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From Individualization to Europeanization:

The Development of Cultural Identity in Medieval Iceland

Iceland is a unique place known for its strong sense of cultural heritage. Intrepid settlers colonizing the virgin shores of this island a mere 1100 years ago were tasked with the opportunity to build an entirely new identity for themselves. The earliest part of Icelandic cultural history is characterized by the development of a new independent Icelandic identity that highlighted the island's uniqueness, isolation, and self-sufficiency. But large social, political, and environmental shifts occurring largely in the 13th and 14th centuries gave elite Icelanders reason to rebrand themselves, and Icelandic ethnic identity was gradually reformed by increasing continental European influence. This Europeanization was reflected in several aspects of Icelandic culture including foodways, metalworking, cloth production, trade patterns, and literature.

Unpacking Identity and Material Culture

Identity is a complex term and should be treated as such. Though this paper focuses specifically on ethnic cultural identity, identity is never singularly faceted. Age, gender, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status are just a few examples of the various aspects of identity that intersect with Icelandic ethnicity to form a much more complex individual identities. When studying identity through an archaeological lens, this principal of intersectionality applies to historical identity just as much as it applies to

modern identity. Diana DiPaolo Loren and Genevieve Fisher define identity as "the internal sameness of the self and the sharing of characteristics with others in a group whose structure, circuitously, constitute the social world within which individual identity is created." Identity is not just what one wears, but how one wears it and the context in which it is worn (DiPaolo Loren & Fisher 2003: 226). Identity is one's sense of self, which is determined by how the body exists in and moves through a landscape, as illustrated by Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *field* and *habitus*. According to Pierre Bourdieu, one's sense of self is determined by *habitus* (a generated pattern of actions that are reproduced but transformed by changing circumstances, dependent on the amount of economic, social, and cultural capital one has) within a given *field* (an institution or social arena that governs one's habitus) (Bourdieu 1984).

Archaeology can provide a rich analysis of identity because of the strong role that material culture plays in forming one's sense of self. Material culture constitutes a significant portion of any *field*; thus, *habitus* is informed by material culture. Daily activity—eating, dressing, playing, working, etc.— is governed by what objects one has access to, but, conversely, production of objects is influenced by practical and cultural needs. Peter van Dommelen and A.B. Knapp state that physical objects are informed by collective cultural memory, including significant historical events such as migration and colonization (Knapp & van Dommelen 2010: 6). Thus, such events contribute significantly even to individual cultural identity through the material culture in one's *field*.

Knapp, van Dommelen, Bourdieu, DiPaolo Loren, and Fisher would all agree on the importance of considering intersectionality in identity, especially the intersection of

socioeconomic class. The role of the elite class in forming an ethnic identity through culture cannot be understated. The elite class controls the production of material culture, and will continually manipulate it to continue to accumulate more capital. For this reason, Michael Dietler believes that in order to properly study cultural identity, one must understand the social setting of both consumption and production of material culture (DiPaolo Loren & Fisher 2003: 227). Specialization is perhaps the most important aspect of production, s it contributes significantly to collective cultural memory through the passing of specific knowledge. Specialization also increases efficiency and output, which in turn standardizes material culture and affixes certain production styles concretely to a culture. Rowen Flad and Zachary Hruby point out that specialization cannot occur in a society that depends entirely on subsistence yields (Flad & Rhuby, 2007: 3). Thus, specialization is also indicative of a society's ability to form a political and economic network that provides a basis for a coherent cultural identity rooted in unique material culture.

The Origin of the Icelanders

Common ancestry is the groundwork of ethnic identity that cultural connections are constructed upon. Ancestry constitutes a large part of collective cultural memory, and was especially important for Icelanders as a way to establish legitimacy over their new land. The settlement (*landnám*) of Iceland is documented in the 12th century text *Landnámabók*. Elizabeth Pierce suggests that this text was composed a few centuries after *landnám* to connect contemporary Icelanders to their Norwegian ancestors in an attempt to establish Norwegian claim over Iceland (Pierce 2016: 137). However, it was not until the following century that Norwegian recolonization became a significant threat.

Thus, it is much more likely that *Landnámabók* was instead written to legitimize Icelandic ethnicity and affirm the claims of contemporary Icelanders over ancestral lands by tracing families to their elite Norse ancestors, as Gislí Sigurðsson suggests (Sigurðsson 1988).

Icelanders are thought to descend primarily from Norwegian ancestors, but this may not actually be the case. *Landnám* occurred in the late 9th century— a time of great instability in Norway. It is traditionally believed that Iceland was settled primarily by Norwegians looking to escape monarchal tyranny as the Norwegian kingdom expanded and became more authoritarian. *Landnámabók* does state that a majority of Icelandic settlers came from Norway, with another quarter of them having been Norsemen coming from Viking lands in the British Isles (Sayers 1994: 129). In all, only 2% of names listed in *Landnámabók* are Gaelic in origin, and Gislí points out that most of these family names are not found among modern Icelanders (Sigurðsson 1988: 27). But genetic evidence contradicts the textual registrar of settlers: a pivotal genetic survey of modern Icelanders conducted in 2000 suggests that Icelanders are actually more genetically Gaelic than Scandinavian (Helgasson et al.: 2001). Furthermore, 80% of Icelandic Y chromosomes are Scandinavian, but only 37.5% of Icelandic mtDNA in total is Scandinavian, indicating that a vast majority of female Icelandic settlers were of Gaelic descent. The article attributes this to genetic mixing that had already occurred in the British Isles among the 25% of settlers that *Landnámabók* attributes to this region (Helgasson et al. 2001: 733). Gislí instead attributes female Gaelic DNA in Iceland to wives and slaves who were brought by Norse settlers coming from the British Isles, and suggests that the genetic mixing took place *after* the settlers reached Iceland. He points

out that *Landnámabók* lists only 5% of an estimated original 20,000 Icelandic settlers, and the text focuses largely on elite Norse men and thus largely ignores the population in question: women and slaves, the latter of which likely comprised 30-40% of the original Icelandic population (Sigurðsson 1988). These social groups consisted largely of Gaelic people who, despite their exclusion from *Landnámabók*, made up a large portion of the Icelandic genetic pool.

Gaelic Culture in Iceland

Given the genetic breakdown of Icelanders, one might expect to see more Gaelic influence in Icelandic culture. However, since the Gaels who immigrated to Iceland were in socially oppressed positions, the island's Norse population established hegemonic cultural control over the island. Since the elite class controls production, Icelandic material culture displays mostly Norse influence.

Gaelic cultural influence is by no means completely absent in Iceland, however. Certain places in the south and west portions of Iceland display more Gaelic influence than elsewhere. Gislí points out that the Gaelic names that *are* mentioned in *Landnámabók* correspond geographically with other indicators of the presence of Gaelic culture, including Gaelic place names, lacks of pagan burials, and Gaelic-style domestic architecture (Sigurðsson 1988). However, the amount of Gaelic material culture in Iceland pales in comparison to the amount of Norse material culture, making a mass migration of free Gaelic people seem unlikely. William Sayers reconciles the lack of Celtic material culture by claiming that a renunciation of Celtic origin, ethnicity, and Christianity in favor of a more Icelandic identity would have garnered free Gaels living in Iceland a significant amount of social capital, so it was likely commonplace to voluntarily

present oneself as culturally Norse through name changing, religious conversion, and the adoption of a Norse-inspired lifestyle (Sayers 1994). Consciously adopting a more Norse habitus within a Norse-dominated field would certainly increase the social status of Gaels living in Iceland, and this would explain the general scarcity of Gaelic embodied material culture in Iceland such as clothing, jewelry, and cookware. However, it seems unlikely that Gaelic slaves would have the agency to make this decision for themselves. Gislí counters that this change was more compulsory than deliberate, suggesting that enslaved Celts would be forced to take on Norse names and adopt Norse lifestyles by their owners (Sigurðsson 1988).

Michele Hayeur Smith's research pushes back against the general lack of Gaelic material culture that Gislí and Sayers recognize. She documents a significant portion of Viking Age jewelry found in Iceland as having come from the British Isles, including bells, pins, and trefoil brooches. Hayeur Smith does acknowledge that that even though this jewelry is imported from or made in the style of Gaelic lands, there is clear Scandinavian influence in a lot of Gaelic jewelry due to Scandinavian presence in the British Isles and the subsequent hybridization that took place there (Hayeur Smith 2004). She also points out that anthropologically, jewelry is used to display social status outwardly, and Scandinavian style jewelry (which does indeed make up a majority of the jewelry she catalogues) would be a way for the elite to demonstrate their Norse ancestry outwardly and further assert their cultural dominance over Iceland (Hayeur Smith 2004).

Ancestry and Land Ownership in the Development of Identity

Whether by deliberate choice or a forced conversion, the assimilation of Gaelic bodies into an Icelandic identity in Settlement Period Iceland was a first step in

developing a well-established and homogenous Icelandic ethnicity. The suppression of Gaelic culture allowed Icelanders to construct a unique ethnic identity based on heritage and geography, which are deeply intertwined in Iceland. Establishing ownership a homeland is another important step in the formation of an ethnic identity.

Ancestral claim over Iceland is legitimized textually through the aforementioned *Landnámabók* as well as the sagas of Icelanders. The sagas of Icelanders tell family histories of Icelanders. These sagas cemented the Icelandic identity by standardizing a written history of the Icelanders through the endeavors of their ancestors. The sagas recount important developments in Icelandic family histories such as settlement, political matters, important legal cases, religious happenings, and blood feuds. While these texts were written down in the 13th century, they represent histories that had been passed down orally from earlier generations. It is therefore incorrect to suggest that the sagas of Icelanders are a product of the 13th century; rather, they are representative of ancestral land claiming taking place beginning with *landnám*. By documenting the rich history of Iceland, the sagas establish cultural ownership over the physical island itself, and demonstrate the Icelanders' ability to exist as an independent culture.

Fences in the archaeological record further support the connection between ancestry and land claiming. Extensive networks of turf fences were constructed in Iceland from the 9th-10th centuries, and continued to hold territorial significance thereafter through the 12th century (Einnarson 2015). Fences can be indicative of animal husbandry as they can be used to corral livestock, but they are also useful for keeping intruders out and establishing claim over land (Einarsson 2015: 14). These physical markers of land ownership were heavily associated with ancestry. Burials were often placed on the

periphery of domestic boundaries to establish familial ownership over lands for future generations (Bolender 2007: 409). This practice once again emphasizes the important connection between ancestry and physical land that plays such a large role in legitimizing identity.

Economic Independence and Specialization as a Contributor to Icelandic Identity

The establishment of the Icelandic commonwealth in 930 CE was a crucial step in unifying Iceland culturally. From this point up until the establishment of Norwegian rule over the island in the 13th century, the Alþing provided Icelanders with a platform to exchange culture, material and otherwise. The Icelandic Commonwealth cemented Iceland as a cohesive society, expanding social and trading networks, and thus reducing dependence on subsistence yields and paving the way for specialization. The establishment of economic networks was particularly instrumental in perpetuating an independent and cohesive Icelandic identity. Like land claiming practices, trade and resource management in Iceland demonstrate a strong connection to the physical island itself, further promoting an Icelandic identity that is deeply rooted in its isolated geographic position.

Archaeological evidence at the site of Myvatn demonstrates a clear pattern of sustainable fish and egg harvesting dating back to the site's 9th century settlement. These conservation practices suggest a desire to promote local Icelandic trade and preserve natural resources for future generations of Icelanders. An abundance of eggshells that show signs of hatching suggest that in an effort to stabilize bird populations, the residents of Myvatn relied consumed the eggs of waterfowl found at the site, but adult birds were rarely eaten (McGovern et al. 2006: 194). Modern Icelandic laws that limit the amount of

eggs one can harvest from nests in Myvatn can be traced back to the Settlement Period (McGovern et al. 2007: 42). Sustainable fish consumption was also practiced at Myvatn. Most fish remains found at the site are from freshwater species found in the nearby lake, but dried marine fish imported from coastal Iceland makes up 12-30% of the fish bones found at the site (McGovern et al. 2006: 194). Importing dried fish allowed residents to avoid overfishing from the nearby lake and maintain fish populations. This harvesting practice simultaneously ensured that ancestrally claimed lands would be fruitful for future generations and contributed to a local insular economy, supporting other Icelanders further and contributing to Icelandic autonomy.

Iron was another important commodity among local trade networks that promoted an independent Icelandic identity through economics. Iron was an incredibly important resource in medieval Iceland used to make agricultural equipment, household tools, ship parts, weapons, and jewelry (Smith 2004: 184). Iron smelting requires ore and wood, both of which were readily available early in Icelandic history, so it initially did not require any exterior trade, and thus, like dried cod, was produced as an exclusively Icelandic resource. *Hauksbók* claims that iron smelting was "discovered" by an Icelander named Rauða-Björn, despite the fact that iron smelting was obviously practiced in Scandinavia and elsewhere long before the settlement of Iceland (Smith 2004: 198). Although evidence of the actual smelting process is not well established, a pit furnace at the site of Belgsá believed to be used for smelting indicates that Icelandic smelting was quite different from other medieval Scandinavian smelting processes (Smith 2004: 198). Thus, it is possible that an Icelander "discovered" this new method of iron smelting. Nevertheless, crediting the discovery of smelting to an Icelander allows Icelanders to lay

cultural claim over their unique smelting process and contribute further to their increasingly unique material culture.

Archaeological work at the Viking Age iron smelting facility of Háls paints a picture of Icelandic iron production that emphasizes specialization and the use of local resources. The site was situated near wetlands and a birch forest, which provided bog ore and wood, respectfully (Smith 2004: 190). In contrast, at coastal sites where ore is scarcer, smithies are abundant but smelting facilities are rare, suggesting that iron was smelted at inland sites such as Háls and then trade to coastal sites to be smithed. Seal and cod remains at the site provide further evidence of trade with coastal regions that strengthened the insular economy of the island (Smith 2004: 194-195).

The division between smelting and smithing, and the Icelandic *chaîne opératoire* of iron as a whole, is demonstrative of the specialization taking place at Icelandic crafting sites, especially considering the unique method of smelting that occurred in Iceland. Works at Háls would have been extremely diverse in their skills, with some being highly specialized and others being employed only to gather resources (Smith 2004: 194). This specialization was important for perpetuating Icelandic identity through material culture, allowing crafting knowledge to become more unique and refined with each subsequent generation of ironworkers.

Specialization is also well demonstrated in the weaving industry of early Iceland. Icelandic weavers played an important role in the national economy throughout the medieval period, and used unique technologies even through the early modern period: while most of Europe adopted horizontal looms and spinning wheels around the 11th century, Iceland continued to use worp-weighted looms and drop high-top whorls as late

as the 17th century (Hayeur Smith 2015: 24). This steadfast method of weaving is the product of generations of specialized production knowledge, demonstrating the strengthening of Icelandic identity through material culture.

Christianity and Colonialism

By the 13th century, an Icelandic ethnic identity was firmly established thorugh heritage, geography, material culture, and trade networks. Yet even before this identity had been fully cemented, it slowly began to unravel and reform. Elizabeth Pierce pinpoints a distinct Europeanization taking place in Iceland in the 13th and 14th centuries. She claims that a new Icelandic dependency on foreign trade at the time gave Icelanders a high-stakes incentive to avoid being othered from the rest of Europe. In order to maintain their economic presence in Europe, Icelanders attempted to present themselves as more culturally European than before (Pierce 2016). Although Pierce makes a compelling argument that this shift peaked in the 13th and 14th centuries, changes beginning as early as 11th century began to shift the dynamics of Icelandic identity.

The Christianization of Iceland in 1000 CE had a gradual but salient effect on the island, foreshadowing the Europeanization that took place in Iceland in the following centuries. Iceland Christianized under pressure from King Olaf of Norway. However, even in their conversion, Icelanders maintained a distinctly Icelandic way of conducting themselves, assuring that they would continue to be allowed to consume horsemeat, expose unwanted infants, and worship pagan gods in private (though these practices were eventually banned too). These conditions preserved important aspects of Icelandic social code, but Christianization nonetheless had a huge impact on the socioeconomic structure of Iceland. The conversion brought in bishops trained in mainland Europe, placing

outsiders in positions of significant power and cultural influence in Iceland for the first time. Elites who embraced Christianity received favor with the Norwegian court and gained unprecedented levels of political power. These vassals received prestige goods in return for their support, which further increased their cultural capital in Iceland.

Expansion of Icelandic Literature

With Christianity tends to come the tradition of writing things down. Written literature facilitated cultural exchange between Europe and the rest of Iceland because it allowed for the transportation of physical manuscripts, and importing literary traditions from Europe was an easy way for the Icelandic elite to demonstrate a common cultural interest with mainland Europeans. *Heimskringla* was particularly instrumental in placing Iceland into the literary arena of medieval Europe. *Heimskringla* is a history of the kings of Norway written by Snorri Sturlusson, an elite Icelander, while he was in residence at the Norwegian court early in the 13th century. The collection of sagas is an emblem of increased Icelandic interest in the affairs of mainland Europe. Snorri pays special attention to Norwegian-Icelandic affairs, but also highlights the expansionist nature of the Norwegian crown and includes gruesome details on pillaging, conquering, and torture committed by Norwegian kings. Of course, the disdain for Norwegian monarchy is somewhat coded within the text: Norwegian monarchs would have read *Heimskringla* as a celebration of their accomplishments, which gave Snorri another way to appeal to the Norwegian king and demonstrate his interest in the affairs of continental Europe, while Icelanders would have read the text as a shaming of the greed of Norwegian kings (Fjalldal 2013). Magnús Fjalldal views *Heimskringla* as a work of propaganda slandering the Norwegian monarchy as power-hungry and expansionist, but other scholars such as

Marlene Ciklamini and Björn Þorsteinsson interpret the tension in *Heimskringla* as representative of an Icelandic distrust towards monarchy and expansionism in general (Fjalldal 2013, 456). Icelanders were indeed skeptical of royal power, hence the development of their own government as a commonwealth rather than the monarchy that they were used to. Despite this distaste for foreign political practices, *Heimskringla* is nonetheless indicative of a new Icelandic willingness to engage with other European affairs and address mainland Europe in their own cultural endeavors.

The Vinland Sagas are also representative of a large shift in Icelandic cultural identity, but in a very different way from *Heimskringla*. The Vinland Sagas consist of *Grœnlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga Rauða*. These sagas were composed later than *Heimskringla*, but also describe the histories of other Scandinavian lands: Greenland and Vinland. Elizabeth Pierce argues that these sagas were written to deliberately portray Greenland and Vinland as lawless frontiers, characterizing Iceland as more civilized and European by comparison (Pierce 2016: 148). The two sagas describe horrible events that took place in Vinland and Greenland, including famine, sickness, encounters with monsters, sinking ships, attacks by Native Americans, and mass murder. *Grœnlandinga saga* also addresses supernatural and pagan themes (Kunz 2000). By highlighting the violent, tragic, and pagan aspects of life in these faraway lands, the authors of these sagas are in a way legitimizing Iceland's bloody and pagan past by comparison, and portraying Iceland as closer to the rest of Europe both geographically and culturally.

The *Riddarasögur*, or chivalric sagas, also reflect a particular cultural entwinement between the Icelandic elites and continental Europe. The chivalric sagas were first composed in Norway in the 13th century, but were popularized in Icelandic

manuscripts in the 14th century and beyond (Kalinke 1985: 317). This group of sagas includes translations and imitations of Old French and Middle German literatures such as *Karlamagnús saga* and *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* (Tómasson 2006, 139). Jürg Glauser claims that King Hákon of Norway originally had these sagas composed to transmit new chivalric concepts to feudalized Norway in effort to bring Norway closer to the rest of Europe (Glauser 2005: 375). The chivalric sagas were likely adapted by elite Icelanders for the very same reason in the following century, and quite successfully: chivalric sagas are found in an immense number of manuscripts, representing their popularity among the elite, who were likely eager to educate themselves and others on European culture.

Exchanging Material Culture with Europe

As power is further and further consolidated into the hands of the elite class, more control over production and trade is acquired, heavily impacting material culture. Because of increasing Norwegian influence ultimately culminating in the end of the commonwealth and the beginning of Norwegian colonial rule over Iceland, the Icelandic elites had clear incentive to rebrand themselves as European. Thus, this cultural shift eventually trickled down to the lower classes through material culture as production and trade became more influenced by the desire for goods that showed European cultural influence.

Gásir, the site of a medieval market, has evidence that suggests an increase in foreign trade occurring by the 14th century. Gásir was a large site for international trade, providing elite Icelanders with exotic luxury goods such walrus ivory, drinking vessels, ivory, swans, porpoises, and even exotic pets, while also providing other Icelanders with more basic goods (Harrison et al. 2008, 115). Ramona Harrison cites unique evidence for

increased foreign trade at Gásir in the late medieval period. By 1200, Icelanders began to biperforate bones to extract the marrow instead of splitting them laterally, which preserved the bone to be used as a tool. This lead to a superstition that breaking bones at meals would cause sheep to break their legs, and the practice was tabooed accordingly. A majority of 14th century animal bone fragments at Gásir are split rather than biperforated, suggesting a significant presence of foreign populations at the site (Harrison et al. 2008, 115). Elizabeth Pierce instead draws attention to wide array of shoes found at Gásir, several of which appear to have been imported from foreign trading hubs such as London and Bergen. Clothing, like jewelry, is one of the easiest ways to alter one's performed identity. Since such a large variety can be found, Pierce argues that shoes imported to Gásir do not conform to the fashion of one particular region (Iceland or otherwise), and instead demonstrate a desire to present a pan-European aesthetic through clothing (Pierce 2016: 147). Pierce and Harrison's findings at Gásir correspond temporally with an increase in imported goods across several farmsteads in Iceland of varying economic power (Kevin Smith, unpublished). Kevin Smith's work demonstrates pattern of increased elite demand for European goods to reflect a more European identity trickling down to lower classes through the distribution of material culture.

An increase in Icelandic international trade can also be traced through exports, particularly in the weaving industry. Yarn can be spun either clockwise (z-spun) or counterclockwise (s-spun). In the 11th century, Icelanders switched from weaving z/z-spun twills to z/s-spun twills (Hayeur Smith 2015: 27). Spinning direction is an excellent example of the importance of cultural memory in specialization: there is no discernible difference between z-spinning and s-spinning, and the choice depends entirely on what is

preferred by a given culture. Michèle Hayeur Smith proposes two explanations to this shift in specialization: either a change in ethnicity of the specialists making the fabric, or pressure from international markets that preferred z/s spun cloth (Hayeur Smith 2015: 28). The latter seems most likely, as this change in production foreshadows a massive increase in exported cloth in the 12th-15th centuries (Hayeur Smith 2015: 28). This increase may have been a result of a cloth shortage in Norway immediately following the advent of Norwegian colonial control over Iceland, which may have led to a huge increase in shepherding in Iceland in the 13th century— a practice that is now a hallmark of Icelandic identity (Hayeur Smith 2015: 29).

Economic Adaptation to Climate Change

Although the increase in shepherding in 13th century Iceland was fortuitous due to the Norwegian cloth shortage, climate change was the most compelling motivator for this change and number of others that overhauled Icelandic cultural identity. In 1258, a volcanic eruption near the equator caused average temperatures in subsequent years to drop about 4 degrees Fahrenheit on average (Zorich 2012: 54). Due to its location at the end of the Gulf Stream, Iceland is quite susceptible to climate change, so this "Little Ice Age" may have had a particularly strong impact on medieval Iceland. Lower temperatures lead to shorter growing seasons, which forced Icelandic farmers to adapt to having less hay (Zorich 2012: 55). This change had an immediate and lasting impact on Icelandic foodways. A team of Canadian archaeologists excavating animal bones from a medieval farm at Svalbard established that the primary diet at the site in the early 13th century consisted of lamb, beef, and pork. But after 1258, cattle and pig remains are largely replaced by those of sheep, and are supplemented by seal bones and whalebones

(Zorich 2012: 55 & 57). Zach Zorich notes that sheep are heartier and require less food than pigs or cattle, so switching primary livestock was a great way for farmers to adapt to climate change (Zorich 2012: 57). Animal bone studies at Myvatn reflect an identical shift in diet: sheep bones almost entirely replace cow and pig bones in the 13th century, with a small supplement of whalebones (McGovern et al. 2006: 191). Though the increase in sheep remains does line up temporally with the aforementioned cloth shortage in Norway, it is more likely that sheep were introduced as a result of climate change, which in turn augmented the weaving industry in Iceland, enabling them to engage in the cloth trade with Norway at exactly the right time and giving Icelandic traders the ability to acquire more foreign goods.

Climate change also brought cold ocean waters closer to the surface, increasing ocean fishing yield (Zorich 2012: 58). English fishermen arrived in Icelandic waters to take advantage of the abundance of fish by the end of the 14th century, shortly followed by Germans (Zorich 2012: 58). Local dried fish production boomed in the 13th and 14th centuries, as demonstrated by several industrial-sized fish processing sites as well as increased evidence of dried fish consumption at interior sites such as Myvatn. However, the amount of dried fish found at Icelandic sites pales in comparison to the amount of dried fish being exported. Gufuskálar is a 14th century industrial fish processing site where fish were gutted, beheaded, and dried for shipment. A pile 3 feet thick of cod bones extends nearly a mile down the beach, and a 2009 survey found 154 drying huts in total. The amount of fish processed at Gufuskálar clearly exceeds the needs of Icelanders, and was traded abroad for resources such as iron, grain, and lumber (Zorich 2012: 60).

Originally, iron was one of the few resources that Icelanders were able to depend on locally, but this also changed in the 13th century due to environmental reasons: not from the Little Ice Age, but because of deforestation. Natascha Mehler argues that wood for iron smelting (or even the smelted iron itself) had to be imported because the island was largely deforested by the end of the Viking Age (Mehler 2007: 230). This change placed iron production under even more control by the elites by the 13th century—yet another example of the consolidation of power into the hands of the elite that took place in the 13th and 14th centuries that caused European influence to trickle down through the classes. Climate change caused a huge shift in the Icelandic economy in the 13th century that provided an abundance of wool and fish, but eliminated the means to create iron, and this is the cause of the dependence on foreign trade that Elizabeth Pierce cites as the cause for the Europeanization of Icelandic identity.

Conclusion

The development of an Icelandic identity founded on the principals of ancestry and geographic location was crucial to the cultural development of the island. Claiming of land, the establishment local trading networks, production specialization, the composition of historical literature, and the eventual suppression of Gaelic culture all contributed to the development of an Icelandic ethnic identity founded on a culture of individualism and camaraderie. Yet conversion to Christianity, Norwegian colonialism, and climate change resulted in large changes in social, political, and economic structures culminating in the 13th and 14th centuries. Power was funneled into the hands of the elite class, who had politically motivated reasons to re-identify themselves as more European. Because these elites had control over trade and production, this new way to attain status

combined with a large increase in foreign trade due to climate change resulted in a new Icelandic material culture that featured an influx of goods and literary traditions imported from Europe, and shifts in production that made Icelandic goods more appealing to European markets, demonstrating a general push by elite Icelanders to Europeanize their Icelandic identity.

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