

Quiggin lecture 2011 : Odd Einar Haugen, University of Bergen

“So that the writing may be less and quicker, and the parchment last longer”

The orthographic reform of the Old Icelandic *First Grammatical Treatise*

*The First Grammatical Treatise* is a brief, but highly original discussion of Old Icelandic orthography, written in the middle of the 12th century by an anonymous Icelander. When the treatise was conceived, a written tradition employing the Latin alphabet had been in place for several decades but probably less than a century, which means that the treatise discusses the orthography of Icelandic at a time when there was still room for change. The treatise makes a number of suggestions for a more consistent and also condensed orthography, especially with regard to the notation of nasality in vowels, and length in vowels as well as in consonants.

*The First Grammatical Treatise* has been preserved in a single manuscript, Codex Wormianus (AM 242 fol), copied around two centuries later than the original. This text uses the orthography of its time, and not the orthography recommended by the first grammarian. In other words, the text in Codex Wormianus preaches a theory that it does not practice. Furthermore, there were probably intermediary manuscripts between the 12th century original and the 14th century copy, so the Codex Wormianus version may deviate in more than orthography from the original. The alphabet that concludes the treatise has been a long-standing topic of discussion: did this in fact reflect an earlier stage of the textual transmission than the rest of the treatise in its 14th century version?

The admonition in the treatise to save parchment means that the writing should decrease along the syntagmatic axis by using each position along the base line more efficiently. However, this could only be achieved by increasing the paradigmatic axis, i.e. by adding diacritical marks or indeed new characters to the alphabet. Orthographic efficiency is basically a question of balancing the character inventory with the number of diacritics and characters needed to write the individual words. On the basis of these reflections, a simple and almost naive question can be raised: *how much* quicker would the writing of Old Icelandic be if the recommendations of the *First Grammatical Treatise* were fully implemented? And what would a text following these recommendations actually look like? This lecture will try and give an answer to these questions based on a comparison of the recommended 12th century orthography and the actual 14th century orthography.