knees do become hollow.[2]

Gaskins had his own laboratory located behind his house where he tried to solve the mystery of unusual shapes of cypress knees. He conducted experiments in "controlled knee growth" to make them grow around/with various objects such as bottles, flint arrowheads, a pewter cup or a telephone receiver, while attempting to control their shapes with wire and weights. In the brochures from 1950s, he indicated that the museum is "also scientific, as many examples of controlled growth are shown. Knees grown around things, writing grown in knees, etc" (Gaskins, n.d. c: 2–3).

Gaskins also has carved names in knees and "watched as nature healed the cuts into a living name" (Clarke, 1985). He also made cuts and observed if and how knees changed shape. As Hunn (1971: 7) claims, Gaskins "believed that the strange shapes result from accidental (or deliberate) damage to a growing knee." Experimenting and observing these knees for years and sometimes for decades, he succeeded in making the knee grow around the object and demonstrated how some knees adjusted their shapes to cover the cuts. In one of the Museum brochures, Gaskins (n.d. a: 4) says:

> Unlike unusual rock and land formations which nature sculptures by action of the wind, rain, sun and accidents, the reverse is true in forming an unusual Cypress Knee. The Cypress Knee is a living thing and it fights back at the elements and accidents. A scar, instead of causing an indentation in the Knee, causes a layer of new growth to develop over the scar. Each scar lays a new foundation which has its effect on normal growth for the life of the Knee. Thereby the shape of the Cypress Knee records its history somewhat as a person records his past in his personality.
>
> The above is my contribution to knowledge of this little-known wood. I know this because I have carved down inside many Cypress Knees and have observed old scars and the wood that grew over them; also, I have Knees growing now in the swamps that I have scarred and rescarred every spring for many, many years. A young Knee will heal over a scar within a year. Some old Knees will not heal over in ten years.[3]

I do not recall if early studies on bald cypress knees claim that they are hollow. Scholars know that they are solid but might become hollow with age. Stating that he knows the extensive literature on bald cypress knees that developed from the middle of nineteenth century, and claiming that "I have written or caused to be written most everything that has been written about cypress knees," does not prove that he was aware of all these studies. It is also hard to evaluate his "discovery" that the unusual forms of knees result from damage. However, it seems that he did not know that Native Americans used hollow knees as beehives. Gaskins (n.d. a: 6) claimed:

> From the beginning of time up until a few years ago, the Cypress Knee was of no use to people. Sportsmen had admired them in the swamps, and

> bumped against them. A very few artistically-inclined people had collected then, as they were. Making things out of the Cypress Knee is my original idea.[4]

After Gaskins' death in 1998 and a burglary in 2000, in which many objects in the collection were stolen, the site was closed and fell into ruin. However, there are attempts to secure the site and build a museum on the culture and ecology of the Fisheating Creek area (Williams, 2014).

"Modern Art? Ancient Art? Natural Art? You name it"

In the 1930s, when Gaskins was establishing the "cypress knee industry," he produced commercial objects but later came to see knees as art objects produce by nature (or examples of art in nature). Gaskins called them "masterpieces of nature" and encouraged visitors to start their own collections of Cypress Knees or to buy a piece "if you are a collector of the unusual and artistic." The museum store offered knees as art objects.

Gaskins considered himself as an artist who works with hands, head and heart. In his article "Art from a Cypress Swamp" (1971: 5) Max Hunn comments that Gaskins "feels that these natural manifestations can outshine the most popular modernistic artists. Why all the uproar over modem art?" Tom Gaskins challenges. "Nature's been creating modem masterpieces for centuries. Cypress knees are beautiful examples. They're abstract, yet they're ancient-far older than the oldest painting and sculpture. Can any modem artist duplicate them?"

Gaskins produced various types of art objects of very different sizes: some that were with the bark on were called "rustic," and some—called De Luxe – were stripped and kept in the sun for weeks or months to dry and acquire colour. The artist (like many visitors) perceived various shapes in the knee formations, with Gasking naming them after resemblances to persons, animals or things. The most popular was "Mrs. [Lady] Hippopotamus Wearing a Carmen Miranda Hat," "Bona Lisa," "Madonna and Child." There are still many advertisements (on eBay or WorthPoint for example) where you can buy Gaskins' cypress knees, which are usually advertised as "Vintage Tom Gaskins Cypress Knee Art Sculpture" or as "a great piece of American Maritime Folk Art."

Hann suggested that the swamp "inspires a new form of artistry" (Hunn, 1971: 5). However, David Bourdon (1965) in an interesting article "The Driftwood Aesthetics" referred to Gaskins' art when reflecting on collecting various products of nature such as shells, stones, and rocks as well as driftwood. Bourdon noted that collecting driftwood was particularly popular in the 1950s and Florida's swamps served as a resource for such objects. However, he acknowledged that "the incredible saga of the Florida driftwood industry" originated in the mid-1930s with Tom Gaskins. "Can driftwood be art?"—asked Bourdon. In an interesting way, the article suggests that when one looks at the driftwood and discovers a certain shape in it, it is "a creative act." The author also cites Harold Rosenberg who claims that

"The question of the driftwood is: Who found it?" No need to say that many artists used driftwoods in their assemblages, but Bourdon (1965: 32) is interested in

> stylistic similarities between driftwood and Abstract Expressionism both of which rely to such large extent upon gesture, chance and spontaneity. The aesthetic content and quality of an Action Painting or a piece of driftwood must be determined by the expressiveness of the "felt life" objectified in the work as well as the degree of artistic perception in the spectator.

What is particularly important to my argument here is Bourdon's observation that "what excites us in the finished product is the *historic record of its own formation*.[5] In nature, it is the quality of expressive gesture that brings driftwood close to art" (Bourdon, 1965: 32; cf. Pétursdóttir, 2020; Pétursdóttir, Olsen, 2018). Driftwood indeed suggests "a weird presence" (to cite E.H. Gombrich) and is—as Bourdon suggests—like "a decorative *memento mori*" whose "morbidity" and decaying condition is a source of attraction. With driftwood coming to be considered artistic after the WWII, it symbolizes destructive powers, ruination and displacement.

However, even if brochures from the 1960s (Gaskin, n.d. d: 2–3) mention that in the Museum's sales room one might find cypress knees as well as "a large selection of weathered wood, commonly called 'driftwood,'" the cypress knees are not driftwood. Knees do not drift in the water, being pushed by the waves to the beach. The knees that ended up in Gaskins' museum were not found, displaced from their natural environment by natural forces or transported by wind or water. They were harvested, cut and brutally disconnected by Gaskins from the tree; so, colonized, objectified and commercialized in the form of "taxidermic" (to use Bourdon's term) objects and called "art." I want to make the point that by presenting knowledge on bald cypress and its knees from across the humanities (history), science (botany) and traditional ecological knowledge, I am able to critically approach the problem of turning the knees into "masterpieces of nature" (commercial and art objects). And what I discover are the deeply anthropocentric, Western and capitalistic aspects of Gaskins' Museum of Bold Cypress Knees. In the context of the arguments outlined above about the deep history of the bald cypress and the historical value of the bald cypress swamps as refuge for slaves (and the trees as eco-witnesses), the important functions of the bald tree for the environment (especially for sustaining wetland biodiversity, maintaining water quality and flood control, etc.) and its knees for the tree's life and well-being (botany), discoveries of plants communication competences (biosemiotcs) and finally learning from trees and treating them as the ancestors and elders (traditional ecological knowledges)—it is impossible (at least for me) to perceive knees in the same way as Gaskins did.

Paraphrasing Donna Haraway's approach to animals, I would say that cypress knees are cypress knees, they are not just wood, everyday objects or art. They are kind of "living persons" with very concrete functions and as such their life has intrinsic value. Note that Gaskins called knees "living things" and he himself observed how knees react when their growth is controlled. They indeed have "wired presence" since they are coming from a different world—a very deep past; they are not representational, and they are beyond our imagination since our perception and memory is not able to identify their formless characters. The human desire to

see shapes in their form seems to be a way of domesticating (i.e. controlling) their "radical otherness." In fact, I'd rather not use the term "otherness" but say that I see them as non-self (since we have common ancestry and are kin). Following Kimmerer, who was cited above, I would say that they help humans to "develop a sense of botanical belonging" (Kimmerer, 2013: 216).

Towards a Symbiotic Biocultural History

What research problems and questions does the above case raise? Firstly, the central object of interest is a prehistoric tree whose existence reaches back into the Mesozoic epoch, the age of dinosaurs and a time when conifers dominated and flourished. But this was also the era of the great extinction of species caused by a meteor impact, a cooling climate and falling sea-levels. The bald cypress is a relic of a distant past: it is "mythical," fantastic and belongs to another world. Its place in the plant world is equivalent to that of the dinosaur in the animal kingdom. Secondly, the case outlined above is illustrative of the popular cultural activity of creating collections of natural objects. Making bald cypress knees part of a collection leads, we can assume, to the loss of the functions performed in the natural environment. This means shifting away from the roles involved in being a pneumatophore, providing carbohydrate and nutrient storage, or serving as an anchor fixing the tree in wetlands, and moving instead towards becoming objects of aesthetic contemplation while also serving as items for everyday use, including clocks and candlesticks. Thirdly, the case outlined above encourages us to view the history of this object from the perspective of big (and deep) history or the grand history of the life of the planet (cf. Christian, 2004; Smail, 2008; Spier, 2010).

The hypothesis presented here is that the presence of objects made of bald cypress knees or the presence of the tree in parks and gardens triggers humans' chemical memory, stimulating atavistic elements of their current existence. Following Lynn Margulis' theory of symbiogenesis, it could be argued that we are referred back *pars pro toto* not only to our plant and mammal ancestors, but indeed even deeper into the past—to the "heritage of the 'primeval metabolism,'" to prehistoric symbiosis, cohabitation, coexistence and existing in close, direct and organic contact with other lifeforms (Margulis, 1998: 79). Current coexistence with bald cypress knees (veiled through their function as objects in a collection and/or everyday items) provides both a memory of common origins and a past organic symbiosis, as well as a reminder that we live in a symbiotic world and that we are, essentially, symbiotic holobionts (Gilbert et al., 2012).

Investigating collections of bald cypresses can inspire research both in the field of dendrosemiotics, as well as a symbiotic biocultural history that refers not only to the history of humans as cultural beings but also to their existence as carbon-based lifeforms rooted in the world of nature. In both cases, these fields and approaches would contribute to the creation of the biohumanities, in the context of which processes connected to carbon chemistry (biosemiotics) become as important to understanding the life of the world/planet as historical processes (cultural semiotics). Furthermore, questions relating to the development of the historical process as rooted in notions of conflict are thus neutralized and instead supplemented by

notions of collaboration, cooperation and symbiotic coexistence that, of course, are not necessarily free of antagonism or violence. As Margulis (1998: 98) notes:

> Symbiotic interaction is the stuff of life on a crowded planet. Our symbiogenesis composite core is far older than the recent innovation we call the individual human. Our strong sense of difference from any other life-form, our sense of species superiority, is a delusion of grandeur. (…) Multicomposition is our nature.

Applying Margulis' idea of "symbiotic interaction" to cultural investigations promotes the legitimacy, usefulness and indeed necessity of the ideas of cooperation, collaboration, and coexistence for the survival of species and the planet itself, which are all important values in our conflicted world. These ideas are aligned with current discussions in the humanities around the concepts of cosmopolitanism, neighbourliness, forgiveness, critical hope and love as a political idea that have been developed by scholars including Kwame Appiach, Jacques Derrida and Luc Boltanski. They also create connections to attempts made by scholars in the posthumanities, including Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, to transcend anthropocentrism and the nature-culture divide, to rethink the idea of the human in the context of relations between the human/nonhuman, and to the idea of life as a dynamic force of becoming (zoe). The work in these fields confirms the idea that everything is interconnected, thus suggesting that semiosis cannot take place without symbiosis.

In light of what has been discussed in this article, collection might appear to be a type of affective and behavioural drive to collect traces of a fragmented world in order to restore at least a semblance of its true totality. Of course, this drive is so strongly "cultured" that its atavistic dimension is neutralized by the aesthetic aspects of collection and creating collections. This drive also points to "constitutive absence" as a natural place for things to orientate themselves around. This kind of thinking can still be aligned with Krzysztof Pomian's (1990: 5) ideas regarding collection. He underlined (although with different intentions to those of this article) that what is typical of collection is "an attempt to create a link between the visible and the invisible." In his writings, Pomian also notes that objects are signs representing all that is distant in time: what belongs to the past or to the future, or indeed they are "situated in a time of its own, or outside any passing of time, in eternity itself" (Pomian, 1990: 24).

Bald cypress knees are in essence semiopneumatic. Their semioforms draw attention to knees as objects of collections shaped by their semiotic significance as carriers of meanings (semiophores) that are future-oriented (futuristic semiophores, to use Ewa Łukaszyk's term). On the other hand, the knees are also typified by a specific pneumatoform, i.e. a form shaped in the course of evolution that has adapted them for the role of carrying air (if we accept the pneumatophoric hypothesis). It is indeed the pneumatoform that seems to have encouraged Gaskins to define the knees as "living things." In his descriptions, the knee acquires the status of a relational, nonhuman person, becoming an agent capable of transforming the immediate environment, thus embodying the conceptualization of the person presented in new animism (cf. Harvey, 2005: xvii–xviii).

Of course, I am not proposing a return to a belief in tree spirits or to the conviction that everything constitutes living matter, since new animism significantly

distances itself from such claims. Instead, my aim is to promote relational approaches that would encourage viewing the world and life on Earth in terms of necessary cohabitation and co-dependency between human and nonhuman lifeforms, with life understood not only in the organic sense but also as the ability to change and transform. Furthermore, what is important for the ideas outlined in this paper is that the concept of the person is expanded to include nonhuman entities and communication-related issues (to be a person means to enter into relations and to communicate), while animistic practices simply become part of networking (entering into relations, creating them, multiplying and sustaining them).

Conclusions

The bald cypress connects us to our ancient ancestors in the plant world from which other forms evolved. This was also the case with dinosaurs. The tree's Knees, like similar such objects (crystals, rocks, fossils and amber), are both material embodiments of our prehistoric past as well as indicators of the future. Bald cypress knees become semiophores when they are made into objects in collections while at the same time retaining their status as material traces of the past as relics (Pomian, 1990: 30, 36). According to the principle of synecdoche (a part for the whole) they also remain indexical signs that are not only endowed with meaning but are indeed a fragment of that which they represent. It is thus worthwhile placing a bald cypress knee in your immediate surroundings. It domesticates the space of contemporary homes, apartments and gardens; it adapts and enlivens them, it makes them same.

Placing a bald cypress knee on the highest bookshelf turns it into a guardian "totem" that is ideal in teaching researchers (and reminding them of) the role they play in human society as the equivalent of a pneumatophore in relation to a tree (cf. Mitchell, 2005: 194). They are transmitters and holders of information and wisdom—understood as life-giving knowledge that is necessary for the development and existence of social groups and individuals as well as providing an anchor that stabilizes and strengthens their existence.

Bald cypress knees that have been included in collections do not simply cease to fulfil the role that they had played in the natural environment but instead continue to fulfil that role, albeit in a metaphorical sense as the pneumatophore becomes a semiophore while the *sēmeion* continues to retain the significance of the original function by referring us to "constitutive absence." In this case, the metaphor applied above, comparing the intellectual to a pneumatophore, underlines the role that this trope plays in current discourse; namely: it not only remains faithful to the magical properties ascribed to the bald cypress, thus becoming a signpost indicating the direction we should take in our future development and transformations, but it also enables us to seek meta-level comparisons that enable the observation that it is at this level that *pneuma* and *sēmeion* form a whole that makes reference to the common origins of various carbon-based lifeforms, as I have sought to argue in this chapter.

I would like to end with a though provoking remark made by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013: 154):

> What would it be like, I wondered, to live with that heightened sensitivity to the lives given for ours? To consider the tree in the Kleenex, the algae in

> the toothpaste, the oaks in the floor, the grapes in the wine; to follow back the thread of life in everything and pay it respect? Once you start, it's hard to stop, and you begin to feel yourself awash in gifts. (…) I wonder if that's a place where the disconnection began, the loss of respect, when we could no longer easily see the life within the object.

What we might learn from observing the habitat and behaviour of the bald cypress, as well as from reading about traditional ecological knowledge, is connected with something that is fundamental to various life forms, namely: reciprocal relationships. And this is what symbiotic interaction (with humans and non-humans) is to me.

Notes

1 Translated by Paul Vickers.
2 Italics by the author.
3 Italics by the author.
4 Italics by the author.
5 Italics are original.

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This chapter incorporates ideas initially presented in the book chapter "Semiofory i pneumatofory w perspektywie biohumanistycznej. (Przypadek korzeni oddechowych Cypryśnika Błotnego)" [Semiophores and Pneumatophores in the Biohumanist Perspective. (A Case of Bold Cypress Knees)], in: *Wśród ludzi, rzeczy i znaków. Krzysztofowi Pomianowi w darze* [*Among People, Things, and Signs: A Tribute to Krzysztof Pomian*], eds. Andrzej Mencwel, Jacek Migasiński, Paweł Rodak, Małgorzata Szpakowska. Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2016: 347–363), and further developed in the conference paper "Collecting Bald Cypress Knees: An Exercise in Symbiotic Interaction," delivered at the International Conference "Biotoopia," Viinistu, Estonia, hosted by the Estonian Anthropocene Center NGO, 26–28 August 2021. The translation of this text was made possible through financial support from the Faculty of History, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland.

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15 Epilogue

Things on a Wall: Potential History

Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon

Potential History

In the book *The Archive Project* the authors commence their introductory chapter with the following definition:

> Broadly, archival research is concerned with a collection of documents – texts of different kinds, including but not confined to words on paper, visual materials or physical objects; and it involves analysing and interpreting these so as to explore a particular topic or question or concern.
>
> (Moore et al., 2017: 3)

They go on to demonstrate that often certain parts of a specific archive are especially scrutinized or that a broader approach becomes the historian's subject. They point out that the path to the archive can be complicated and that its content is not necessarily some kind of embodiment of the past, as much that relates to the archive happens in the present. The archive is reshuffled by the keepers of the material and made accessible in accord with the needs of the present day. Other material is packed up and put away for decades, without ever being seen by the public. It is true to say that the content of the archive always reflects the present, although long-ago events are being addressed in research. We must not forget that items from the original archive have been discarded, and it will have been thinned out for various reasons—that is simply one aspect of the process of conservation. Furthermore, it cannot be ignored that many archives are subjected to strict requirements—rules and standards formulated long ago, which have a formative impact on the possibilities for using them.

The authors go on to say that opinions differ on why archival research is important, mentioning two main views. One—the simplest but with profound implications—is that 'the past' is a shorthand for everything that has come before and made us, our lives and the societies we live in, what they are. So, understanding even small parts of the past can give us a handle on things in the present and possibly aspects of the future, too. The other perspective is that the present and the future are uncontrollable, while the remaining traces of the past, including the near-past that contemporary archiving is concerned with, are finite and can be

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made at least provisionally known, albeit with many ifs and buts (Moore et al., 2017: 4).

In other words, in order to acquire an opportunity to gain access to the past, the authors of *The Archive Project* claim that scholars look at archives as storage places of knowledge and culture. The question is simply this: what past is brought out by today's scholars? Like, the archive becomes outrageous and descends into chaos when a scholar sets to work, for instance, in former colonial territories, and turns their attention to the powerless. In such cases new means of studying the past and existing sources must often be sought; means which have not always been met with the approval of conventional history. The argument of the authors of *The Archive Project* ignores the fact that archives—although about preserving the past—are really about carrying that past over into an indefinite future. Archives are as future-oriented as they are past-oriented. Which means, in a sense, they are less about controlling the past as controlling the present and future through their preservationist practices.

The authors of *The Archive Project* point out that the archive has a remarkable place in society, due to the fact that it becomes a place for the idea of the death of all those who lived through the archive. The phenomenon thus serves to remind us of the transience of life. In other words, it surely confirms that we will all die. Yet, despite this philosophical significance of the archive, it functions first and foremost as a storage place for memories, material left behind by living people or phenomena of the past. That fact is by no means simple. On the contrary, it gives rise to innumerable difficulties in handling the archive. The authors of the book maintain that people of the present time seek both to catalogue the archive and to organize it, just like their own lives. Hence, the archive becomes a mechanism for understanding existence.

Many historians approach the archive-phenomenon as a gateway to the past, containing 'material' that has not been lost. Within that context the authors discuss for instance the British historian Carolyn Steedman and her interpretation of the archive. They say:

> Her take on this is that it is precisely its absence that feeds imagination and analysis, that scholarly activity of filling the gaps between the traces that remain. It is the very incompleteness that moves understanding forward.
>
> (Moore et al., 2017: 9)

That fact—that 'obviously deconstructionist vein'—makes the archive an unusually alluring subject, which demands a hugely extensive approach to the phenomenon per se. It is probably fair to say that this fact is precisely a feature of the ideas of many microhistorians, which include to recognize that the sources have little to tell us about that past and that it is important to identify the gaps in our knowledge. It is just as important to identify the lacunae in our knowledge as to address the fragments of knowledge themselves (Magnússon and Szijártó, 2013).

I can assuredly agree with what Antoinette Burton (2005: 7–8) says when she describes her work in the book *Archive Stories* as …

> … motivated, in other words, by our conviction that history is not merely a project of fact-retrieval […] but also a set of complex processes of selection, interpretation, and even creative invention – processes set in motion by, among other things, one's personal encounter with the archive, the history of the archive itself, and the pressure of the contemporary moment on one's reading of what is to be found there.

This is certainly an important declaration, which undermines historians' conventional approach to their subjects. Some acknowledge this, while others carry on regardless, continuing to approach the archive as a reliable way to the secrets of the past.

The authors of *The Archive Project* provide detailed explanations of diverse views relating to collecting, the organization of collections, analysis of the material they contain and other uses of the archive and some approaches to the phenomenon archive. They (Moore et al., 2017: 20) point out that some scholars maintain that archives …

> … are incomplete as well as partial; they hold fragments of traces, representations of representations, and as Steedman (2001: 45) has put it, "You find nothing in the archive but stories caught half way through." What then can be known and how? Can knowledge reside in, be derived from, the fragmentary and partial?

The authors are not willing to accept this interpretation of the place of the archive, and they reject it entirely, unlike Steedman and Burton.

Scholarly Focus

Research in the humanities and the social sciences is often complicated and calls on a difficult process as this book establishes well. Not only do they cost considerable amount of money, but also great efforts by a group of capable scientists. The Grant of Excellence Project *My Favourite Things* is one of these projects that has both taken time and effort to come together. The project was placed at an intersection between Material Culture Studies, History, and Museum and Archival Studies. Its main scholarly aim was twofold; (a) to investigate the material world of the Icelandic population in the late Modern Era as this is represented in archives of written and material form, and the different relations and interactions between people and things implied in these archives with both macro- and micro-methods; (b) to explore the tensions between these different archives, asking how they reflect the material past and how the possible discrepancies between them may be dealt with. The approach was multidisciplinary, and the archives employed were indicative of this. They included probate inventories of household goods drawn up by

district commissioners in connection with the distribution of estates, or when poor households were broken up as the result of debts to the community arising from poor relief. The National Archives of Iceland store close to 33,000 probate inventories from the late 17th century until the early 20th. The documents include lists of private property such as clothes, household equipment, tools, bedlinen, saddlery and tackle, books, jewellery, ornaments, livestock, etc. Until this project, these documents had barely come under the scrutiny of historians in Iceland, let alone scholars of material culture studies (Jónsson, 2012, 2015, 2014). However, these sources offer new paths and insights into understanding people's possessions and material relations, as well as the entwined biographies of people and things. As well included are the archives of the National Museum of Iceland and other local heritage museums in Iceland, with their documentation of acquisitions. Since the establishment of the National Museum of Iceland in 1864 it has put considerable effort into maintaining detailed records of every item individually, including their ownership histories, form, composition, production and salient features. It is difficult to pin down the actual number of objects located in Iceland's heritage museums, but the National Museum alone stores about 300,000 objects. These collections and the museum exhibitions are the cornerstone of Icelandic cultural heritage, representing the material relations of the Icelandic population throughout the centuries. Nonetheless, they are composed in a very selective manner that has not yet been thoroughly scrutinized.

Thus, this material opened an opportunity to explore the meaning of the archive in a new and exciting way. Additionally, these items, which have stood at the core of material culture studies in Iceland, have importantly entered the museum archive via different routes, as personal donations to the museums, as parts of the museum's collective work and as parts of assemblages from archaeological excavations. The possible tensions between these different parts of the museum's grand archive remain mostly downplayed and overlooked, but constitute an interesting trajectory in exploring its representativity and that is something we have done in this project.

A New Approach—33,000 Inventories

This project presented an alternative approach to Icelandic material culture studies by placing the inventories of household goods at the centre of the research. The inventories are a detailed repository of information about personal property and the value of things, both economic worth and emotional value, that hitherto have only been slightly touched upon in Iceland, and never in such a comprehensive manner as is the case in this project. The project benefitted greatly from the unique access to exceptionally rich written source material in Iceland, providing details on the estates of individuals and their biographies, and information on the material relations of the Icelandic population in broad terms (Magnússon and Ólafsson, 2017). Although the Icelandic inventories have just recently been the subject of intense scrutiny, like in our project, scholars elsewhere have elaborated on similar sources from various perspectives, ranging from the focus on certain social categories and

their material surroundings (King, 1997) and household formations (McCann, 2006) to consumer behaviour in a wider sense (Weatherhill, 1996) and global trade (McCann, 2008a, 2008b). Our project, of course, earn and learn from that academic discourse as one notices in this book.

The multidisciplinary approach made this project innovative as it brought together scholars from different corners of the humanities and social sciences to work hand-in-hand on many levels of investigation. This meant both macrohistorically, providing a general overview of the sources and their cultural, social and historical context, and microhistorically, scrutinizing in detail certain themes, social groups, material categories or individual persons. Both approaches allow for new and alternative narratives of the past and the material relations of the Icelandic population in the later modern period and provide us with an extended and improved basis for discussing Icelandic cultural heritage.

There is no question that the project has provided an important input into Museum Studies and the development of museums as key players in the creation of Icelandic cultural history. Furthermore, the team around this project was committed to contribute to an advancing international scholarly debate about material culture history through international collaboration, dissemination of findings and publications.

Finally, and probably most importantly, the project set out to provide extensive insights into knowledge creation. The project was focused on rethinking the current notion of Icelandic cultural history as it is presented in the material archives and exhibitions of Icelandic heritage museums. We realized that we would only succeed by fostering a dynamic discussion between academia and the general public. Thus, alongside the traditional scholarly publication, we applied media that reached out to the public and allows it to interact with and comment on the academic findings. This included special exhibitions at the National Museum of Iceland, as well as online and visual media. All this was intended to stimulate debate among the public about Icelandic cultural history and how material culture has participated in moulding Icelandic history at large, both regarding the past and how material culture continues to be an essential agent within present-day society.

How Much Do We Know?

By a closer look it becomes obvious that the inventories of household goods provide an extraordinary wealth of information about human–material relations during late modern times in Icelandic history. Yet the inventories also demonstrate another battle that things are up against and that is the one with text (Olsen, 1997; Andrén, 1998; Domańska, 2006). The essence of this battle reverberates in the contest of text versus things. Textual sources are generally seen as more informative than things, providing deeper understanding of historical processes, illustrating more clearly social circumstances or being more reflective of human intention and deliberate mediation than things.

This project, however, started from the hypothesis that things (material culture in general) can be active on their own terms, i.e. possess agency, and thus

are rich in content, although their mediation may be totally different from that of text. Acknowledging these ideas about material agency and social significance implies that the human–material relation is reciprocal. Things not only reflect economy or social standing but are eminent players in the creation, maintenance and transition of human elements such as personhood and identity, whether social, cultural, personal or self-identity. Such a perspective on things as active parts of human society also demands an alternative attitude towards their life histories and ability to change status. This was influentially argued by Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) who emphasized that the identities of people and things were not fixed, but fluid and constantly changing according to their interactions and social situation. Thus, an individual thing can throughout its lifetime take on a different social status through playing the roles of commodity, gift, loot, heirloom, object of national heritage, waste, etc., and through these roles it interacts differently and establishes different relations also between people. So, according to this, things have agency and acquire biographies in much the same way as humans, and humans and things are in a symmetrical relationship where both are participating in the transformation of each other.

Furthermore, the separation between things and text is not as clear-cut as one might assume, especially when we look at archives. First, we should not forget that documentary archives are nothing but a collection of objects, which like any other collection is dependent on the museums' complex infrastructure for its well-being. Material collections are in the same way not composed by mere objects. Each museum object is linked to a variety of attached information, both scientific analyses and textual descriptions. Hence, both archives and collections are a mixture of material and textual information about the past. Approaching both the material culture collections and the textual archives as being a hybrid composition of material and textual sources was fundamental to this research project in general, as it enables us to treat the sources (textual and material) on a level basis. In addition, it allows for an alternative approach to history of material culture that does not privilege one source category over another. Thus, as I consider both types of collections (textual and material) rich in content, we have—as is evident in this book—chosen to unite them under a single term, *archive*. By this I do not claim that the material archives need to be totally consistent with the documentary archives but rather emphasize that the tensions that may exist between them do not rule out a juxtaposition of the two, but instead afford and call for an exploration of their characteristics, how they divide and communicate, and how their joined forces may allow alternative perspectives on the past, as well as on the conventional distinction between text and thing.

In the end we need to ask what is a thing on a wall? The historian Nile Green (2018: 849) of UCLA in the USA makes the following points in a paper in *American Historical Review*:

> A heterotopia, then, contradicts, challenges, and potentially overturns the familiar assumptions of those who enter it.

Green maintains that the value of Foucault's concept of hétérotopie consists primarily in the researcher feeling that they are discovering something new, the process of equivocal experience "as distinct from ideological uniformity," as he puts it. Heterotopia leads to a certain disruption of conventional approaches and may be described as a "state of multiple possibilities rather than predetermined outcomes" (Green, 2018: 849). Heterotopia is a space which is part of the other which is far removed from the idea behind consensus. It is rather part of the contradictions we find in everyday life, the intense relationship between two or more parties, and can even be disturbing when someone faces its consequences. It is a space with many different layers of meanings. It might be seen as an archive—as we have used it in this book—or a thing on a wall.

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