

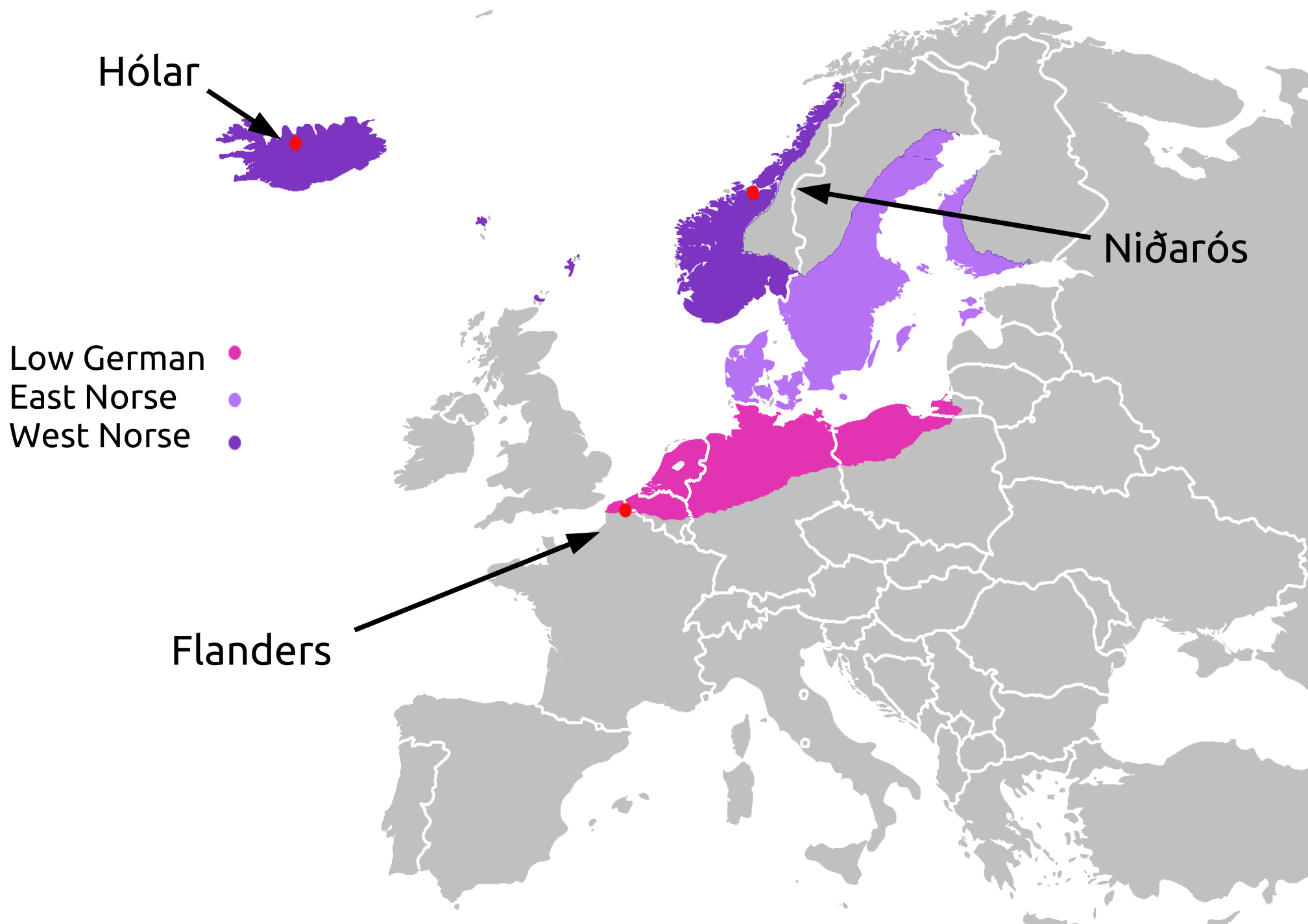
Learning Old Norse in Fourteenth-Century Norway

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handout and presentation at:
<http://www.alarichall.org.uk/imc2011>

Laurentius saga, composed in the diocese of Hólar, 1346×93



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Erika Sigurdson, 'The Church in Fourteenth-Century
Iceland: Administrative Structures, Literacy and the
Formation of an Elite Clerical Identity'

Sheryl McDonald, 'Icelandic-European Dialogue in *Nítíðasaga*'

1. How does Low German influence Old Norse?

Effects of Low German well catalogued, but causes little known

How mutually intelligible were Norse and Low German?

‘Generally, hardly any comments are to be found concerned with questions of problems of multilingual communities during this period’ (Braunmüller 2002, 1228)

2. Why do fourteenth-century Icelanders write so much about multilingualism?

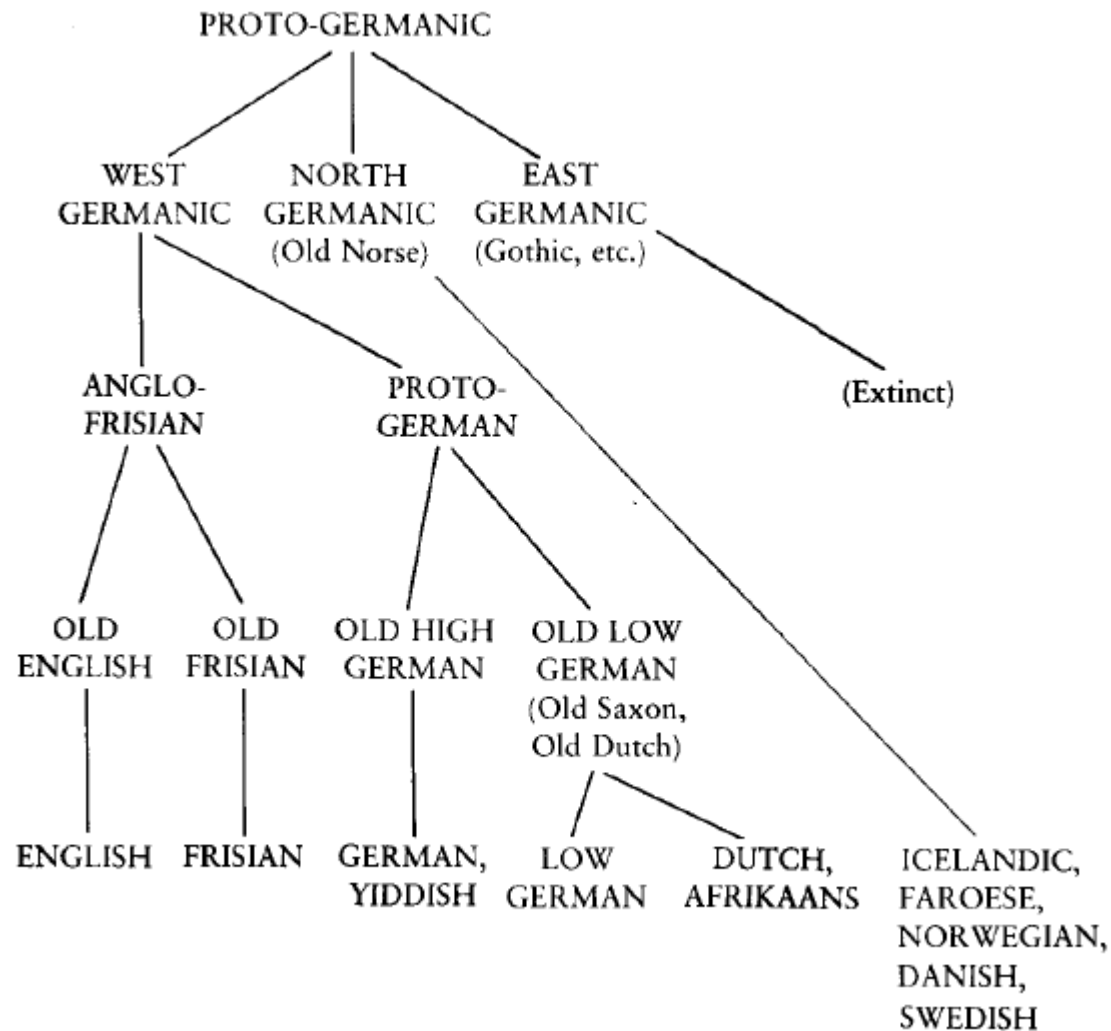
Icelandic romance is uniquely fascinated with multilingualism (Kalinke 1983)

A nerdy network of known saga-authors

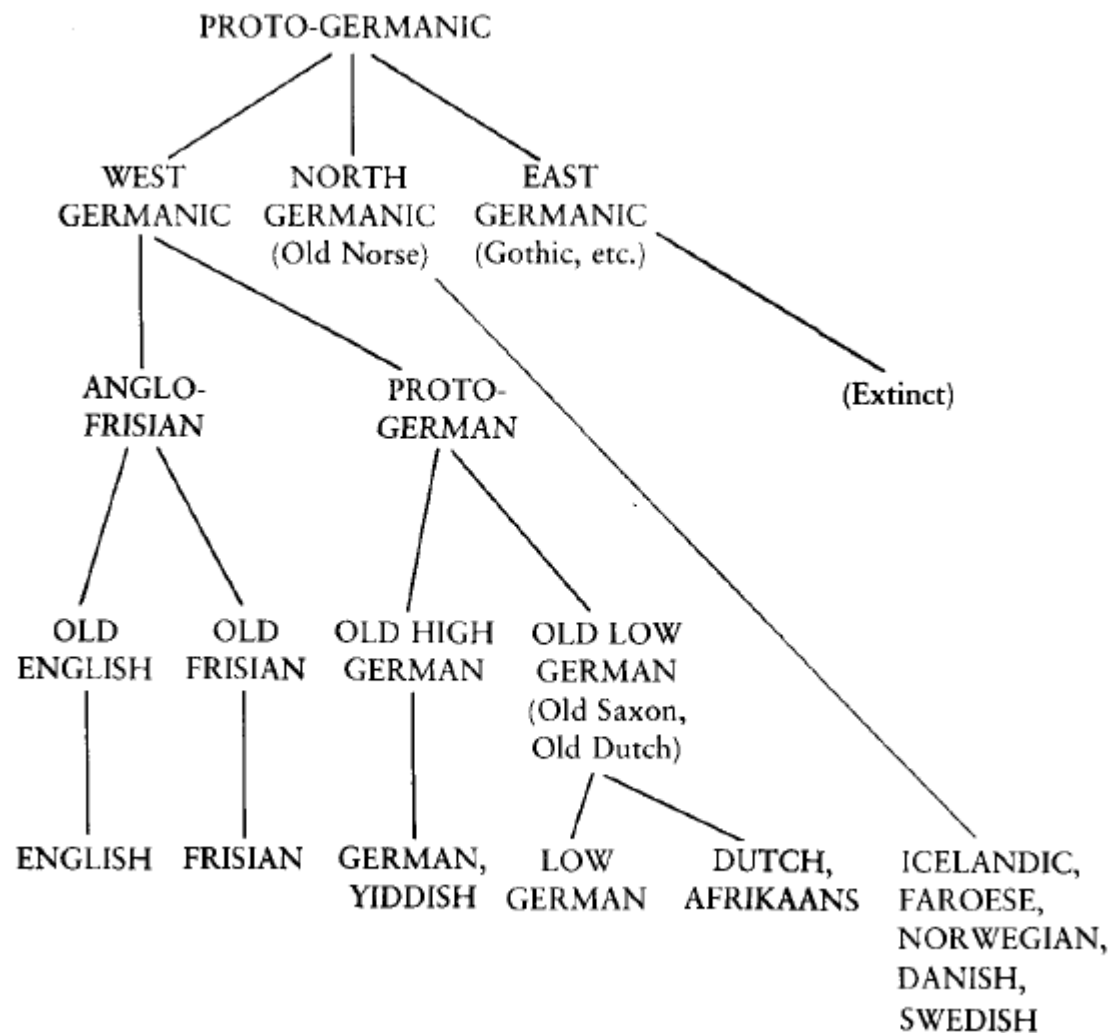
Anxiety and excitement about international culture

3. Does our evidence tell us more about (1) or (2)?

1. How does Low German influence Old Norse?



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Why are Continental Scandinavian languages easier for English-speakers to learn than Icelandic?

Norwegian and Icelandic are 'West Norse', Danish and Swedish 'East Norse': so why is modern Norwegian more like Swedish than Icelandic?

One answer is Low German influence.

1. How does Low German influence Old Norse?

Loan-words

	ICELANDIC	SWEDISH	DUTCH
PAY (v.)	borga, greiða	betala	betalen
TRANSLATE (v.)	þýða	översätta	overzetten
POSSIBILITY (n.)	möguleiki	möjlighet	mogelijkeheit
WORK (n.)	starf	arbete	arbeid
CHAT (v.)	spjalla	prata	praten
WAR (n.)	stríð	krig	krijg
USE (v.)	nota	använda	aanwenden
SCIENCE (n.)	vísindi	vetenskap	wetenschap

1. How does Low German influence Old Norse?

Grammar?

Ernst Håkon Jahr, 'Sociolinguistics in Historical Language Contact: The Scandinavian Languages and Low German during the Hanseatic Period', in *Language Change: Advances in Historical Sociolinguistics*, ed. by E. H. Jahr (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), pp. 119–40.

Harry Perridon, 'Language Contact and Grammatical Change: The Case of Bergen', *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek*, 24 (2003), 235–56.

Peter Trudgill, 'Contact and Sociolinguistic Typology', in *The Handbook of Language Contact*, ed. by Raymond Hickey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 299–319.

1. How does Low German influence Old Norse?

Mátti því Jón flæmingi miðr gagna erkibiskupi í deilum þeira kórsbræðra at hann kunni ekki norrænu at tala, ok skildi alþýðan ekki máls hans því at hann talaði allt á latínu, fransisku eðr flæmsku.

Jón the Fleming could therefore help out the Archbishop less in his dealings with the chapter, because he couldn't speak Norse, and the general populace didn't understand his speech because he said everything in Latin, French or Flemish.

1. How does Low German influence Old Norse?

Konungs skuggsjá, ch. 34 (Norway, c. 1260):

nemdu allar mállýzkur, en allra helst latínu ok völsku, þvíat þær tungur ganga víðast. En þó týndu eigi at heldr þinni tungu.

you must acquire all languages, but first and foremost Latin and French, because those languages are the most widely used. Though don't neglect your own language either.

- * The chapter is not (always) willing/able to tackle Low German, Latin or French—*notwithstanding Kongungs skuggsjá*

- * Though this is a pretty formal and technical context

- * The incomprehension of Jón's speech is in the context of conflict

1. How does Low German influence Old Norse?

‘Á þenna **máta**’, sagði Jón flæmingi,
‘nú er komin **lentin**, hvern mann
kristinn komi til kirkju, gjöri sína
skripin, kasti burt konu sinni, **maki**
engi **sukk**, *nonne sufficit, domine?*’

Laurentius saga ch. 14

1. How does Low German influence Old Norse?

accusative for
nominative

‘Á þenna **máta**’, sagði Jón flæmingi,
‘nú er komin **lentin**, hvern mann
kristinn komi til kirkju, gjeri sína
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Laurentius saga ch. 14

for *skriptir*
‘confession, penance’

hopelessly
unsophisticated

1. How does Low German influence Old Norse?

- * Low German-speakers are getting important jobs *and are expected to speak Norse*
- * German and Norse are not considered mutually intelligible...
- * ... but Low German-speakers do have extensive recourse to Low German's genetic similarity with Norse
- * and they do introduce simplifications of the inflexional system

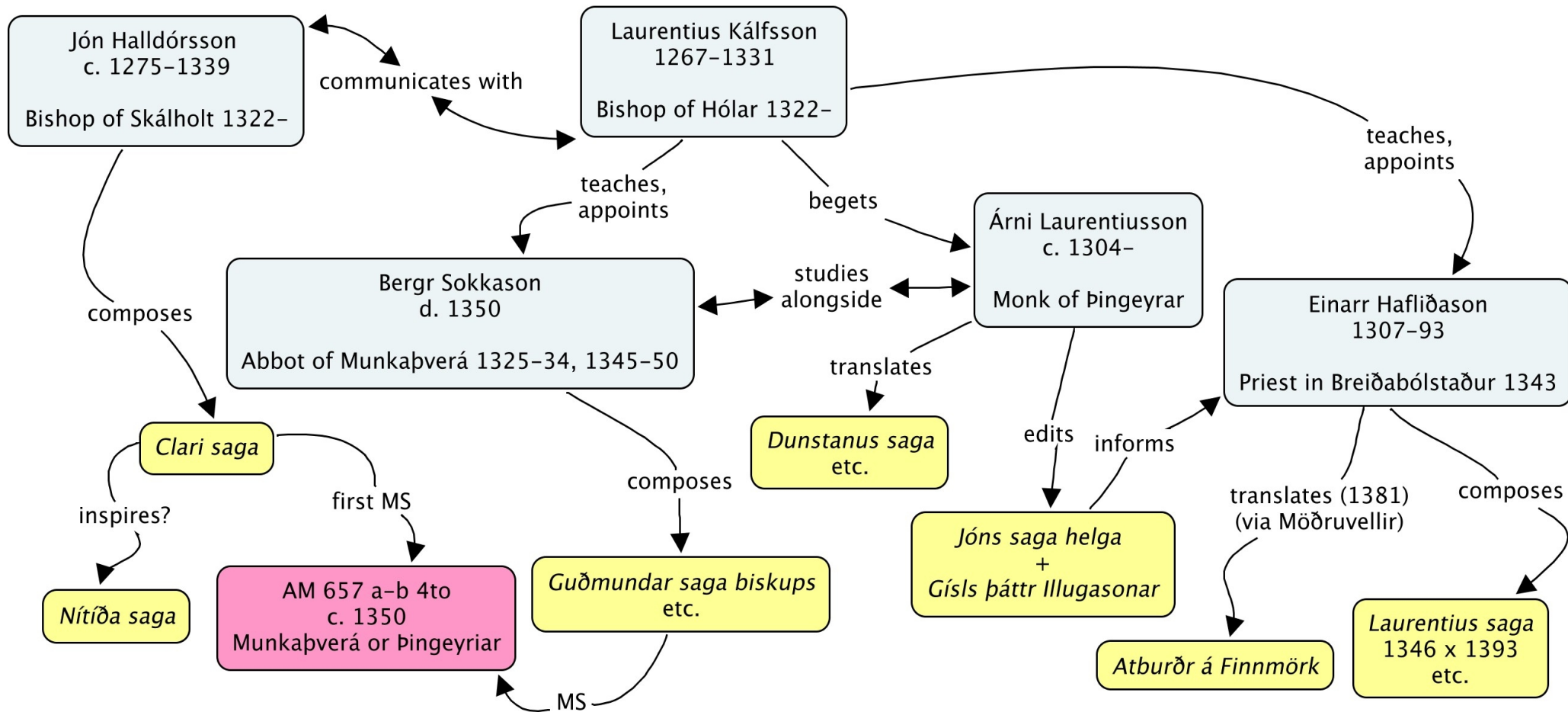
2. Why do fourteenth-century Icelanders write so much about multilingualism?

- * Einarr gives Norse prestige by emphasising that mainstream Europeans cannot cope with it...
- * ... but at the same time implicitly marginalises Norse from the European mainstream
- * Einarr is experiencing a Latin textual world and a Norse register heavily influenced by Low German

2. Why do fourteenth-century Icelanders write so much about multilingualism?

- * a tight network of nerds who got the piss taken out of them at school...
- * ... yet dine out on their rare and prestigious linguistic/scholarly skills
- * profound contact with Norway: parents, teachers, habitation; travel in France
- * genuine excitement at French and Latin literary culture and a desire to integrate this with vernacular culture
- * awareness that Norwegian and Icelandic are suddenly diverging?

2. Why do fourteenth-century Icelanders write so much about multilingualism?



2. Why do fourteenth-century Icelanders write so much about multilingualism?

Valuing Latinity: *Laurentius saga*, ch. 11 (Iceland, 1346×93)

Var þá kominn ... klerkr einn mikill, Jón flæmingi, hafði hann lengi til París staðit ok Orlens at *studium*. Var hann svá mikill *juriste* at enginn var þá í Nóregi hans líki; hafði ok erkibiskupinn þar við at styðjaz sem hann var, því at allir mestháttar kórsbræðr voru honum mótstaðligir. *Appelleruðu* þeir iðugliga til páfans ok fengu bréf mörg af páfagarði erkibiskupi til þunga; vildi ok erkibiskupinn gjarnan fá klerka hvar sem hann kunni.

A great scholar, Jón the Fleming, had recently arrived. He had spent a long time studying in Paris and Orleans. He was so great a lawyer that there was at that time no-one of his calibre in Norway. Moreover, the archbishop had good reason to lean on him, because the all the leading brothers of the chapter were set against him. They went always petitioning the Pope and got many letters from the Curia with which to oppress the Archbishop—and the Archbishop was always eager to get hold of scholars wherever he could.

2. Why do fourteenth-century Icelanders write so much about multilingualism?

Borrowing motifs: *Gísels þáttr*, ch. 5 (Iceland, earliest MS c. 1360)

Síðan mælti hann til konungs: ‘Male diarik,’ en þat er á vára tungu: ‘Bölvaðr sér þú, konungr.’

Þá svaraði einn konungsmaðr: ‘Herra,’ segir hann, ‘þessi maðr mun vera þræll allra Norðmanna.’

Konungr svarar: ‘Olgeira ragall,’ þat er á vára tungu: ‘Ókunnug er myrk gata.’ Konungr var vel við þá. Magnús konungr herjaði síðan á Írlandi . . .

Then he said to the king: ‘Male diarik,’ which is in our language: ‘Cursed be you, king.’

One of the courtiers responded: ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘this man must be the slave of all the Norsemen.’

The king replied: ‘Olgeira ragall,’ which is in our language: ‘Unknown is a dark road.’ The king treated them well. King Magnús later raided in Ireland . . . (Power 1998–2001, 310)

2. Why do fourteenth-century Icelanders write so much about multilingualism?

Writing Iceland into Europe: *Nítíðsa saga*, ch. 5 (Iceland, c. 1350×1450)

Er og ei auðsagt með ófróðri tungu í útlegðum veraldarinnar, svo mönnum verði skemmtilegt, hvor fögnuður vera mundi í miðjum heiminum af slíku hoffólki samankomnu

Indeed, it was so entertaining for everyone that it is not easily said with an unlearned tongue in the outer regions of the world what joy there may be in the middle of the world when such courtiers come together. (McDonald 2009, 142–43)

2. Why do fourteenth-century Icelanders write so much about multilingualism?

Handling language-change (in Iceland)?

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Handling language-change (in Iceland)?

- * *vá* > *vo* (*svá* > *svo*)
- * *-r* > *-ur* (*fagr* > *fagur*)
- * diphthongisation of long vowels (e.g. [e:] > [jɛ])
- * acceleration of final consonant voicing and spirantisation (e.g. *ok* > *og*)
- * appearance of middle inflexions in *-zt*, *-zst*, *-st*
- * *rl* > *ll*, *rn* > *nn* (e.g. *karl* > *kall*)
- * assimilation of first-person singular verbs to third-person (e.g. *ek sagða* > *ég sagði*, *ek em* > *ég er*)
- * *sjá* 'this' > *þessi*

2. Why do fourteenth-century Icelanders write so much about multilingualism?

Handling language-change (in Norway)?

- * cancellation of *u*-mutation (*mǫnnum* > *mannum*)
- * loss of *h*- (*hlaupa* > *laupa*)
- * regularisation of verb-forms (*vaxa*, *óx* > *vaxa*, *vóx*)

1. How does Low German influence Old Norse?

The early fourteenth century sees Low German clerics being expected to use Norse as a second language

The evidence militates against mutual comprehensibility of Norse and Low German, certainly in formal contexts but maybe in informal ones

Low German clerics apparently gain influential positions

2. Why do fourteenth-century Icelanders write so much about multilingualism?







A nerdy network of known saga-authors

Anxiety and excitement about international culture

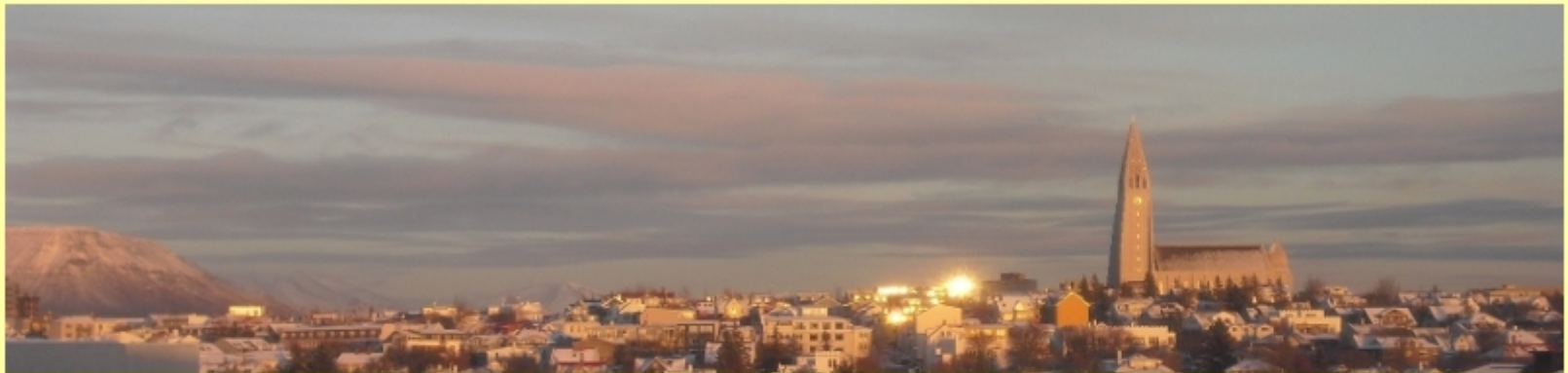
A sense of divergence from Norwegian?

3. Does our evidence tell us more about (1) or (2)?

4. And does Laurentius have anything to tell us about teaching Norse?

 http://www.alarichall.org.uk/teaching/modern_icelandic.php    [doaj](#)  

[Navigate](#) [Links which Alaric often needs](#)



A beginners' mp3 course in modern Icelandic

This is an experimental eight-hour beginners' Icelandic course, based on Alaric's experiences living in Iceland in 2010, and of learning French through the self-teaching course by [Michel Thomas](#). It's quite rough and ready, certainly not complete, and may contain one or two mistakes. But Alaric hopes that it nonetheless provides a confidence-building and efficient way to get started with Icelandic—and to get towards the point where you can say enough to Icelanders in their own language that they will talk back to you in it, giving you a chance to get better. Alaric also hopes that it's a good way to get started on learning Old Icelandic.

Lots of things here could be done better, and Alaric hopes one day to do a better job, so he would really appreciate your feedback: alaric@cantab.net.

- [the mp3s](#)
- [course contents list](#)

credits

This course was designed by Alaric and recorded by Alaric, Laura Boehm and Alistair Woods at the University of Leeds in January 2011. It was funded by a University of Leeds Teaching Fellowship. Thanks also to Kate Zalzal and Claire Musikas for helping to pilot the course, and to Paul Sturtevant for lending us the recording equipment.

Some other suggested resources

This is just a bit of a grab-bag of material which Alaric finds useful in teaching modern

