**Language and Culture Show and Tell: Icelandic**

**Dr Helga Hlaðgerður Lúthersdóttir**

**Transcript**

**Two Tales of One City: Expressing London in Icelandic Terms**

We live in the times of online information. Should we be curious about Iceland, an abundance of material is freely available online, including maps, basic phrases in the Icelandic language and travel guides, promoting the land of ice and fire, including one offering 37 reasons NOT to visit Iceland!

I’m Helga Hlaðgerður Lúthersdóttir, and rather than taking a tour of today’s Iceland we will follow one Jón Ólafsson as he visits London in the summer of 1615, and juxtapose that city with the one known to us some 400 years later.

By late 16th century Iceland was becoming a recognisable entity on the world map, not least thanks to cartographers such as Abraham Ortelius, even if Ortelius had rather a vague notion of the shape of Iceland when he published his first world map as you can see by comparison.

We should therefore appreciate the improvement in this version, included in his atlas a quarter of a century later. Sea monsters are alive and well in the map-maker’s imagination and, at the time, still considered good science in less-explored areas. Ortelius is not the author of the map though, having acquired it from Andreas Velleius who had published it as his own 15 years previously. However, the map’s true author is believed to have been Guðbrandur Þorláksson, who became bishop here at Hólar in 1571, thereby dating the origin of the map to the late 1570s.

Let us take a closer look at that map. What do we expect to find on a map and what is missing from this one? If your answer is ‘glaciers’ you’ve scored a point. Surprisingly, Vatnajökull, the largest glacier in Iceland is nowhere to be seen while many smaller glaciers are featured.

Note that in the Icelandic language each noun has a gender assigned to it, masculine, feminine, or neuter. Unlike biological gender, grammatical gender is mainly arbitrary, so you must memorise the gender as you learn each new term. Including the pronoun as you gloss the term helps memorising it, as does adding the definite article, which in Icelandic is suffixed and specific to each gender. What do you think the gender of jökull is? If you said masculine, you are correct, (hann) jökull-inn is he, the glacier.

But back to the map. If you suggested that cities and towns are what is missing you are again correct, indeed there are none on this map. This, however, is not an error – there were no cities or towns, nor even villages in 16th century Iceland; the country was entirely rural. In fact Reykjavík, today’s capital, was not granted township until some 200 years after the making of this map and even by then Reykjavík still would not have qualified as a village consisting of a couple of farms only.

Granting Reykjavík township makes little sense until we consider that the Icelandic term, ‘kaupstaður’, simply means ‘place of commerce’ and could as such refer to any place with natural harbour capable of receiving merchant ships, preferably in the vicinity of seats of power. And where would seats of power be in a country that didn’t even have villages? If you suggested with the church, you are correct yet again.

The church, [kirkja] held much of local power in 16th century Iceland with one Bishop at Hólar – that would be our map-making friend Guðbrandur, and another one here at Skálholt, both places prominently presented on this map.

Should you be wondering by what route one would travel from one bishopric to the other, given that there seem to be at least 4 glaciers barring the two, you are asking the correct question: Where are the roads? And yes, you probably guessed it, there were none. No roads, no bridges, no villages, no inns. How quaint this country must have seemed to anyone coming from England at the time. And how marvellous England, not to mention the city of London, must have looked like to someone of no consequence and limited education, born on a remote farm in this obscure country.

Enter Jón Ólafsson, Icelandic farm-boy, later the King’s gunner and traveller to the East Indies. The tiny farm at Svarthamar where Jón and his 13 siblings were born (only 3 of them reached adulthood) was so remote that there was not even a church in the fjord. The farmhouses would have looked akin to these, making it unlikely Jón had ever seen a building made of timber alone, and definitely not one built of stone. And then, one fine morning, an English fishing ship drifted into the fjord and cast anchor within a rowing distance of the then 22-year old Jón’s fishing post.

Take a moment to appreciate not only the opportunity but the marvel and splendour this vessel would have been to Jón. Without hesitation he secured himself a fare, took his leave of his mother and set sails for England on summer solstice. Jón spent the 7-week journey learning English – a summer-school intensive if ever there was one. In his memoirs, completed some 46 years later, he lists the places they sailed past, using Icelandic terms where available and creating new ones where needed.

By then London was a city of some 90,000 people, almost twice the population of Iceland. We don’t know if Jón ever saw a map of the city, but a birds-eye view of London or ‘Lundúnir’ from 1572 gives us an idea of what met his eye.

Docked at Gravesend, which he transliterated to Grafsund, ‘sund’ meaning sound or a channel, rather than the literal translation of ‘Grafarendi’, Jón took a ferry boat up to London, describing the sights from the Themes; “swans [svanur] swim on the river … pigeons [dúfa, i.e. dove] roost in the barges.” And while the map is illustrated by colourful images of aristocrats enjoying a leisurely outing, Jón notes the commoners, “tending to their craft and labour, some in their fields, some at carpentry, some making whetstones and other masonry, building ferries, schooners and ships.”

Jón demonstrates a clear idea of the city’s layout, telling us that “London is of three parts, with fields in between” and using various terms, such as ‘pláss’ or place, for the view from the ferry boat, ‘borg’ or city, when referring to London proper, ‘byggð’ or township when discussing greater London, and even ‘þorp’, a village, one time when describing London’s South Bank. None of Jón’s terminology seems to carry a fixed connotation of population, having referred to both Harwich and Newcastle as ‘borg’ or cities on his route down the English coast, but rather his terms simply mean ‘not a farm’ – that is, not Iceland.

Visscher’s stylised *Panorama of London* at the start of the 17th century gives us a clearer idea how the city would have appeared to Jón. Unsurprisingly the spire of St Paul’s which he refers to as ‘turn’ or tower, seemed to him like a mountain peak, or ‘gnýpa’. The densely populated banks of the Themes fascinate him, and he vividly describes how “At hightide the river rises up to the city, so high that one only needs to descend 3 steps to fetch water [vatn] from houses [hús] on the bank”, either unaware or ignoring the fact the Thames then as now provides only brackish water.

Jón marvels at the city’s “300 churches [and] two palaces“ where he uses the Danish loanword ‘slot’ although not to describe the Tower of London and Whitehall as one might expect, but St Paul‘s yet again and the cathedral of Westminster Abbey, two most glorious symbols of heavenly power to the young and devout Jón. But it is London Bridge or ‘Lundúna brú’ that truly fascinates him.

Let us take a closer look. “One could hear trumpets, drums, flutes, and various instruments as well as sounds of roosters, humans, chattel, and church bells,” Jón exclaims enthusiastically, later cautiously adding, “I was told there were 700 goldsmiths in that part of the city which stands on the bridge,” apparently having some (justified) doubts about the accuracy of such grand a number. He then wistfully describes the ease of living for the inhabitants of the bridge, claiming that, “Each steakhouse has a trapdoor in its floor, through which water is pulled from the river … when fish run the river, it’s fished up through there and cooked immediately.”

Despite his admiration, Jón left London at his earliest opportunity, not to return to Iceland but to continue his travels to Denmark. There he became a gunner in the Royal Navy, which was to take him as far north as the White Sea and Svalbard, as far south as crossing the Cape of Good Hope, and as far east as Tranquebar in India where he was critically injured in a cannon explosion. His arduous return journey included a visit to Ireland en-route to Denmark, before finally returning home to Iceland in 1626. We, however, will maintain our location in space but move forward in time to visit the London of today.

In 2016 the London-based Zimbabwean artist, Robin Reynolds, exhibited his contemporary re-creation of Visscher’s *Panorama*. Contrasting the panoramas provides us with two tales of one city, 400 years apart. While Jón made no mention of the Tower of London, we can only imagine the impression the iconic Tower Bridge would have made on him. St Paul’s is still a striking landmark, although no longer due to the spire that impressed Jón so thoroughly, but for its dome. Despite there now being more than 2000 churches in London, it is the high-rises of The City that mark the skyline. Numerous bridges span the river, including Millennium Bridge, Blackfriars and Southwark, in addition to London bridge, which to Jón would be little but a shadow of its former glory, while it is the South Bank that holds attraction for today’s visitor with its vibrant street life and multiple attractions. Most of us are unlikely to arrive at the city by boat, even if we might splurge on a river cruise on a beautiful day, and the map of London that we tend to know best and use most often is therefore likely to be this one, of London’s tube system, thereby translating the formerly iconic ‘London Bridge’ to a transit hub where we alight for our visit to the bustle of Borough Market, the latest exhibition at the Tate, or an afternoon tea at Butler’s Warf.

But it is the power of this enchanting city to allow us to keep using the same words to describe it while constantly reinventing their meaning in our minds, and we may only imagine what meaning the words ‘London Bridge’ will hold 400 years from now.