The development of Latin script I: in Norway

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1. The introduction of Latin script

Norwegians encountered the Latin alphabet on Viking raids and on trading expeditions a long time before it was taken into use at home. Coins with Nordic names in the Latin alphabet (e.g. Anlaf = Óláfr, Sihtric = Sigtrygg) were issued in York before the middle of the 10th century and suggest that Scandinavian traders also knew how to employ the new alphabet. The fundamentals of an alphabetical script were, after all, well known, since the runes had by then been in use for many centuries in Norway and the other Scandinavian countries.

The introduction of Christianity brought the Latin alphabet to Norwegian shores, most likely as early as the 10th century. Several Norwegian bishops during the reign of King Óláfr Haraldsson (d. 1030) had learnt to write in England. One received the nick-name inn bøkvisi ‘the bookwise’, and Bishop Grimkell or one of his companions is supposed to have written a mass for King Óláfr ca. 1050. Since the reign of King Óláfr inn kyrr (1067–1093) we have every reason to assume that quite a few Norwegians knew how to write, not only in Latin but also in the vernacular. It is generally thought that the recording of provincial
laws started in the second part of the 11th century, but some scholars believe this took place as early as during the reign of King Óláfr (cf. article 92 by M. Rindal). The earliest extant manuscript in the vernacular, however, is AM 655 IX 4to, three leaves of an Old Norse translation of Latin legends, which are dated to the second half of the 12th century, possibly as early as ca. 1150. (Manuscript sigla and dates are given according to ONP Registré 1989.)

2. The corpus

A large number of Norwegian books and charters were written in Latin but, with a few exceptions, only fragments remain of the book manuscripts. The oldest fragments date back to ca. 1000, and were probably written in England and brought to Norway by English missionaries. Some manuscripts were later copied locally in Norway, but due to the highly fragmentary nature of the material, it is difficult to distinguish between foreign and local productions. Among the oldest extant manuscripts thought to be written in Norway are Hieronymi Canones super Evangelia (GKS 1347 4to, before 1200) and Liber ritualis (NKS 32 8vo). Also, many charters issued in Norway were written in Latin. The earliest extant ones are dated to the 1160s (cf. Regesta Norvegica vol. 1), and a fair number remain intact.

In a European context, the Nordic countries were late in introducing the Latin alphabet, but early in developing a vernacular literature. Norway has a considerable corpus of early vernacular manuscripts, larger than that of Sweden and Denmark, but smaller by far than that of Iceland. All but a few medieval Norwegian manuscripts date before ca. 1400, and the great majority of extant manuscripts were written in the comparatively short period ca. 1250–1350. There is a sharp decline in the production of book manuscripts around 1370. Seip has explained this, at least partly, as a result of the Black Death, which reached Norway in 1349–1530. Two decades later, a new generation had taken over from those who had survived the plague, and in political matters Norway was becoming increasingly dependent upon Sweden and Denmark. From a palaeographic point of view, there is no sharp division in the 1370s, but the almost complete lack of younger book manuscripts makes for a practical, corpus-based division around 1370.

There are 1108 Norwegian charters written in the vernacular up to 1350, of which about 80 date from the period up to 1300. Although there is a decline in the decades after 1350, by the end of the century the production of charters had resumed the level of the pre-plague years. From the period up to ca. 1350 there are more than 125 Norwegian book manuscripts, though many are fragmentary (the exact number depends on how the fragments are sorted and interpreted; cf. the list in ONP Registré and Seip 1955, 226ff.). The majority of these are law manuscripts, ranging from the early provincial laws (for Gulåping, Frostuping etc.) to King Magnus’s Landslag from 1274. In addition to the large group of law manuscripts there are about 20 Norwegian manuscripts, more or less complete, of other genres, such as historical works, courtly literature, religious works, legends etc. (cf. the list in Stefán Karlsson 1979, 4–6). A number of well-known works belong here, including The Old Norwegian Book of homilies (AM 619 4to, ca. 1200–1225), the legendary Ólafs saga ins helga (DG 8 II, ca. 1225–1250), Strengleiðark (DG 4–7, ca. 1270), Konungs skuggsjá (AM 243 b a fol., ca. 1275), Barlaams ok Josaphats saga (Holm perg 6 fol., ca. 1275), Þidrekssaga (Holm perg 4 fol. ca. 1275–1300).

In addition to the unintended loss of manuscripts through the passage of time, many Norwegian manuscripts were deliberately destroyed in the 16th and 17th centuries. After the publication of Missale Nidrosiense and Breviarium Nidrosiense in 1519, a large number of Latin liturgical manuscripts were cut up and used for binding books. The National Archive (Riksarkivet) in Oslo has a collection of no less than about 5,000 Latin fragments, most of which are liturgical; it has been estimated that these fragments are the remains of ca. 1,200 codices. Vernacular manuscripts fared better for a while, since law books were still being used throughout the 16th century. However, after a translation of the Old Norwegian landslag was published in 1604, Den Norske Lov- Bog (authorised by King Christian IV), a number of vernacular law manuscripts encountered the same sad fate as the Latin ones. The National Archive has about 500 such fragments, many very small and few larger than 1/2–1 leaf. It has been estimated that they once made up about 100 manuscripts, of which more than two thirds were law books.

In a palaeographic context, there is no reason to distinguish between documents written in Latin and in the vernacular. However, unlike Latin documents, those written in the ver-
nacular can safely be assumed to be of Nordic origin, though not necessarily Norwegian. There are a number of manuscripts which were written by Icelanders, many of whom were staying in Norway. Other manuscripts were written in Iceland for the purpose of export to Norway, right up to ca. 1400 (Stefán Karlsson 1979). There are also a fair number of charters which may be classified as Swedish, and to a lesser extent, Danish. Although it is now generally accepted that perhaps too much interest has been invested in discussing the national provenance of medieval documents, especially between Norway and Iceland, it is impossible to avoid this question when trying to describe the national development of literature and script. However, the total number of medieval Norwegian manuscripts and charters is so high that one may disregard disputed manuscripts and charters and still have an ample corpus for a palaeographic study.

3. Typology

The earliest Norwegian script is a minuscule with a mixture of Carolingian and Insular letter-forms, as seen in AM 655 IX 4to, cf. fig. 95.1. It is generally thought that this script was brought to Norway from England, where the Carolingian minuscule of the Continent came up against the local Insular script in the 11th century, resulting in several types of intermediate scripts. The early Norwegian script is basically a formal script in which each letter is drawn separately. Up to the latter half of the 13th century, there seems to have been no distinction between the script in book manuscripts (libraria) and charters (documentaria), cf. e.g. the script in fig. 95.3, a book manuscript, and fig. 95.4, a charter. In fact, in the first half of the 13th century, the script in some of the charters is more formal than in some of the contemporaneous books.

From ca. 1280, a cursive script appeared in Norwegian charters and soon became dominant, cf. fig. 95.7. The influence may once more be sought in England. During the late 12th and early 13th centuries, the semi-cursive documentary script in England was developed into a fully-fledged cursive script, cursive anglicana. This cursive script is characterized by linked letters, loops, decorative strokes and skeletal forms of initials. Although a cursive script also developed on the Continent, it is most likely that the Norwegian cursive was shaped by English influence; the cultural contact across the sea was still close, and English scribes worked in Norway (possibly Gabriel klerkr, who wrote several charters ca. 1290).

For a while, the formal script of the books, especially the many law manuscripts, coexisted with the cursive hands of the charters. From ca. 1300, both types of script fall under the wide term Gothic, the book script a formal textualis (fig. 95.6) and the cursive script in the charters a much simpler, more rounded and fluent type (fig. 95.7). In the 14th century, however, a new, semi-cursive script developed and appeared in several book manuscripts (fig. 95.8). The Gothic semi-cursive is often somewhat condescendingly referred to as bastardus, since it has dual parentage: the formal textualis and the fluent cursive. From a functional point of view, the semi-cursive was rather practical. It was quicker to write than the formal textualis, and more legible than the cursive script.

Beginning with a single, multi-purpose script in the 12th century, the introduction of the cursive in the 13th century and the semi-cursive in the 14th century thus led to three main types of script coexisting in the 14th century: the formal textualis, used in book manuscripts up to ca. 1370; the semi-cursive, increasingly used in books and from ca. 1370 generally replacing the textualis; and the cursive, used in charters throughout the period.

4. Periodisation

Following the division by Seip (1954) and the period names by Svensson (1974), Norwegian palaeography falls into a Carolingian-Insular period up to ca. 1300 and a Gothic period thereafter; the Carolingian-Insular period may be subdivided into an earlier period up to ca. 1225 and a younger period ca. 1225–1300. In the latter period, a gradual change began: the lines grew closer, the ascenders and descenders shorter and the letters closer. This process was brought to an end with the formal Gothic script of the 14th century.

4.1. Insular influence

Sweden and Denmark received their script from the Continent, and through the metropolitan sees in Hamburg, later Lund (1103/04) and finally Nidaros (present-day Trondheim, 1152/53) there must have been a Continental, Carolingian influence on the Norwegian script as well. However, the Insular character of
dauda. En þen allen en skilia megð petta feðmaði. Da takð
abnaut f. augkia munu gull heta-ferra-ferro xver, eðu gedi myntene-
gudið með þiri pe-de komeð otr þangat til. Heiðu of guðs

Fig. 95.1: AM 655 IX 4to, 3r, Matheus saga postola, ca. 1150–1200.

Af Gloponsyki. Skettingir.
Af Ongulpjiec, .m. manapharmater |
Af Dumbaftiini. xiiii. manapharmater
Af Þimafærre. halfr annar manapharmater |
Af Diuppie .v. manapharmater
Af Tiftame .xi. manapharmater

frænda fin. bæði þá fulning „oc hialpa. hét oc þið til þeim
hælga manne | ef hám leða hauðu liðs oc unðan quarno
at lata gerar och filfrí dýrlega ro- | ðo til þet hælga hus er
hám hjóllir i. Siðan leipar hám líði finu oc fygltgi

Fig. 95.3: AM 619 4to, 56v, Old Norwegian Book of Homilies, ca. 1200–1225.

Ollum lipandum oc þoð komundum guðs þinum oc finum þeim fæ þetta breþ feða eða heyrja
fendir Nikolai biðcup oc koðbroðr i oslo quðiu guðs oc fina. Vek þilium yðr kunnict gera um eign

Fig. 95.4: NRA dipl no perg I, a letter from the bishop, Oslo 1224/25 (85 per cent of full size).

Fig. 95.2: GKS 1347 4to, 62v, property list from Munkalíf in Bergen, ca. 1175.
Barlaam sjaraðe, pruglega ðkil
pec þat, þui at ec raððavægt
eigi þenna dauta, at af þui at
ei: ec þendir tekni, a þeim þeig

Eighi skulð ver honum leid
angs fynnæ eða vtbøða æf j
byðr ver með fliku þkillode
sem her þýlgir Kunná

Eighi skulu ver honom leid | angrs fynnæ eða
vtbøða æf hann | byði vti með fliku þkillode |
sem her þýlgir. Konungar a

Ollum manum þeim fem þetta bæp siða höðra sundir officialis j ðtaþwangre Queðiu guds ok | þína. kumvngt gerande at fira þosollþur j
hitrung kom þir off j doom j vmbdke bergh- | þueins amundar Ionar a felu mauþa eptan j ðtoðumi fem kosþrðuner aþa a þagðligha

Ollum manum þeim fem þetta bæp siða höðra sundir officialis j ðtaþwangre Queðiu guds ok | þína. kumvngt gerande at fira þosollþur j
hitrung kom þir off j doom j vmbdke bergh- | þueins amundar Ionar a felu mauþa eptan j ðtoðumi fem kosþrðuner aþa a þagðligha

Kríðtin man huarn ðkal j kirkju garðe | gropt oc likiðflo |
vigðum iardæ en æighi j kirkju nema erchibýskups orðof fe till. |
Ok til kirkju haþua þót ðinn å v. nattæ nauðþynía lautf. En

Fig. 95.5: Holm perg 6 fol., 39ra, Barlaams ok Josaphats saga, ca. 1275.

Fig. 95.6: AM 305 fol., 10vb, King Magnús’ Landslog, ca. 1300.

Fig. 95.7: AM dipl norv fass XXXIV 18, a letter from the Official, Stavanger 1348.

Fig. 95.8: Holm perg 35 4to, 5r, Kristiréttir Jöns erþibýskups, ca. 1350.
the oldest manuscripts strongly points to the British Isles.

Insular script supplemented the Latin alphabet with two new letters, \(\mathcal{h}\) (thorn, adopted from the Anglo-Saxon runes) and \(\mathcal{d}\). Although \(\mathcal{h}\) was also known from the Scandinavian runes, its use in Latin script is in all likelihood a result of English influence. Otherwise, the most characteristic Insular letter-forms are \(\mathcal{h}, \mathcal{p}, \mathcal{p}\) and \(\mathcal{f}\) (for \(g, r, v\) and \(f\) respectively). There are no traces of the Insular \(\mathcal{h}\) in Norwegian manuscripts at all, but \(\mathcal{p}\), \(\mathcal{p}\) and \(\mathcal{f}\) are known from the earliest extant manuscript, AM 655 IX 4to. The Insular \(\mathcal{p}\) is only found in NRA 73 in addition to AM 655 IX 4to, but \(\mathcal{f}\) was widely used up to ca. 1300, and \(\mathcal{f}\) to ca. 1420.

4.2. Older Carolingian-Insular script (up to ca. 1225)

From the earliest period, we have eight extant manuscripts, four written in Nidaros and four in Bergen. They are all fragments, except the Old Norwegian Book of Homilies, AM 619 4to, which was written in the Bergen area. The Nidaros manuscripts have a slightly stronger Insular flavour than those written in Bergen. From this period there are also three charters from Oslo and one from Nidaros; the oldest charter is the one issued ca. 1210 by Philipus boglungakonungur. The script in these charters does not differ from the contemporaneous book manuscripts. The individual letter-forms in this period show influence from both Carolingian and Insular script. Thus the Carolingian open-necked \(a\) is used consistently, not the Insular single-storey type, and the Insular \(\mathcal{p}\) was soon replaced by Carolingian \(\mathcal{r}\). On the other hand, both Carolingian straight \(\mathcal{d}\) and Insular \(\mathcal{d}\) are used, and Insular \(\mathcal{p}\), and \(\mathcal{p}\) were dominant. There is also great variation in the forms of \(\mathcal{h}\) and \(\mathcal{f}\).

AM 655 IX 4to, which contains only three disparate leaves, though probably by the same scribe, is the manuscript with the strongest Insular influence. As can be seen in fig. 95.1 it has consistent use of the Insular letter-forms \(\mathcal{p}, \mathcal{p}\) and \(\mathcal{p}\) (for \(f, r\) and \(v\) respectively), and also the capital \(\mathcal{D}\), another adaptation from English script. The dental fricative is denoted with \(\mathcal{h}\) in initial position and \(\mathcal{d}\) in medial and final position, in accordance with the English practice of the time. GKS 1347 4to (fig. 95.2) has the Insular letter-forms \(\mathcal{p}\) and \(\mathcal{p}\), but not \(\mathcal{p}\). The long-stemmed form of \(r, \mathcal{r}\), however, is known from Continental scripts and should not be regarded as an Insular form. Also of note here is the use of thorn, \(\mathcal{h}\), in all positions, which was the norm in early Icelandic script, but rarely seen in Norwegian manuscripts. In AM 619 4to, fig. 95.3, the Insular influence is less pronounced; straight minuscule \(r\) is used, and the minuscule form of \(f, \mathcal{f}\). A round form of \(r, \mathcal{r}\), is found after the letter \(a\), alternating with the straight \(r\).

4.3. Younger Carolingian-Insular script (ca. 1225–1300)

The Insular influence was still present after ca. 1200, but decreased towards the end of the century. Icelandic script, which until the beginning of the 13th century was predominantly Carolingian, imported some Insular traits from Norway in this period, e.g. the distinction between \(\mathcal{h}\) and \(\mathcal{d}\). The influence from Norwegian script can also be seen in early Swedish manuscripts, e.g. in a fragment of Västgötalagen (SKB B 193), which has several Insular characters. Towards the end of the period, the script of Norwegian manuscripts became increasingly Gothic. It is difficult to point to any definitive change; there was rather a general drift towards more compressed and angular letter-forms.

Around 1250 a closed, two-storeyed \(a\) appears for the first time, but Carolingian open-necked \(a\) was still used for several decades. Also, round \(r\) expanded its use, being found after curved letters other than \(o\), such as \(b\) and \(d\). The round \(r\) sometimes extends below the base line, so that it resembles the figure 3. Otherwise, the arms of the Insular \(f\) are reduced to two dots in some manuscripts (cf. fig. 95.5) or the upper arm becomes a bow (cf. fig. 95.6). The tall form of \(x, \mathcal{f}\), is dominant, and seldom extends below the base line, while the low form, \(\mathcal{x}\), in some manuscripts is terminated below the base line. The letter \(d\) is widely used, but towards the end of the period it was replaced by \(\mathcal{D}\) in many manuscripts, especially charters. As mentioned above, the Insular \(r, \mathcal{r}\), was used fairly regularly until ca. 1300.

Holm perg 6 fol. (ca. 1275), fig. 95.5, still employs the Carolingian open-necked \(a\), and round \(r, \mathcal{r}\), is used sparingly. The Insular \(f\) has an open form, and the Insular \(v\) is used exclusively. The letter \(d\) also has the Insular shape, \(\mathcal{d}\). The capital \(\mathcal{D}\), however, has been replaced by \(\mathcal{D}\). The script in this manuscript is basically the same as the one found
in AM 619 4to (fig. 95.3), although written more unevenly and with a broader pen.

4.4. Gothic textual and cursive script  
(from ca. 1300)

From ca. 1300, the script generally became Gothic in character: the letters are more compressed vertically, the ascenders and descendents shorter, the strokes more angular and the organisation of the script more regular. This is the script of the many law manuscripts of the 14th century; easily readable, stately and distinctly written. It is often referred to as textual script, textualis. The base line emerges clearly, and in some manuscripts the frame and rulings were drawn in ink (GKS 1154 fol., AM 309 fol.). The vertical strokes in letters such as m, i, n and u (the so-called minimis) tend to look like single strokes, so that accents over the i’s are introduced as a distinctive mark. The two-storey a is now most common, though co-existing with older a-types. The Insular v, 〈p〉, is rarely seen, but the Insular f is still widely used, possibly due to the fact that it easily accommodates superscript abbreviation signs. The low s looks like the figure 8. The letter w is introduced, and long vowels are often noted as ligatures, e.g. 〈aw〉. In addition to the formal textualis, cursive script was used in charters, and with the introduction of the semi-cursive, also in books. In general, the cursive scripts have simplified letter forms, looped ascenders, and, in the true cursive, letters were joined.

AM 305 fol. (ca. 1300), fig. 95.6, written by Porgeir Hákonarson, is a good example of an early Gothic textual script. The letter a has two storeys, s has the typical 8-shape, the Insular v has been replaced by minuscule v, and there are accents over the i’s. There is also a tendency towards the fusion of bows, e.g. between adjacent o and c, b and e, etc. The script is clearly duolinear, i.e. there is a marked difference between heavy and light strokes.

The script in AM dipl norv fasc XXXIV 18 (1348), fig. 95.7, is cursive, typical of the charters from the beginning of this century. Here, lines are closely spaced, and most letters are joined by connecting strokes. Ascenders and descendents may be looped, such as in b, p, h and k. Notably, the ascender of the letter d has acquired a loop which goes all the way down to the base line. The letter a has two storeys, but was later replaced by a simple form, which could easily be mistaken for o. The tall s, 〈f〉, extends below the base line, and both arms of the Insular f are drawn as bows, 〈p〉. The letter i, originally a capital 〈I〉 from English cursive script, is introduced for the preposition i and in word-initial position. In general, accents and decorative strokes are semicircular. The script gives the impression of haste, fluency and elegance.

The script in Holm perg 35 4to, Kristinrétt Jóns erkiðskups (ca. 1350), fig. 95.8, is a typical example of early Gothic half-cursive. Unlike the full cursive script, few letters are actually joined, but many have looped ascenders, e.g. b, l, h and k. The a still has two storeys, but soon developed a simple, single-storeyed form. The tall s extends below the base line, 〈f〉, and the same applies to the finished strokes of h and sometimes m. The ascenders of the letters d and ð are drawn diagonally, and are often accentuated with a heavy stroke. Otherwise, the difference between heavy and light strokes is not strong in the Gothic half-cursive; it is rather as if the letters were written with a too broad pen.

5. Abbreviations

The system of abbreviation in Old Norwegian manuscripts was, like the script, imported from England. Abbreviations were used liberally, though much more sparingly than in many Icelandic manuscripts. The most common abbreviation sign is the horizontal bar, used primarily for the nasal consonants m and n (therefore often referred to as the nasal stroke), e.g. 〈onomic〉 = ‘onomic’; at a later stage it could also be used to abbreviate a longer sequence, e.g. 〈momm〉 = ‘momom’ (expanded abbreviations are shown by italics). Two types of superscript abbreviations were frequently used: the zigzag-sign for front vowel + r, and any superscript vowel for r or v + the vowel; the letter a was usually written with an open, 〈a〉-like letter-form. Baseline abbreviations include the usualironian notae for ac, us, per, pro and rim. Also quite common was the semi-colon for ð. Frequently occurring names or words in the text were sometimes abbreviated with a dot, either contractions such as 〈kgr.〉 = ‘konungr’ or suspensions such as 〈O.〉 = ‘Olaf’. The rune m, 〈y〉, was sometimes used for madr.

6. Scribes

With a few exceptions the scribes of the earliest manuscripts are anonymous. An early example of a known scribe is Eirikr Próndarson,
who wrote part of a law book (Holm perg 34 4to, hand f) in the last quarter of the 13th century. From ca. 1300 we know of several scribes, especially of law manuscripts, e.g. Porseir Hákansonar who wrote several state-

The scribes of the charters are less anonym-
ous, especially those writing on behalf of the king. In the period ca. 1280–1345, the scribes in these charters usually identified themselves with words such as “N.N. klerk/notarius ritabí”. In his indispensable though controver-
sial study, Norske skrivarar í millónalderen (1989), Eivind Váglands has tried to collect

As a general introduction to Old Norwegian palaeography, Seip (1954) is indispensable and still unsurpassed. His Språkhistorie (1955) also contains much palaeographical and codi-

Hodnebø (1960) is an excellent introduction to the earliest charters (up to 1300); there are good facsimiles of each charter, a transcription and a translation into Norwegian. Photographic facsimiles of younger charters are located at The National Archive in Oslo and The University of Bergen (Nordisk institutt).

Since the 1940s, a number of MA theses (“hovedfagsoppgaver”) have been written in Norway on the palaeography of individual manuscripts. The great majority are unpub-

7. Reference books and study aids
Kålund’s Palæografisk Atlas (1905–07) is still very helpful; the quality of the facsimiles is admirably high and there are useful transcrip-
tions. Each facsimile is of a single page from the chosen manuscripts, so that the Atlas gives a condensed overview of the development of Old Icelandic and Old Norwegian palaeogra-

excellent supplement to Seip’s palaeography, since Old Iceland and Old Norwegian scripts are closely connected, especially in the 13th and 14th centuries.

examples up to ca. 1300 and 11 ca.1300–

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manuscripts. Some of them have received new dates since the publication of Seip (1954), e.g. GKS 1347 4to, which was dated ca. 1200 by Seip (1954), but now ca. 1175.

Finally, Holm-Olsen (1990) should be mentioned. This is a general introduction to the field of Norwegian literary culture in medieval times, popular in approach, but well documented and richly illustrated.

8. Literature (a selection)


Corpus codicum Norvegicorum mediæ ævi (CCN). Folio and Quarto series. Oslo 1950–.


Regesta Norvegica, 1–. Oslo 1978–.


Seip, Didrik Arup (1955), Norsk språkhistorie til omkring 1370. 2nd ed. Oslo.


Odd Einar Haugen, Bergen (Norway)

96. The development of Latin script II: in Iceland

1. The introduction of Latin script
2. The corpus
3. The earliest Icelandic script
4. The development of the script
5. The shape and use of individual letters
6. Literature (a selection)

1. The introduction of Latin script

According to the Icelandic Book of Settlements (Landnámabók), a considerable part of the Norse population which settled in Iceland in the decades around the year 900 came from the British Isles; some of these settlers, at least, were Christians and may have brought with them books in Latin. Christian missionaries travelling to Iceland during the last decades of the 10th century must have relied on Latin texts, and such books no doubt existed in Iceland after Christianity was adopted in the year 1000 and in the 11th century with the organization of the Icelandic church.

The General Assembly (Alþingi) resolved in the summer of 1117 to put Icelandic civil laws into writing; this work was begun in the following winter, but the resolution would hardly have been passed unless Icelanders already at that time had some experience in writing the vernacular in the Latin script.

2. The corpus

Remains of Latin medieval manuscripts in Iceland are for the most part confined to single leaves used in the binding of younger books, and it cannot be determined conclusively whether the oldest ones were written in Iceland or abroad. On such fragments, see especially Eggen 1968 and Gjerløw 1980. Only in very few cases has the same scribe been shown to have written in both Latin and Icelandic; see e.g. Louis-Jensen 1977, 19–20, and Stefán Karlsson 1982, 1986.

Relatively few Icelandic manuscripts from the Middle Ages have been preserved intact; in many cases we are left with only a few leaves, sometimes no more than a single leaf or a part of a single leaf. The earliest preserved manuscripts (and fragments of manuscripts) containing vernacular texts have been dated to the middle of or second half of the 12th century, and manuscripts from before 1300
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