

The History of Icelandic Literature

by Jürg Glauser, whose book *Island – Eine Literaturgeschichte* (Iceland – A Literary History) was published recently by J.B. Metzler

Compared with that of other European countries, Iceland's medieval literature is unique. On the one hand, Icelandic works dating from the 12th and 13th centuries are apparently firmly rooted in medieval Christianity. However, at the same time they also carry over many pagan traditions from the time prior to Iceland's Christianisation at around 1000 AD.

This simultaneous orientation toward the past and the present explains why the old parchments of Iceland contain entire genres of literature that only exist here – and this in turn justifies the great importance that is accorded to Icelandic literature in the global context.

Medieval Icelandic poetry can be divided into the eddic and skaldic genres. Skaldic verse is a complex form of poetry in which the poets, known as skalds, sang songs of praise to the Norse noblemen and also addressed other subjects. Simpler in form, the eddic poems are texts which recount the deeds of the Nordic gods, such as Odin and Thor, as well as Germanic heroes like Sigurd, Gunnar and Gudrun, who are also familiar from the Middle High German Nibelungenlied. A particularly notable work is the so-called Prose Edda by the Icelandic historiographer, politician and writer, Snorri Sturluson (c. 1179–1241).

Alongside the eddas and the skaldic poetry are the sagas, a very broad-reaching group of stories in prose. The most significant of these texts are the Icelandic Sagas, which tell the story of the country's settlement and early history. In a realistic style, the sagas tell the stories of the heroes and the ruling families, describing their conflicts and their destinies. As such, they express the cultural memory of Iceland. That is why, when we talk about the great medieval literature of Iceland, we usually mean the sagas by Egil, Gísli, Njál, Hrafnkel and Grettir, which were composed in the 13th and 14th centuries, and which were handed down through the following centuries in manuscript form. These handwritten documents from the Middle Ages and the early modern period are the material substance of Iceland's literary heritage, and its greatest cultural treasure. In 2009, they were added to UNESCO's "Memory of the World" register.

During the Reformation, the most important writings of the reformers were also translated into Icelandic. On top of this, the great 1584 translation of the Bible by the influential Bishop Guðbrandur Thorláksson (1541/42–1627) also left its own special mark on the Icelandic language. Thereafter, the Baroque and Enlightenment periods also added significant authors to the ranks of Icelandic Literature. These included the Baroque poet Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–74), whose Passion Hymns was the most

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widely read book in Iceland, or the Enlightenment figure Eggert Ólafsson (1726–68), who published the first large-scale travelogue in Icelandic, among other works.

In the 19th century romantic poets, such as Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–45), connected to the earlier history and literature with their extravagant descriptions of nature. In the course of the 19th century the landscape became the paramount subject for Icelandic poetry. Icelanders identify themselves more with their nature poems than almost any other medium.

At the turn of the 20th century, new avant-garde voices emerged with authors such as Thórbergur Thórðarson (1889–1974) and Halldór Laxness (1902–98); the modern era had begun. The literature of the 20th century is associated above all with Halldór Laxness, who described Iceland's history, society and culture like no other writer has ever done. In 1955 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his wake came modernist authors in the 1960s and 70s, such as Svava Jakobsdóttir (1930–2004), Thor Vilhjálmsson (1925–2011) and Guðbergur Bergsson (born in 1932), who have had a strong influence on subsequent generations.

In the 80s and 90s, a trend began for fantastic-realistic storytelling, as in the novels of Steinunn Sigurðardóttir (born 1950) and Einar Már Guðmundsson (born 1954). Today, the literary scene is characterised by a wide spectrum of literary forms and subject matter, ranging from internationally respected crime fiction, to sophisticated, often highly experimental poetry, modernist "body poetry" and intertextual novels.

Jürg Glasur is Professor of Nordic Philology at the universities of Basel and Zurich. He has studied the medieval and modern literature of Iceland for many years, and has first-hand experience of the country and its culture.

In his book, *Island – Eine Literaturgeschichte* (Iceland – A Literary History), he describes Iceland as a culture of the word, a culture for which the importance of literature persists unabated, despite the challenges posed by the new media. This is the first work in German that attempts to provide an overview of the enormous literary heritage of Iceland. It shows how even today the country's literary figures continue to draw on the earlier literature.

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