Writing on Skin and Bone
The Material Culture of Beginner Literacy in Premodern Iceland

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1. Introduction

Although we generally treat them as waste products today, animal bones were a normal part of the Icelandic home environment until very recent times.[1] It was possible to turn bones into a digestible meal through an extended process of soaking them in fermented whey and boiling them into a form of bone pudding or aspic jelly, known as *strjúgur* or *beinastrjúgur* (Hallgerður Gísladóttir 1999: 83–84). However, bones were not only viewed as a potential source of nourishment. Household uses ranged from spools for thread to gaming pieces and toys for children.[2]

In a recent article on the intersection between environmental studies and manuscript culture, Viðar Hreinsson (2023: 372–74) discusses the use of weathered, sun-bleached bones as writing surfaces. In the cases examined by Viðar, which date from the early nineteenth century, children turned to

[1] I am grateful to Viðar Hreinsson and Birna Lárusdóttir for their comments on this research, as well as to the anonymous peer reviewers and editors. An earlier version of this article was presented at the AASSC 40th Annual Conference, 16–19 May 2022. Many thanks to the audience for the lively and insightful discussion that followed. The research for this article was supported by the Icelandic Research Fund, grant no. 218209-051. My deepest thanks to the National Museum of Iceland for permission to reproduce images from their collections.

[2] Several bone spools survive in Icelandic museums, some intricately carved and decorated. The use of bones for playthings is discussed below. On bone gaming pieces, see Lucas (2024: 328–330).

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bones in the absence of paper. I argue here that nineteenth-century accounts of animal jawbones serving as writing surfaces for children and adolescents – while they can seem like a mark of extreme privation to modern readers – belong to a longer tradition in Iceland that gradually vanished with improved access to paper and formal schooling for beginner writers.

Due to the ephemeral nature of children's writing, very little premodern material has been preserved that can be definitively identified as having been the work of a child or beginner writer. As will be discussed below, beginner writers in Iceland did not learn in formal school settings that were physically separate from everyday living spaces. While recent research on material practices of reading and writing is invaluable for its insights into scribal culture, it is difficult to draw conclusions on early education. The availability of various writing surfaces is discussed briefly below, comparing paper with bone, vellum, wax tablets and stone writing slates.

Relatively little has been written on practices of beginner writing in Iceland before the nineteenth century. Changing practices of childhood reading are somewhat better documented, as they are closely linked with children's religious education and the spread of printed books to ordinary households in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To explore the stability of the premodern material culture supporting children's pathways to literacy, this article compares the case study of a young Icelandic boy in the 1780s with a series of poems written in the 1660s by poet Stefán Ólafsson of Vallanes (c. 1618–1688). These poems, all of which deal at least briefly with children's writing, offer a valuable perspective on the material environment of writing. As examined below, they suggest that bone was enlisted as a writing surface for those learning to use a quill pen and ink, even in households like Stefán's with reliable access to paper. Stefán's poems are valuable as they embed children's writing practices within their wider social context (cf. Boyes, Steele and Astoreca 2021: 11), highlighting both children's experiences of learning and the relationship between education and play.

2. The transformation of education and play

The material culture of early education and play in Iceland both underwent a major transformation during the twentieth century. Ethnographic surveys of Icelandic toy culture collected in 1973 and 1974 reveal that imported, mass-produced toys did not have a widespread impact on Icelandic children's

Fig. 1. A young boy in Reykjavik, ca. 1902–1911. Photograph by Gunhild Augusta Thorsteinsson. National Museum of Iceland, A-GTh-54. ©National Museum of Iceland.

play before the 1920s and 1930s, although wealthy parents could afford much earlier to provide their children with factory-made toys identical to those encountered in middle-class households in mainland Scandinavia (Spurningaskrá 1973-1: Leikföng).[3] These toys were a marker of their parents' social status, as displayed prominently in a photograph taken by Gunhild Augusta Thorsteinsson (1878–1948) in Reykjavik between 1902 and 1911, which shows a young boy proudly surrounded by his doll, building blocks and other manufactured toys (Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, A-GTh-54, see Fig. 1).

[3] A total of 192 responses were collected from individuals born between 1882 and 1944. The survey covered use of animal bones as playthings, as well as shells, plants, wood, metal, stones, homemade dolls and finally imported toys. Bones continued to serve as toys for rural children long after they vanished from urban households.

Fig. 2. The household at Víðar in Reykjadalur in 1906. Photograph by Bárður Sigurðsson. National Museum of Iceland, BS-11. ©National Museum of Iceland.

Before such toys became available, children's play incorporated mainly self-created objects made from materials found in their immediate environment, such as sheep and horse bones. Bárður Sigurðsson (1877–1937) captured this aspect of childhood in a photograph from 1906 (Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, BS-11, see Fig. 2), in which the farm family at Víðar in Reykjadalur in North Iceland is posed as if enjoying a long winter evening together. The farmer's brother reads to the family while the other adults and older children engage in woolworking activities. Two of the farmer's young sons are seated on the floor, playing with bones for toys. The bones are evidently from the children's own collection, lined up as proudly and prominently as the Reykjavik boy's doll and blocks.

Expansion of school education for children was a parallel development. The earliest legislation on school attendance for children in Iceland dates from 1907, when laws on compulsory education for children between the ages of 10 and 14 were passed. Prior to this, most Icelandic children's educations had been managed exclusively within the home, with reading and catechism being required subjects from 1746. Writing and basic arithmetic were introduced only in 1880.

The primary function of early education before 1880 was to support religious instruction, in which respect Iceland did not differ from other Nordic countries (Laine 2019; Haarberg 2011). As elsewhere in northern Europe, the number of readers far outstripped the number of active writers. Literacy campaigns in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries focused narrowly on the development of religious literacy, in which context the Church played an active role in promoting reading across all social classes (Loftur Guttormsson 1989, 1983, 1981).

During and immediately following the Reformation in Iceland, production of printed religious books in Icelandic served to supply churches with the core texts required for performing religious services (Kristján Valur Ingólfsson 2003). The first and arguably most significant of these was Oddur Gottskálksson's New Testament translation from 1540, which laid the foundation for subsequent publications and cemented the status of Icelandic as a church language. While Danish was used for church services in Norway and the Faroe Islands, Icelandic was established as the language of vernacular religious education at the outset of the Reformation period.

The project of bringing Lutheran doctrine to Icelandic households began with Guðbrandur Þorláksson (c. 1542–1627), who became bishop of Hólar in 1571. Recognising that the scattered rural population, harsh climate and difficult terrain between farms meant that regular church attendance was impossible for many, he printed a flood of devotional titles aimed at a lay audience (Margrét Eggertsdóttir 2017; Einar G. Pétursson 2006). This project was continued by Guðbrandur's descendants, including his grandson and successor Þorlákur Skúlason (1597–1656) and grandsons Bishop Gísli Þorláksson of Hólar (1631–1684) and Bishop Þórður Þorláksson of Skálholt (1637–1697). The publication of the first alphabet in 1686 at Skálholt as a supplement to Luther's Small Catechism is an important milestone; the publication of the first primer in 1695 is another (Luther 1686; Eitt lijted stafrofs kver 1695).

The pietist movement in the mid-eighteenth century strongly emphasized personal reading as one of the cornerstones of Christian devotional

practices, promoting universal literacy across social class and gender. The ability to read thus became linked to the ability to participate as a full adult member of society. By this time, nearly all Icelandic households owned at least one book: 97.2% of households for which data on religious book ownership for the period 1748–1763 has survived (Loftur Guttormsson 1988, see also Sólrún Jensdóttir 1974–1977). By the end of the eighteenth century, printed book ownership was near-ubiquitous regardless of social standing, and even female servants and paupers might own their own personal libraries (Guðný Hallgrímsdóttir 2019).

While the growth of villages and towns in the nineteenth century permitted the gradual expansion of formal schooling to a wider segment of the population, no parallels existed to early modern grammar schools (cf. Árni Daníel Júlíusson 2003). Most children's educational opportunities were dictated by the social status and attitudes of their parents and other adults within their household. For motivated children not fortunate enough to have parents willing and able to support them in their studies, self-education typically filled the gap between the most rudimentary reading skills (essentially the ability to recite core religious teachings from a book when prompted) and full literacy in the modern sense of the word (cf. Loftur Guttormsson 2000, Davíð Ólafsson 2009).

Aside from the printed Catechism, which was intended for rote learning, no fixed curriculum or formal standards existed. Virtually the only mass-produced educational materials known to have been used by beginners in early modern Iceland were printed books such as the above-mentioned primer. As explored in greater depth below, a common theme in nineteenth-century biographies and autobiographies is the need for self-educated children to make or acquire their own materials for writing practice.

3. Writing surfaces: paper, wax, skin, bone and stone

Writing surfaces are a central aspect of the materiality of writing and have become increasingly visible as an object of research in recent decades (Piquette and Whitehouse 2013). In Iceland, this has led to a number of valuable studies, most of which have focused on paper (e.g., Arna Björk Stefánsdóttir 2013; Silvia Hufnagel 2023).

For the majority of Icelanders before the nineteenth century, writing

paper was primarily a material from which to read someone else's written text. Paper was introduced relatively late to Iceland. While it existed in extremely limited quantities in the fifteenth century, it was not an import commodity. Larger quantities entered Icelandic document culture in the sixteenth century, but not until the early seventeenth century did paper make inroads into manuscript culture (Arna Björk Stefánsdóttir 2013).

As Silvia Hufnagel's (2023) research highlights, paper could not have been manufactured in premodern Iceland even on a small scale, as conditions were unfavourable and necessary resources unavailable. Nevertheless, it can be stated with confidence that writing on paper was a practice broadly familiar to all Icelanders long before the country-wide population census taken in 1703, even among those who were themselves illiterate. Writing paper remained a relatively scarce import commodity even in the early nineteenth century.

One obvious downside to use of paper for practicing writing with a quill pen is that it cannot be easily wiped clean for reuse. The act of carving text into wax with a stylus can be repeated, and the premodern practice of using wax writing-tablets for children's education is well-established (Rouse and Rouse 1989, Cribiore 1996). Wax writing-tablets were certainly known in Iceland, and several such tablets were discovered with the wax still intact during the excavation of the former site of the Viðey monastery (Margrét Hallgrímsdóttir 1990; see also Þórður Tómasson 1982). Metal styli for writing on wax tablets were also among the writing implements uncovered during excavations at Skálholt (Lucas 2024b).[4] However, writing wax was an import to Iceland, and even wood was a much scarcer resource than in most other parts of Europe. References to medieval use of wax tablets in Iceland relate either to clerical literacy or use by the upper echelons of Icelandic society, rather than early learners. While it was possible that some Icelandic children did learn to write with the help of wax tablets, their use was likely limited mainly to religious houses, Latin schools, well-equipped churches and wealthy households.

Another imported surface was stone slate, which was used for writing slates in premodern Europe. A large number of slate fragments were found at Skálholt in the nursery belonging to the bishop's family, most of which were dated to the period 1670–1750, but slate fragments were also identified in areas associated with the Latin school (Sólveig Guðmundsdóttir Beck

[4] Silvia Hufnagel (2018) has also observed the use of dry point writing with a stylus in the margins of a paper manuscript from c. 1700.

2024). This is consistent with the status of Skálholt as a centre of education and knowledge production (Margrét Eggertsdóttir 2010; Springborg 1977). Besides traditional wax tablets and stone writing slates, various reusable products were also commercially available in Europe that might have been known in Iceland in very small quantities, such as booklets containing erasable leaves (May 2023).

One resource that existed in relative abundance in Iceland was bone. Bone has been a writing surface for as long as humans have used writing systems: arguably the best-studied instances of bone writing are inscriptions made on the scapula bones of oxen in China, the oldest of which were produced over three thousand years ago (Shaughnessy 2023). The use of bone for runic inscriptions was known throughout much of Northern Europe even before the settlement of Iceland (see Looijenga 2003).

Jónas Jónasson from Hrafnagil (1934/2010: 276) characterises bone as a paper substitute, citing the self-educated poet Sigvaldi Jónsson *skáldi* (1814–1879) as an example of a child who learned to write on a horse's jawbone in a stable. In addition to Sigvaldi, Viðar Hreinsson (2023: 375) cites the case of Ólafur Sigurðsson Sivertsen (1790–1860), the eldest son of a farming couple in Dalasýsla in West Iceland whose journey to literacy also began with a horse's jawbone, supplemented by paper strips cut from the margins of old letters. His posthumously published biography (Stutt æfiágrip 1862: 5–6) suggests that this was due to hard times and general shortages of paper and other import goods in the early 1800s when he was learning to write – the Napoleonic Wars caused major disruptions to the Iceland trade.[5] Viðar's third case (2023: 374) is that of Guðjón Jónsson (1826–1881), a child who practiced his letters on a horse's shoulder-bone, despite receiving no encouragement from the adults in his household.

The bones described in the above-mentioned nineteenth-century sources on children's literacy were not characterized as decorated or modified. Guðjón, for instance, found his bone while wandering outdoors. However, more elaborate bone tablets have survived. Most notable is a kind of reusable notebook made from four thin, flat sheets of bone that have been pinned together at the top by a rivet and can be fanned out (Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, Þjms 4896, see Fig. 3). This object is known to have belonged to the Rev.

[5] A second independent source on Ólafur Sigurðsson Sivertsen's education is a letter from Ingibjörg Finnsdóttir from Kjörseyri (1880–1972), whose mother, Jóhanna Matthíasdóttir (1845–1927), was his niece. Ingibjörg credits his mother, Katrín Þorvaldsdóttir (1765–1819), with teaching her sons to read using a horse's jawbone, carbon ink (*sótblek*) and a feather pen (Nanna Ólafsdóttir 1990: 58).

Fig. 3. Bone writing tablet owned by the Rev. Jón Steingrímsson of Hruni. National Museum of Iceland, Þjms 4896. ©National Museum of Iceland.

Jón Steingrímsson of Hruni (1777–1851) and is believed to have been made in Iceland (Guðmundur Magnússon 1994). For the purposes of this article, "bone slate" will refer to a bone object with a surface intended for writing practice or note-taking, however rudimentary.

Located on the spectrum between imported writing supplies and leftover bones is a final writing surface worth mentioning in connection with early education, namely recycled vellum. As late as the second half of the seventeenth century, discarded medieval books made from vellum, including liturgical books, continued to circulate in Iceland. Although produced for use in scribal culture and not intended as a temporary surface for writing practice, vellum was an exceptionally durable writing surface that could be palimpsested for reuse.[6] Even in the case of vellum manuscripts and documents that continued to be carefully preserved by owners, generous margins meant that it was possible to practice writing with a quill pen and ink

[6] Tom Lorenz is currently researching reuse of parchment from Icelandic liturgical manuscripts as part of his doctoral research at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) on liturgical fragments.

without damage or destruction to the main writing block. Of the surfaces mentioned here, writing on the margins of vellum manuscripts is the most likely to be preserved, but the extent to which surviving manuscripts were used for writing practice (e.g., copying out letters of the alphabet, words and phrases) has not been systematically catalogued or studied.

4. Jón Jónsson Therkelsen: a child's journey to literacy

Children's historical experiences of reading and writing tend to be poorly documented, particularly within premodern manuscript cultures. Childhood, not unlike the phenomenon of the manuscript itself in post-Gutenberg Europe, tends to be viewed as a transitional phase on the path to full participation in literary culture (Karen Sánchez-Eppler 2008, 188). Even after children became increasingly visible as readers during the educational reforms of the 1740s, it was not until later that children's own responses to literacy began to be documented as part of the learning process.[7] Appel, Christensen and Baden Staffensen (2022) advocate for the use of memoirs and autobiographies, and this is also the approach taken by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson (2017), who connect the quest for literacy with the emotional development of the child (cf. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon 2010: 91–97).

An account of one young Icelander's struggle to learn to write in the 1780s illustrates the circumstances in which children might progress from reading to writing through self-education (Steingrímur Jónsson 1825). Jón Jónsson Therkelsen (1774–1805) was born in Rauðanes in Mýrasýsla in West Iceland. His parents, Ragnheiður Oddsdóttir (1731–1788) and Jón Þorkelsson (d. 1775), were landowners at the time of his birth but not wealthy; Therkelsen characterizes them as a couple of average means. A fire at Rauðanes in July 1774 had destroyed their farmhouse only a few months before his birth, with considerable loss of property. The following year, when Therkelsen was only four months old, his father and older half-brother drowned while fishing at sea, leaving his mother a widow.

Therkelsen was an unlikely candidate for a scholar, a farmer's son who beat overwhelming odds to become a university graduate. In spite of his poverty,

[7] On the development of Icelandic children's literature, see Dagný Kristjánsdóttir (2015).

he successfully completed an education at the Latin school in Reykjavik and later sailed for the University of Copenhagen, where he gained a reputation as an exceptionally intelligent student. He died as a young graduate in Denmark. Shortly before his death in hospital in Copenhagen, he entrusted his friend Steingrímur Jónsson with his personal account of his struggle for education, asking Steingrímur to publish his biography, with special attention to his early years. Steingrímur indicates in his introduction that his contribution to the first part of Therkelsen's biography was as a translator and editor: Therkelsen had written his recollections in a mixture of Latin and Icelandic with the intention of eventual publication (Steingrímur Jónsson 1825: iv–vi). While the precise words used may not always be Therkelsen's own, the narrative and the impulse to share it are his.

Therkelsen's first memorable encounter with books occurred in his fourth year, when he was left alone in his mother's farmhouse and opened an unlocked cupboard to discover a collection of handwritten and printed religious and devotional books. Being an unsupervised child unaccustomed to handling books, Therkelsen tore up an old paper manuscript copy containing poet Guðmundur Bergþórsson's translation of Jesper Rasmussen Rachløv's *Taareperse* (1684), for which his mother beat him harshly (Steingrímur Jónsson 1825: 4–5). In his fifth year, his mother married a poor farmer, characterized by his stepson as a God-fearing and exceptionally gentle man who treated him well. It was in this year that Therkelsen learned to read, progressing from the alphabet to entire printed books within a single winter. There was no shortage of religious reading material at Rauðanes, although the books were not specifically tailored to young children, and Therkelsen notes that during the winter and spring of his sixth year he read the entire Bible aloud to his mother, who corrected his reading to the best of her ability (Steingrímur Jónsson 1825: 7–8).

Considerably more difficulties arose when Therkelsen decided in his eighth year that he wanted to learn to write. According to Therkelsen, a second half-brother was the only close family member to have ever learned to write, having received some limited instruction from his own late father (Therkelsen's mother's first husband). However, his older half-brother was more interested in farming than literary practices and had put writing activities aside. Therkelsen lacked paper, pen, ink and a tutor, and he began by forming letters on a dirty chest lid with his finger or a stick. Next, he was able to obtain a few drops of homemade ink from a boy from a neighbouring farm in exchange for food. He found a seabird's feather and took it to his literate half-brother, who cut it into a pen to the best of his ability. However,

his stepfather became concerned when Therkelsen began writing on wooden surfaces within the turf farmhouse (including the doorway, support beams, chests and bed-boards), fearing that the unreadable scribblings could inadvertently bring evil to the household. The scribblings were painstakingly scrubbed away with salt water, although Therkelsen was not punished for the act. Therkelsen explains at this point that he turned to a bleached horse jaw as a slate for writing practice, to which his mother and stepfather did not object (Steingrímur Jónsson 1825: 9–10).[8]

The idea that pre-writing on the wrong surfaces could bring harm to the young writer by attracting evil forces is echoed in nineteenth-century warnings to enthusiastic children who experimented with writing in snow or other surfaces without adult supervision and were said to have been taken by the Devil (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson 2017: 130–31). Here, one finds a clear division of the world into regulated, safe and neutral writing surfaces (presumably including animal bones) and surfaces that ought not be inscribed with unknown characters – including the domestic interior and the natural landscape. Teaching children not to scribble on walls is something modern parents still struggle with, but Therkelsen's account underlines that his family was less concerned with the aesthetics of a house filled with scribbling and more with the potential to open the home to malevolent spirits through the creation of accidental magic. Surfaces and objects in close proximity to the household, such as bed-boards, were entirely off limits for early writing practice. Writing magical symbols, or *charactares*, on *eikarspjöld* (wooden tablets) is a forbidden practice documented in court cases from seventeenth-century Iceland (Már Jónsson 2021), and it may be that there was an enduring association between harmful magic and experimental writing on wood in the home.[9]

[8] "Nú var hann eins rádalaus, sem hugsandi um, hvad hann gjæti haft til at skrifa á, þar til at fyrir hönum vard hvítr og skininn hross-kiálki; hann reynir strax á hönum penna sinn, og þó illa tæki á, var kiálkinn, af hvörium jafn-ódum mátti útslétta, lengi eptir þetta hans einasta skrif-bók" ('Now he was at an utter loss as to what he could possibly use to write on, until he came across the white and bleached jawbone of a horse; he immediately attempted to use his pen on it, and though it went rather badly, the jawbone, which could be wiped off at once, for a long time after that his only copy-book') (Steingrímur Jónsson 1825: 10). Although the narrative foregrounds Therkelsen's ingenuity and personal initiative, it does not clarify whether the idea was entirely Therkelsen's own.

[9] Although *eik* is cognate with English *oak*, an *eikarspjald* is not literally an oaken tablet: in premodern Icelandic usage, *eik* generally refers to a tree rather than a particular species. Younger words for a wooden tablet, *tréspjald* and *viðarspjald*, are first attested in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively.

As Anthony J. La Vopa (1988: 9,19–20) observes, a centuries-long tradition existed within the Lutheran church of identifying and training poor but exceptionally intelligent boys like Therkelsen for careers in the clergy, and charity and state-sponsored support for young men from less privileged backgrounds meant that a pathway existed for them to complete university studies. By the early 1800s, there was less emphasis on higher education as preparation for an ecclesiastical career: Therkelsen was to have become a grammar teacher at the Latin school in Reykjavik. Nevertheless, the idea of merit-based advancement is central to what is in some sense an educational or intellectual biography, in which adversity threatens the individual's intellectual maturation rather than his spiritual progress and/or physical wellbeing (cf. Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir 1994). The unusually close attention to detail in describing Therkelsen's early efforts to write makes Therkelsen's biography a valuable source on practices of self-education in the late eighteenth century, but its primary focus is on the obstacles a peasant child must overcome to achieve literacy.

5. Premodern educators and education without schools

While the premodern use of animal jawbones by children for writing practice among highly motivated self-taught learners such as Therkelsen is well attested, these cases are treated as exceptional by nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors. This raises the question of whether children made a spontaneous decision to incorporate available objects from their immediate environment into their self-education, just as they did in their play, or whether this was a more established practice.

A majority of Icelandic parents in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were like Therkelsen's mother Ragnheiður: they could support their children's reading activities to at least some degree but lacked the ability to write. Stefán Karlsson's (2008) research on literacy among farmers in the mid-seventeenth century indicates that this would also have been the case in earlier times, with around 20–25% of taxpaying farmers in Iceland able to write their names in 1649. This broad social group included individuals who would have grown up in households where writing was a part of everyday life, e.g., ministers' sons who did not pursue a clerical career and property-owning farmers from elite families who did not seek out

positions within the Church or the administration (Bragi Guðmundsson 1985).[10] Literacy was thus unevenly distributed throughout communities, as children from wealthier families and households with family connections to individuals who had completed formal schooling had significantly better access to education.

Although there were no schools for beginner learners in Iceland and the Latin schools at Skálholt and Hólar accepted only more advanced male students, fosterage within kinship networks could support the development of literacy and other forms of learning. For instance, Guðrún Árnadóttir (d. 1619) learned reading, writing and arithmetic from her foster-father, Jón Björnsson of Grund in Eyjafjörður (1538–1613), who was married to Guðrún's aunt (cf. Þórunn Sigurðardóttir 2015: 175–83). The largely self-taught scholar Jón Guðmundsson *lærði* (1574–1658), born in Ófeigsfjörður in the Westfjords, states in a genealogical treatise that he was fostered by his paternal grandfather Hákon Þormóðsson (d. about 1597 in his late seventies), a shipwright, but spent three years (between the ages of seven and nine) in the company of his maternal grandfather, the former priest Indriði Ámundarson, who died in 1583 (Jón Guðmundsson 1902: 708,713; see also Einar G. Pétursson 2013, 1984).

Given that both Guðrún and Jón were born in the later sixteenth century (Guðrún was likely in her thirties when she and her infant died of smallpox during an epidemic), vellum would have played a significant role in the education of both. In his *Tíðfordríf* (1644), Jón Guðmundsson confirms that an old book from Skálholt made its way to his parish in the wake of the Reformation, from which he learned when he was young (AM 727 II 4to: 9r).

Even children born after paper had replaced calfskin as the dominant writing material in Iceland might learn from vellum books. According to Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík's biography of Páll Vídalín (1667–1727), Páll was tasked by his tutor with reading a vellum copy of the *Jónsbók* law code at the age of seven or eight (Jón Ólafsson 2013: 116). A similar account of a child learning to read from a vellum codex is preserved in Árni Magnússon's notes (AM 435 a 4to: 9v–10r): he records that Guðbrandur Björnsson (c. 1657–1733), who spent his childhood at Munkaþverá but emigrated to

[10] Some upper-class Icelanders such as the district administrator Gísli Magnússon (1621–1696) wished to establish a hereditary aristocracy in early modern Iceland that was formally distinct from the peasantry, but these efforts were unsuccessful (Jakob Benediktsson 1939: 48–85).

Denmark as a young man and served in the Danish army, learned to read from a volume of saints' lives, AM 232 fol.

As Loftur Guttormsson notes, educational opportunities for the children (and especially the sons) of wealthy landowning families like Páll's and Guðbrandur's were significantly better than those of peasant children (Loftur Guttormsson 1983: 163–168). Elite families frequently hired tutors and/or arranged for their children to stay in the households of clergymen or other teachers. Given that children's early educations were managed entirely in home settings, however, very little documentation exists beyond (auto) biographical prose and poetry, which can sometimes mention details of everyday life.

6. Stefán Ólafsson as educator and poet

The relationship between children and writing surfaces is the theme of several poems by Stefán Ólafsson, a university-educated provost and minister in East Iceland. Stefán was born into a significantly more privileged family than Therkelsen's. His father, Ólafur Einarsson (c. 1573–1651), was a university-educated provost, a respected scholar and poet and an experienced educator who had served as rector of the Latin school at Skálholt in 1600–1608.

After returning from the University of Copenhagen in 1648 and receiving the living of Vallanes in East Iceland, Stefán married Guðrún Þorvaldsdóttir (c. 1625–1700). The couple had eight children. Stefán's two sons, Ólafur (1659–1740?) and Þorvaldur (c. 1666–1749), attended the Latin school in Skálholt and later travelled to Copenhagen for university studies. Less is known of their six daughters' education, but his eldest daughter, Þóra (1653–1727), learned advanced needlework (cf. Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, Þjms 728), and one of his poems describes three of his daughters weaving an elaborate floral design together (SÓ II: 124).

In the late 1660s, one of Stefán's daughters, Guðrún (c. 1657–after 1704), spent an extended period away from home, although surviving sources unfortunately fail to mention where or with whom she lived. As she is not known to have been fostered by another family from early childhood, it is possible that her stay was related to her education. Stefán sent at least four poems to his daughter during this period, conveying love and greetings from her parents and siblings at Vallanes.

In two of the poems, the speaker is Guðrún's younger brother Ólafur. The first of these poems opens with Ólafur sitting inside, bored of his writing exercises and thinking back to a happy memory of playing games outside with his siblings and their grown-up friend Bjarni Þorsteinsson, a saddler who despite his greying hair and 45 years had not lost sight of his inner child. Although the poem itself would presumably have been sent on paper, Ólafur mentions the use of a bone for writing practice in the opening lines:

> Ber eg mig enn að bagla vísur beins á spjald, / iðka pár og pennahald. (SÓ I: 32)
>
> (I'm still scrawling verses on a slate of bone, / practicing my scribbles and penhold.)

The twenty-fifth stanza returns to this image of the bored Ólafur at his lessons, learning his books, making ink and placing lines correctly on a page (SÓ I: 35). Ólafur's comically disinterested attitude toward his studies presents a remarkable contrast to images of self-educated peasant children in younger and better-known sources on childhood education. Unlike these less fortunate children, Ólafur had a university-educated father who took a proactive role in his early education, with the objective of preparing his eldest son for a successful career in the clergy. Stefán's poem is thus evidence that bones were more than an improvised writing surface used by a handful of self-taught children. The poem playfully contrasts the freedom of the childhood world outdoors with the neatly ordered, closely regulated space of the written page. The poet's sympathy for his young son as he makes the unwilling transition to the adult world indoors shines through, but the sense of a single-minded desire to learn, so prominent in works like Therkelsen's biography, is wholly absent.

The second poem in which Ólafur is the speaker takes the form of a more traditional *ljóðabréf* or verse epistle. The rise of the verse epistle in Iceland as a literary genre coincided with the spread of paper in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but they are only sporadically preserved; Stefán's grandfather, Einar Sigurðsson of Eydalir (c. 1538–1626), is among the earliest poets to have composed verse epistles that still survive (Þórunn Sigurðardóttir 2021). As a form of correspondence, verse epistles were typically structured in the manner of ordinary letters, offering personal news and news from the community before ending with good wishes and a farewell to the recipient, although they tend to remain light and playful in tone even when the subject matter is serious (Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir 2006). In the case of Ólafur's verse epistle, it contains a brief reference to a recent

disease outbreak at Vallanes and elsewhere in the region, indicating that the poem was composed during the epidemic winter of 1669–1670, when the boy was around 10.[11]

Ólafur assures his sister that her siblings are in good health, but he's nonetheless discontent with his lot. According to Ólafur, he sits with calfskin and is also supposed to be copying out the content of some printed leaves (*þrentblöð*). Ólafur's description (SÓ I: 36) implies that his calfskin was formerly a leaf from a medieval manuscript – he calls it "saurljót / sinni einu kálfskinn" ('filthy once-upon-a-time calfskin'). The same stanza mentions his use of a quill pen for practicing writing on paper, suggesting that at least some privileged children would progress to paper as part of their early education:

> Þríf eg fjöður og hníf / sker penna og skrifa stór / skýran orð á pappír. (SÓ I: 37)
>
> (I take up a feather and knife, / cut a pen and write large, / clear letters on paper.)

If the poet's teasing portrayal does not exaggerate, Ólafur remains less than enthusiastic about book-learning. A later verse describes the many delays he manages to contrive in his studies, with the outcome that Ólafur's writing remains clumsy and uneven. It is possible that the message copied by Ólafur onto paper was the letter sent to Guðrún and that the poem itself was intended as a more interesting writing assignment than copying out dry printed material (presumably a religious or didactic text in Icelandic, given that the 1686 alphabet had not yet been published).

The conjecture that Ólafur practiced writing on vellum manuscript leaves as part of his early education is supported by an eight-line verse also attributed to Stefán Ólafsson, which conjures up a noisy scene of two beginner writers – one of whom is his daughter Kristín – and the crackling pieces of vellum on which they write:

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[11] Historical chronicles mention an epidemic in Iceland in the autumn of 1669, the victims of which were mainly the poor (ÍA II: 220; ÍA III: 152). The contagion is unknown, and Stefán Ólafsson's poem calls the sickness *göngusótt* ('walking disease'), a poetic synonym for *landfarsótt* ('epidemic disease'), which could describe a range of contagious diseases, including the common cold. The chronicles also describe the winter of 1669–1670 as a period of harsh weather and severe famine. Jón Steffensen (1975: 290–295) suspected that fatalities were caused not by an exceptionally virulent virus but by the spread of opportunistic pathogens in a vulnerable population. In Iceland as elsewhere, infectious diseases were a major cause of death during pre-modern famines (cf. Joel Mokyr and Cormac Ó Gráda 2002).

> Oddur og Kristín klóra / á kálfskinns þunna bjóra, / með brakið, busl og óra / bögla stafina fjóra, / a og b með opið c, / einninn D-ið stóra, / þá kemur e-ið, f og g, / og að því brosir hún Þóra. (SÓ II: 109)
>
> (Oddur and Kristín scratch away on thin calfskin hides, with creakings, swishings and clamourings, struggling with the four letters – 'a' and 'b' with open 'c', and also capital 'D' – then comes 'e', 'f' and 'g', at which Þóra smiles.)

The young writers are surprisingly loud. The poem evokes the image of an old vellum codex open at the spine, groaning in its binding as the children labour away at their writing. Many medieval codices do indeed have marginalia suggestive of use by beginner writers in later centuries, including the abovementioned AM 232 fol. As an adult, Ólafur Stefánsson gave a fourteenth-century manuscript, AM 791 4to, to the collector Árni Magnússon, which contains an ordo or calendar outlining the Masses and Offices to be celebrated throughout the ecclesiastical year (*Ordo ecclesiastici usus per anni circulum observandus*). Some margins have been cut away entirely, presumably for the purpose of recycling the vellum. Elsewhere, one can find a brief inscription by a beginner writer (26r) and various markings and letters that are either intended as writing practice or pen trials (25v, 26v, 36r, 39r, 46v, 51v and 56v).[12]

Kristín Stefánsdóttir died on 19 December 1671, when she was in her fourteenth year. It is unclear at what age she began to learn to write, but the poem in which she and Oddur learned to write together likely dates from the mid-to-late 1660s. It was less common for girls to learn to write than boys, even in upper-class households such as Stefán's (cf. Guðrún Ingólfsdóttir 2016). Kristín must have been a more eager would-be scribe than her reluctant brother Ólafur. Stefán's eldest daughter Þóra was around four years older than Kristín and presumably a more experienced writer, who found the scene amusing. However, Oddur was not a close family member. Although his identity is unknown, Oddur was likely a child fostered by the family at Vallanes or a young boy staying with the household whom Stefán

[12] The manuscript's provenance is uncertain. Both Ólafur and his brother Þorvarður married daughters of Björn Magnússon (1623–1697), who managed the former monastery at Munkaþverá in Eyjafjörður and was the son of Magnús Björnsson of Munkaþverá (1595–1662), who owned a sizeable collection of medieval manuscripts (cf. Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson 1994). The abovementioned Guðbrandur Björnsson was their brother-in-law. Vernacular marginalia from more advanced writers can also be found on ff. 32r, 46v, 51v and 53v (the opening address of a letter to an unknown Oddur). These hint that the manuscript may also have functioned as a portable writing surface for some users, since many Icelandic households did not have writing desks.

taught to write alongside his own daughter.[13] This is supported by another single-stanza poem, also attributed to Stefán Ólafsson, about a boy named Oddur Jónsson:

> Oddur Jónsson er að skrifa upp á kjálka, / því mun bagga beinsins hálka / burt úr stöfunum teygist álka. (SÓ II: 108)
>
> (Oddur Jónsson is writing on a maw, / the bone's slipperiness plagues his paw: / away from the letters juts the jaw.)

Although this is a single-stanza poem, it provides better evidence than "Ber eg mig enn að bagla vísur beins á spjald" that the *bein* ('bone') in question is specifically an animal jawbone (i.e., *kjálki*) being used for writing practice, just as described in the younger biographical sources. The poem on Oddur Jónsson seems to teasingly address the seldom-discussed topic of how difficult children found it to write on a jawbone, which was not a flat writing surface like recycled vellum.

Yet another poem attributed to Stefán, "Nú er komið nýtt bein" ('Now a new bone is ready'), is a stanza of eight lines describing the preparation of a bone slate for writing, although no names are mentioned, making it impossible to date the stanza or identify for whom the bone slate might have been intended (SÓ II: 108). The speaker of this poem seems to be an adult, possibly the poet himself, who has prepared the bone by polishing it on a *slípsteinn* ('grindstone') and refers to the bone as a *skrifteinn* ('writing bar') for *rein stafanna* ('the strip of letters'). While it is possible that the bone object described here was akin to the slate used by the Rev. Jón Steingrímsson (see above) and never intended for a beginner writer's use, the poem hints at the use of modified bones for writing practice, with adult involvement in the process of preparing the bone slate. Polished bones would have been more slippery than those that were merely weathered, but they would also have been smoother surfaces on which to write.

Finally comes an alphabet poem, "Eg er nú við það illa 'd'" ('I am now at the troublesome 'd''), which describes in comic terms an unwilling child's earliest efforts to learn to write the alphabet.[14] The child as the poem's speaker complains continually, exaggerating the difficulties in forming the letters, but also mentions that the letter 'q' is placed on the jaw (*kjálki*) – i.e., a bone slate made from an animal jawbone:

[13] One possibility is that the boy is Oddur Jónsson (1661–after 1734) of Kirkjuból in Norðfjörður, a farmer who served as the *hreppstjóri* for his local community in 1703. He was around four years younger than Kristín.

[14] According to the rubric, the poem's speaker is the poet's son Ólafur Stefánsson.

> Q-ið set eg á kjálkann hress, / krókótt verður r og s / í t-ið fellur kúkakless / kemur mér 'u' á vondan sess. (SÓ II: 123)
>
> (I put the Q on the jaw with glee, / R and S go slithering free, / a doo-doo dropping plops onto T, / in a tight spot U gets me.)

The poem's final stanza again mentions a jawbone as the writing surface, associating use of the bone slate with the very earliest stage of learning, when the child has very little control of the ink flow. The poem has an obvious pedagogical function in helping the child to remember the order of the alphabet letters. It can thus be used as a teaching aid, although unlike some other premodern poems it does not also help the learner to remember the letter shapes (cf. Margrét Eggertsdóttir 2001). One possibility is that the instructor pre-inscribed the bone with the correct letter shapes (i.e., a strip of letters), which the pupil could then trace and retrace in carbon ink; a bone could be more easily washed and reused than a vellum leaf or a wax or wooden tablet, and it would have been a durable and easily replaced writing surface.

By late 1672, thirteen-year-old Ólafur Stefánsson had successfully progressed from basic writing exercises at home in Vallanes to more intensive Latin studies. His tutor was the Rev. Þorvarður Árnason of Klyppstaður in Loðmundarfjörður, who taught the rudiments of Latin to boys from the region, in preparation for more advanced studies at the Latin school in Skálholt. Ólafur was at Klyppstaður when an avalanche buried the living quarters on Christmas Eve of 1672. The minister, the Rev. Þorvarður Árnason, had been sitting at a table and was killed instantly when a support beam fell on him; Ólafur was saved by crawling under the minister's knees (ÍA II: 453).

Ólafur was a fluent writer by the time that he left Vallanes and presumably no longer needed a bone slate. He may have acquired his own wax tablet or stone slate but would have needed to write extensively on paper after gaining entrance to the Latin school at Skálholt (cf. Gunnar Marel Hinriksson 2023). However, Stefán's poems normalise the use of bone slates in home settings among Icelandic children of the highest social strata in his day – free from later associations with poverty and scarcity.

Taken together, Stefán Ólafsson's playful poems on childhood literacy give an unusually rich glimpse of the materials that might be used to teach a young pupil the craft of writing in a cultural household in the mid-seventeenth century. Four poems describe the use of a bone or jawbone for writing practice (one specifically for writing the alphabet), two name calfskin (one also for writing the alphabet) and one mentions paper.

Using poetry as a source on historical writing does have its limitations. The

impulse to play with words and images is stronger in poetry than in prose accounts like Therkelsen's. Likewise, each of these scattered micronarratives provides only the briefest of glimpses into children's writing activities, with no unifying thread to link the fragments together. Nevertheless, one potential advantage of poems like these is that they originate from a beginner writer's immediate environment instead of looking back from the perspective of the fully mature writer. Biographies and memoirs tend to be highly selective in their presentation of the individual's past, reflecting mainly on significant life milestones and deeply formative moments, whereas poems like Stefán's can vividly describe an instant in time without needing to construct a stable, coherent identity for their subjects. Preadolescent acts of writing on skin and bone were irrelevant to Ólafur Stefánsson's adult identity as a high-ranking clergyman. Like other mundane household objects, bone slates are invisible except when captured by the poet's perceptive eye – Stefán's poems include descriptions of everything from servants licking and scraping the tallow off equipment used for candle-making (SÓ I: 69–70) to a badly made iron *panna* ('pan') that failed to help light his home (SÓ I: 79–81).[15]

7. Conclusion

Although the absence of mass-produced toys from a modern child's home environment is often seen as a mark of desperate poverty or extreme neglect, the history of toys as inherently disposable objects of consumption produced outside the child's own environment is fleeting when one compares it to the much longer history of play. Using resources from one's immediate surroundings was an ordinary part of play. This article argues that children's literacy practices in Iceland followed a parallel trajectory. As Jón Therkelsen's biography illustrates, premodern children could practice writing in Iceland without reliance on scarce import goods, thanks to bones, homemade ink

[15] Stefán also calls the iron receptacle a *kola*, which in some premodern sources specifically refers to a type of open stone or metal lamp fuelled with fish oil. Given its association with *kol* ('coal, charcoal'), a *kola* might also describe a brazier (i.e., a 'coal-pot') in earlier usage. Stefán's poem, which dates from 1649, does not clarify whether the primary function of the *panna* was to carry light from the hearth into the household's living quarters or act itself as a static source of light. The poem's complaint that it was not sturdy enough indicates a need for portability (and thus a shaft or handle). Lendinara (2017) provides a fascinating discussion of words for pans and other equipment used to heat and light premodern homes in Northern Europe.

and quills sourced from local birdlife. In such a setting, no one rigidly standardized pathway exists to becoming a writer, and the acquisition of literacy is driven by natural, organic experimentation and improvisation.

Most surviving prose accounts of children's early literacy practices describe exceptionally motivated peasant learners for whom the act of learning to write was a significant accomplishment, such as Jón Therkelsen in the late eighteenth century. As Stefán Ólafsson's poetry hints, not all children were equally thrilled at the prospect of learning to write. While his daughter Kristín is depicted as a noisy but diligent beginner, poems in which his son Ólafur is the speaker make no bones about the boy's lack of motivation and preference for unstructured outdoor play. Although written by an adult, these poems illustrate how literacy had different meanings for different children. If Therkelsen was driven by a seemingly unquenchable passion for learning, Ólafur's education was central to shaping his identity as a member of the Icelandic elite. His father took an active role as educator, and his poems playfully transmit both the correct letter-forms and the social values informing them.

A commonality between these otherwise dissimilar sources is the association between animal bones and children's writing practice. Stefán Ólafsson's poetry makes repeated reference to bone slates, whereas paper is named only once. The poet from Vallanes also mentions the use of old or scrap vellum, which continued to be available in some households in the second half of the seventeenth century. As the supply of medieval vellum in Iceland dried up, the practice of using recycled vellum must have gradually vanished. Alternatives such as wax tablets and stone writing slates were comparatively expensive import products, and at least sporadic use of bone slates continued until the nineteenth century, when paper became increasingly obtainable even for rural children. Bone slates became associated with backwardness, as children's writing culture began to revolve increasingly around consumption of a ready-made product, namely commercially manufactured writing paper and copy-books.

Stefán's poetry is a reminder that the material conditions of the premodern Icelandic cultural and literary elite did not differ greatly from those of ordinary Icelanders (cf. Viðar Hreinsson 2023: 369), with the main distinction being the level of attention given to their children's education. Stefán himself would have learned to write on skin and possibly bone in the 1620s and certainly benefited from his own father's experience as a teacher at Skálholt in 1600–1608.

Crucially, while the material culture of writing depicted by Stefán Ólafsson differs from that in mainland Scandinavia due to the differences in the

natural resources at hand, comparison with studies of premodern children's literacy suggests that the poet's objectives were closely aligned with those of elite parents beyond Iceland's borders. In impressing upon his children the importance of letter-writing and good penmanship from an early age, Stefán's poetry reflects contemporary attitudes elsewhere in Europe (Blas 2017).

As discussed earlier, Stefán Ólafsson may have composed some of his verses on childhood writing with the intention of having learners copy them. For instance, "Eg er við það illa d" would provide the writer with practice in writing out the entire alphabet, including less common letters such as 'c' and 'q'. The choice of his young son as speaker for poems sent to his daughter may also have been a deliberate attempt on the poet's part to find a writing activity that would interest her brother and demonstrate for him the value of literacy. The poems reveal an unexpectedly sympathetic attitude towards frustrated young beginner writers and a desire to foster children's literacy by appealing to their sense of fun. Whereas children are frequently addressed in premodern children's literature in the capacity of passive listeners or readers, these poems provide some of the earliest evidence of Icelandic children's engagement with writing tasks, whether imagined or not.

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Summary

The article explores the material culture of the first stages of writing in premodern Iceland, arguing for the importance of repurposed writing surfaces in supporting beginner literacy. The article compares a biographical account of a self-taught writer, Jón Jónsson Therkelsen (1774–1805), with poetry composed in the 1660s by Stefán Ólafsson of Vallanes (c. 1618–1688), who taught his children to read and write. While the practice of writing on bleached horse bones is well-known from nineteenth-century accounts of self-educated children, Stefán's poetry demonstrates that use of bone slates was not limited to socially disadvantaged or self-educated children. Stefán's poems depict writing on animal jawbones as an exercise for those learning to control their pen and form letters correctly, and his poems provide evidence that bones were deliberately supplied by educators for use as reusable writing slates. Also described in Stefán Ólafsson's poetry is the use of calfskin for children's writing, a practice that has left enduring material traces in the margins of surviving vellum manuscripts. Vellum became increasingly scarce in the later seventeenth century and was no longer available for beginner writers by Therkelsen's day. Recycled vellum nevertheless played a role in the process of becoming a writer many decades after paper had become the dominant material for manuscript production.

Keywords: literacy development of literacy, children's writing, materiality of writing, Stefán Ólafsson of Vallanes

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