

The origin and development of Icelandic script

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1.

Nordic people came into contact with the Latin alphabet before it was adopted in their countries. A coin inscribed with Old Norse¹ names was struck in York in Northern England before the middle of the tenth century². Furthermore, as runes had been in use there for many centuries, alphabetic script was already well known at this time in Scandinavia.

Iceland accepted Christianity in the year 999 or 1000, at about the same time as Norway. During the following century the new religion and the Christian church took a firm footing and literacy was introduced along with the new faith. Christianity was brought to Norway and Iceland mostly from England, though, of course, Icelanders and Norwegians knew the new faith in other countries as well, for example Ireland, the Hebrides, Denmark, Germany and France. The first bishoprics were established in the Norse area in the latter part of the eleventh century and the first monasteries around the year 1100. Ísleifr Gizurarson (1006–80), the first Icelander to be consecrated a bishop in 1056, ran a school, as other bishops in the Nordic countries must have done³. It is therefore almost certain that both liturgical works and educational books existed at episcopal seats as early as the 11th century. No remains of these books have been preserved, but fragments of liturgical works exist dating from the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, the oldest of which originated outside the Nordic countries⁴.

2.

It seems obvious that writing in the vernacular with Latin script began in these countries in the course of the eleventh century, even though there is no reliable documentation before 1117 to prove this. *Íslendingabók* (Book of Icelanders) states that it was decided at the Althing in the summer of 1117 to record the laws of Iceland, and that their writing was begun in northern Iceland during the following winter⁵. This decision could scarcely have been taken without some previous experience of writing in the vernacular in Iceland using the Latin alphabet. It is probable, for example, even though this is not recorded, that the tithe laws were written down when they were introduced in 1096. In

¹ The term *Old Norse* in the middle ages usually refers to Norwegians and people of Norwegian origin (and speaking the same language) in other countries, i. e. Iceland, Greenland, Faroe Islands, Shetland Islands, and Orkney Islands, and some areas in Scotland and England. A few documents written in the vernacular in the Faroes, Shetland and Orkney have been preserved, but no manuscripts as far as we know.

² Cf. O. E. HAUGEN, The development of Latin script I: in Norway, in: *The Nordic Languages I* (Ed. O. BANDLE). Berlin–New York 2002, 824.

³ Cf. *Íslenzk fornrit I*. Ed. JAKOB BENEDIKTSSON. Reykjavík 1968, 17; D. A. SEIP, *Palæografi B: Norge og Island (Nordisk kultur 28 B)*. Stockholm–Oslo–København 1954, 1, 3; HREINN BENEDIKTSSON, Early Icelandic Script as Illustrated in Vernacular Texts from the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries (*Íslenzk handrit, Series in Folio 2*). Reykjavík 1965, 19.

⁴ Cf. L. GJERLOW, *Liturgica Islandica (Bibliotheca Arnarnagœvana 35)*. Copenhagen 1980.

⁵ *Íslendingabók* was written by the priest Ari Þorgilsson fróði (1068–1148) in the 1120's. The oldest manuscripts date from ca. 1650, but they are copies of a manuscript from around 1200; cf. *Íslenzk fornrit I* (cf. n. 3) 23.

Norway, the writing of laws may have begun towards the end of the eleventh century⁶. The oldest manuscripts in the vernacular, in both countries, date from the middle of the twelfth century. There are fragments in Latin which are older, but since such manuscripts were certainly imported or written by foreigners who moved to Iceland or to Norway, it is only possible to use some of them in determining where the knowledge of writing in these countries came from.

The *First Grammatical Treatise* contains evidence about the types of writing that had been produced in Iceland during the author's life in the twelfth century⁷. He mentions: 'laws and genealogies, or interpretations of sacred writings, or also that historical lore that Ari Þorgilsson has recorded in books with such reasonable understanding'⁸. What is meant by *laws* and *genealogies* is clear, but the meaning of the words *historical lore* in this context has been disputed. As for *interpretations of sacred writings*, this probably refers to interpretations of religious texts, for example in homilies. Of these literary categories mentioned by the 'First Grammarian', fragments of homilies have survived from the mid-twelfth century in AM 237 a fol. and law texts from the second half of the twelfth century in AM 315 d fol., but no genealogies from this period exist. If the words *historical lore* meant historical writings, then the earliest manuscripts of such works that now exist are from about 1200.

3.

Many of the medieval Icelandic and Norwegian manuscripts that have survived are incomplete, and in many cases all that survives is a few leaves, or even a single leaf, or part of a leaf. Altogether, about 750 Icelandic manuscripts (and fragments of manuscripts) written in the vernacular are thought to date from before the mid-sixteenth century.

AM 732 a VII 4to	1 leaf	ca. 1120–1140	Easter table (only letters)
AM 237 a fol.	2 leaves	ca. 1150	Homilies
AM 315 d fol.	2 leaves	ca. 1150–1175	Law
*AM 655 IX 4to	3 leaves	ca. 1150–1200	Saints' Lives
*GKS 1347 4to	1 p. in a Latin ms.	ca. 1175	Ground-rent list
*NRA 1 b	fragments of 4 leaves	ca. 1180	Law
Reykjaholtsmáldagi	14 lines	ca. 1185	Deed
*AM 315 f fol.	fragments of 5 leaves	ca. 1175–1200	Law
AM 674 a 4to	33 leaves	ca. 1175–1200	Elucidarius
GKS 1812 IV 4to	11 leaves	ca. 1192	Treatise on computation

Table 1: Manuscripts from the 12th century (Norwegian mss. are marked with *)

Twelve manuscripts have survived from the twelfth century or about 1200. About 315 Icelandic manuscripts are dated to before about 1370 (see Table 2). Sometimes it cannot be established with certainty whether individual leaves originally belonged to larger manuscripts, and partly for this reason the exact numbers of manuscripts cannot be stated. In addition, it is not clear in all cases whether they are Norwegian or Icelandic. Most manuscripts dated after 1300 are copies of texts that are believed to have originated in the thirteenth century⁹.

⁶ Cf. HREINN BENEDIKTSSON, *Early Icelandic Script* (cf. n. 3) 17; D. A. SEIP, *Palæografi B* (cf. n. 3) 2–3.

⁷ The first grammatical treatise of four treatises in the manuscript AM 242 fol. (in Copenhagen) from ca. 1350 was originally written in Iceland by an unknown author and is dated to about the middle of the twelfth century, cf. *The First Grammatical Treatise*. Ed. HREINN BENEDIKTSSON (*Publications in Linguistics* 1). Reykjavík 1972, 31–33.

⁸ I. e. 'lög ok áttvísi eða þýðingar helgar eða svá þau hin spaklegu fræði er Ari Þorgilsson hefir á bæk sett af skynsamlegu viti', cf. *The First Grammatical Treatise* (cf. n. 7) 208–209.

⁹ Cf. STEFÁN KARLSSON, *The development of Latin script II: in Iceland*, in: *The Nordic Languages I*. Red. O. BANDLE. Berlin–New York 2002, 833.

Norway can boast of a considerable number of manuscripts written in the vernacular before 1370; more than Denmark and Sweden, though far fewer than Iceland. Practically all Norwegian manuscripts in Old Norse date from before 1400. There was a marked decline in book production in Norway about 1370, on account of great social changes in the country and linguistic changes as well. There was no decline in the writing of letters and other legal documents in Norway, however, so from the point of view of palaeography the year 1370 marks no such change. Nevertheless, because of the linguistic changes and the paucity of books produced after 1370, it is convenient to use this date as a cut-off point¹⁰. About 130 Norwegian manuscripts in Old Norse survive from before 1370, many of them in fragments only. Of this number, eight date from the twelfth century or about 1200.

	–1200	1200– 1300	1300– 1370	–1370	1300– 1400	1400– 1500	1500– 1550	
Norwegian	8	ca. 50	ca. 72	ca. 130				ca. 130
Icelandic	12	ca. 100	ca. 203	ca. 315	ca. 300	ca. 230	ca. 100	ca. 750
	20	ca. 150	ca. 275	ca. 445	ca. 300	ca. 230	ca. 100	ca. 880

Table 2: Old Norse manuscripts in the vernacular

To begin with, Norwegian documents were written in Latin, and Latin continued to be used side by side with the vernacular throughout the Middle Ages. The oldest extant Norwegian document in Latin is dated to the seventh decade of the twelfth century, while the oldest Norwegian letter in Old Norse dates from about 1210. Most surviving documents are originals; this is hardly ever the case with other texts. About 1,650 original Norwegian letters written in Old Norse prior to 1370 are now extant, of which only about 80 are from the thirteenth century. No Icelandic letters from before 1300 have survived, and only 20–25 from the first half of the fourteenth century, after which their numbers increase rapidly. Altogether, about 1,500 letters in the vernacular exist from before 1540, including about 700 from the second half of the fifteenth century. Fewer than 50 letters pre-date 1370. Documents were written mostly in Old Norse/Icelandic in Iceland.

	–1200	1200– 1300	1300– 1370	–1370	1300– 1400	1400– 1500	1500– 1540	
Norwegian		ca. 80	ca. 1570	ca. 1650				ca. 1650
Icelandic			ca. 50	ca. 50	ca. 120	ca. 930	ca. 400	ca. 1500
		ca. 80	ca. 1620	ca. 1700	ca. 120	ca. 930	ca. 400	ca. 3150

Table 3: Old Norse documents in the vernacular

4.

Scholars have not been of one mind as to whether the knowledge of writing came to Iceland from mainland Europe (Northern Germany) — perhaps through Denmark or Norway — or from England (perhaps through Norway). There are very few traces of Anglo-Saxon influence in the earliest Icelandic manuscripts, apart from the letter *þ* (thorn = *th* [voiceless]), whereas in the earliest Norwegian manuscripts there is greater Anglo-Saxon influence, namely the Anglo-Saxon letters *ð* (eth = *th* [voiced]), and *w* (*wyn* or *wen*; used as *v* in Old Norse), and the Anglo-Saxon forms of *f* and *r*. Three of these letters begin to appear in Icelandic manuscripts in the first part of the thirteenth century. As a result, it could be that the Icelanders acquired the art of writing Latin script both from the

¹⁰ Cf. D. A. SEIP, *Norsk språkhistorie til omkring 1370*. Oslo 1955, 224–225; O. E. HAUGEN, *The development of Latin script I*. In *Norway*, in: *The Nordic Languages I*. Ed. O. BANDLE. Berlin–New York 2002, 825.

continent (or directly from Latin manuscripts) and England, while the Norwegians learned it from the English¹¹.

On paleographic grounds Norwegian in the earliest period of writing in the vernacular falls into two main parts, the East and the West. Norwegian writings from the East show more characteristic Anglo-Saxon features, indicating a strong influence from Anglo-Saxon writing. In the West the same Anglo-Saxon features occur too, but not to the same extent as in the East¹².

Some letters in Insular or Anglo-Saxon script had undergone greater transformations than others in the course of independent development in the British Isles. In particular, *a*, *e*, *f*, *g*, *h*, *r*, and *s* differed from their counterparts in the script of the same period on the continent, and from the later Carolingian script¹³. There are no traces of Anglo-Saxon *a*, *e*, *g*, *h*, or *s* in Old Norse manuscripts; the other letters and letter forms mentioned above are used, though to differing extents. The adoption of *ð*, *w*, and the Anglo-Saxon *f* in Icelandic script was doubtless due more to Norwegian than to English influence, just as the disappearance of Anglo-Saxon *w* around 1300 and *ð* in the fourteenth century was doubtless due to Norwegian influence¹⁴.

It must also be kept in mind that Anglo-Saxon influence on Old Norse could have been more than purely paleographic. It could also have been orthographical. The basic Latin alphabet was not sufficient, without modifications and augmentations, to write texts in Old Norse. Norwegians and Icelanders had to deal with this somehow. It is, for example, likely that they learned to use *y* as a letter for the front round vowel from the Anglo-Saxons, as well as the use of *eo* for the *ø*-sound, and perhaps the letter *ø* itself; and they used *ð* in medial and final position and *þ* in initial position as the Anglo-Saxons did. They also imported an extensive set of abbreviations from England¹⁵.

Nevertheless, some continental influence must have reached Norwegian and Icelandic script, for example through the archbishoprics of Hamburg or Bremen in Germany until 1103 and Lund in Denmark in the period 1104–52, and through direct contact with people in Denmark, Germany, the Low Countries and France. The first three Icelandic bishops studied for example in Germany and France and the priest Sæmundr Sigfússon fróði (1056–1133) as well¹⁶.

In the nineteenth century it was discovered that the spines of many of the regional administrative accounts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Norwegian State Archives in Oslo had been strengthened with strips of parchment that had been cut from medieval manuscripts. About 5,000 fragments of Latin manuscripts are in the archives, most of them of a religious nature. It is estimated that they come from about 1,200 original books. Recently some Norwegian scholars, with help from scholars abroad, have been looking more closely at some of these Latin fragments. The material shows that English influence was very strong in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (English missals or missals copied from English manuscripts), though North German influence also can be traced¹⁷.

Although it is uncertain whether the Latin script originally came to Norway and Iceland from the continent or more likely from England, at the very least, Anglo-Saxon influence soon became strong and remained strong for some time.

5.

D. A. Seip divided the history of Icelandic-Norwegian script into three periods. The first extended down to 1225, the second from 1225 to 1300 and the third ran from 1300 onwards. Lars Svensson

¹¹ Cf. D. A. SEIP, *Palæografi B* (cf. n. 3) 13, 44; HREINN BENEDIKTSSON, *Early Icelandic Script* (cf. n. 3) 34–36.

¹² Cf. HREINN BENEDIKTSSON, *Early Icelandic Script* (cf. n. 3) 19.

¹³ M. P. BROWN, *A Guide to Western Historical Scripts from Antiquity to 1600*. London 1990, 59.

¹⁴ Cf. STEFÁN KARLSSON, *The development of Latin script* (cf. n. 9) 834–835.

¹⁵ Cf. HREINN BENEDIKTSSON, *Early Icelandic Script* (cf. n. 3) 21, 29, 34, 86.

¹⁶ Cf. HREINN BENEDIKTSSON, *Early Icelandic Script* (cf. n. 3) 38–40.

¹⁷ Cf. G. I. PETTERSEN–E. KARLSEN, *Katalogisering av latinske membranfragmenter som forskningsprosjekt*, in: *Arkivverkets forskningsseminar Gardemoen 2003 (Riksarkivaren: Rapport og retningslinjer 16)*. [Oslo] 2003, 45, 47–59, 70; O. E. HAUGEN, *The development of Latin script I* (cf. n. 10) 825.

gave these three periods names: he divided Icelandic script into Carolingian, Carolingian insular and Gothic script, while he divided Norwegian script into the older Carolingian insular period, younger Carolingian insular period and Gothic¹⁸. The term *Carolingian insular* is not particularly apt, since even though Norwegian and Icelandic scribes adopted some letters and letter forms from Anglo-Saxon script, their script never bore the other characteristics of insular script.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Carolingian script was also used in England in Latin texts in the tenth and eleventh centuries, while Anglo-Saxon insular script was used in vernacular writing down to the twelfth century, and some Anglo-Saxon letters and letter forms survived in the vernacular down to the thirteenth century and even the fifteenth century¹⁹. Thus, insular letters or letter forms appear to have been adopted in Norwegian writing from English manuscripts written in the vernacular in the period c. 950–1150.

If we use the terms used by A. Derolez in his book on the Gothic script, only a few of the earliest Icelandic manuscripts in the vernacular, maybe only three or four, are written in Carolingian script; and perhaps only one page in a Norwegian manuscript. The others are all written in Praegothica, which was the principal script used in Norway and Iceland until the second half of the thirteenth century. In the twelfth century Protogothica was the dominant script in England, both in Latin and in the vernacular, although Gothic script (*Textualis*) spread there during the latter part of that century²⁰.

It is evident to me that Icelanders lagged behind Norwegians in adopting new forms of writing from the south. The Norwegians were first to use Protogothica and to import Anglo-Saxon letters and letter forms, so that the Anglo-Saxon influence came to Iceland through Norway rather than from England directly. Icelandic script seems to have a more continental character. The only thing that supports this is that the oldest manuscripts are written with the Carolingian script while the oldest Norwegian manuscripts are written with the ‘new’ Protogothic script. We do not know when the East Norwegians adopted the Anglo-Saxon letters and letter forms because they are already found in the oldest manuscripts. One could speculate that it happened in the first half of the twelfth century or perhaps in the late eleventh century when it is thought that they began to use the Latin alphabet to write in the vernacular. The Anglo-Saxon influence then gradually moved to West Norway and then to Iceland.

6.

Very few twelfth century manuscripts in the vernacular are written in Carolingian script (plate 1). Most of the manuscripts from around the year 1200 and from the first half of the thirteenth century are written in Praegothica (plate 2); perhaps some of them with cursive influence. The manuscript on Plate 2 (AM 645 4^{vo}) is heavily abbreviated and has many ligatures like many other Icelandic manuscripts. These manuscripts are in the vernacular, and as has been pointed out before, it is more likely that manuscripts written in the vernacular are written with lesser degree of formality than liturgical manuscripts in Latin. Most of the manuscripts from the second half of the thirteenth century and the fourteenth century are written in *Textualis libraria* (plate 3), and some of them are under cursive influence. After the year 1400 *Textualis* is rarely used in manuscripts in the vernacular. Some manuscripts are written in *Cursiva Antiquior* in the fourteenth century, and it was still in use in the middle of the sixteenth century (plate 4). Most of the manuscripts written in *Cursiva* are in *Cursiva Antiquior libraria* or *Cursiva libraria* (plate 5). I have not looked at all preserved Icelandic manuscripts in the vernacular from the fifteenth and sixteenth century, but so far I have only found

¹⁸ Cf. D. A. SEIP, *Palaeografi B* (cf. n. 3); L. SVENSSON, *Nordisk paleografi (Lundastudier i nordisk språkvetsenskap A 28)*. Lund 1974, 169–170, 201–204; L. SVENSSON, *Palaeography*, in: *Medieval Scandinavia*. New York–London 1993, 492, 495.

¹⁹ M. P. BROWN, *A Guide to Western Historical Scripts* (cf. n. 13) XV.

²⁰ Cf. A. DEROLEZ, *The Palaeography of Gothic Manuscript Books (Cambridge Studies in Palaeography and Codicology 9)*. Cambridge 2003; M. P. Brown, *A Guide to Western Historical Scripts* (cf. n. 13) 73, 81.

one manuscript written in hybrida (plate 6) and only one or two which are possibly written in semi-hybrida (plate 7); they are all from the second half of the sixteenth century.

In this paper I will not discuss the development in the seventeenth century and later, except from mentioning that New Gothic or German script came to Iceland from Denmark in the second half of the sixteenth century and that in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries the development of writing was almost the same as in Denmark and Norway²¹.

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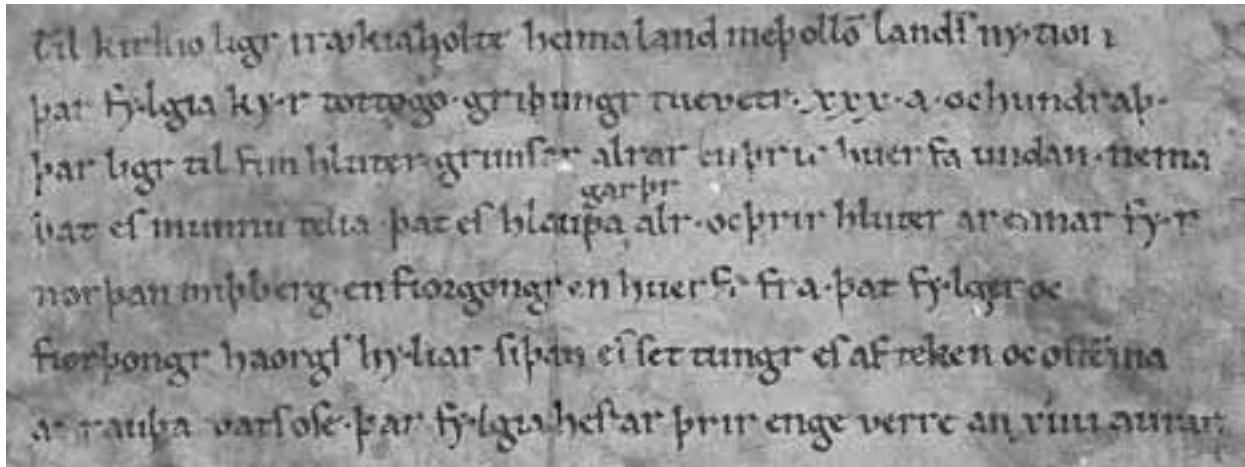
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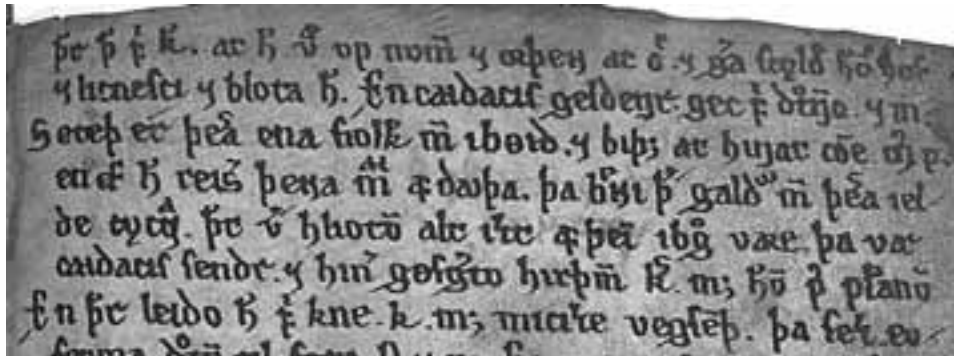
PLATES

1. Reykjaholtsmáldagi, fol. 1r, lines 1–7, from ca. 1150–1200. Owner: Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands, Reykjavík (The National Archives of Iceland, Reykjavík).
2. AM 645 4to, fol. 38r, lines 1–7, from ca. 1220. Owner: Den Arnarnagæanske Samling, Nordisk Forskningsinstitut, København (The Arnarnagæan Collection, Nordisk Forskningsinstitut, Copenhagen).
3. AM 519 a 4to, fol. 11r, lines 1–7, from ca. 1280. Owner: Den Arnarnagæanske Samling, Nordisk Forskningsinstitut, København (The Arnarnagæan Collection, Nordisk Forskningsinstitut, Copenhagen).
4. AM 604 h 4to, fol. 14v, lines 1–7, from ca. 1550. Owner: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Reykjavík (The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Reykjavík).
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7. AM 240 II 4to, fol. 6r, lines 1–7, from ca. 1600. Owner: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Reykjavík (The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Reykjavík).

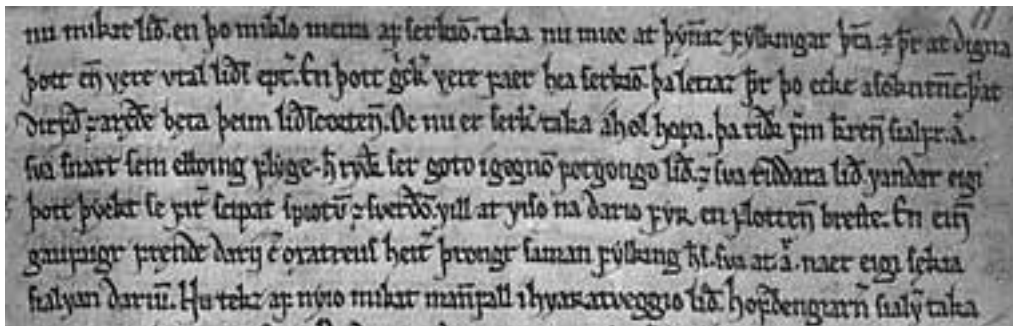
²¹ I wish to thank Professor A. Derolez for his assistance and am grateful to the late Professor Stefán Karlsson (1928–2006) for all the discussions about Icelandic script we had throughout the years.



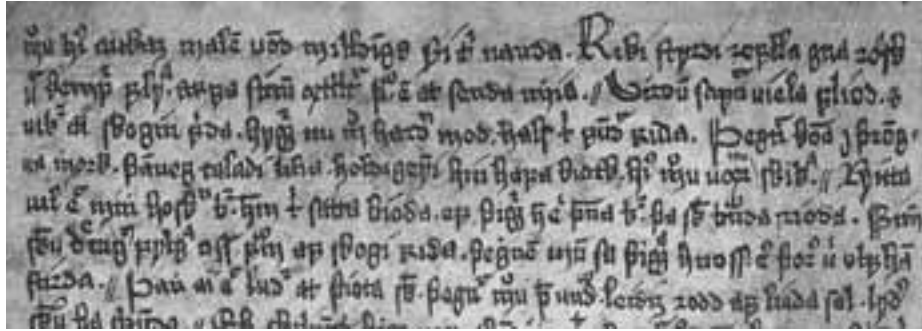
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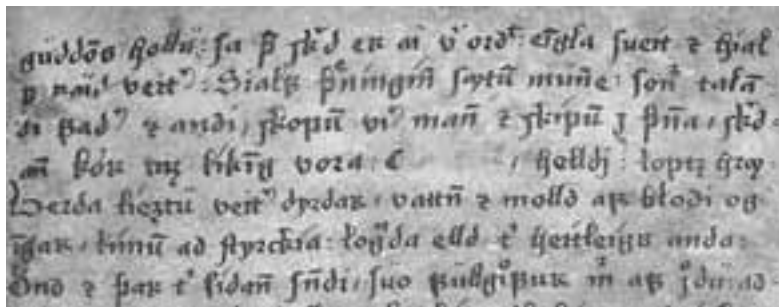
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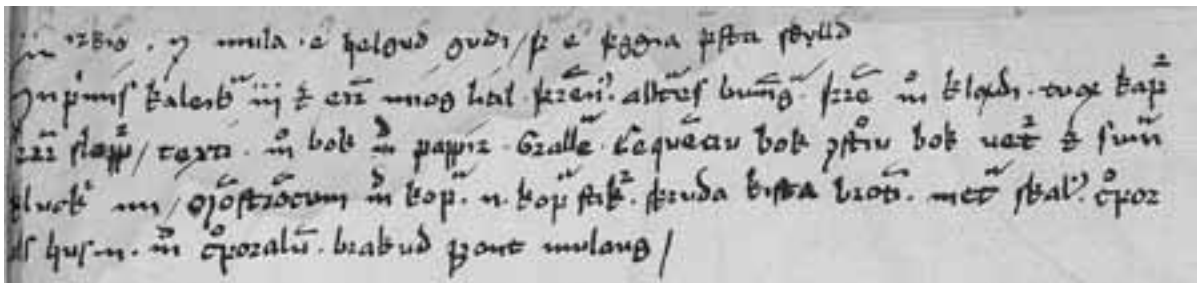
3. AM 519 a 4to, fol. 11r, lines 1–7, from ca. 1280. Owner: Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, Nordisk Forskningsinstitut, København (The Arnamagnæan Collection, Nordisk Forskningsinstitut, Copenhagen)



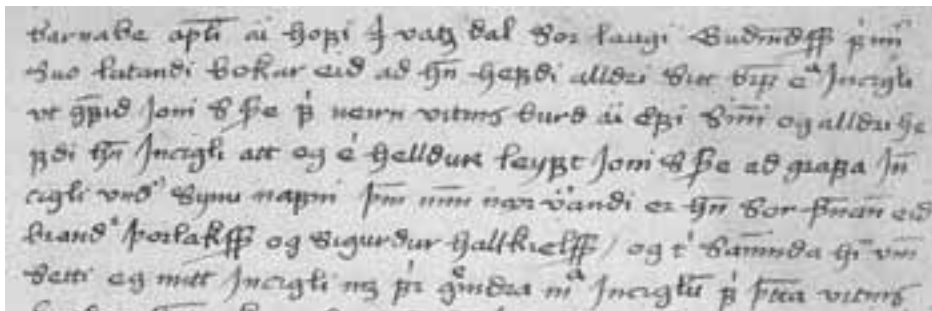
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