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Abstract: Acute accent marks in Old Norse, what are they?

The frequent use of acute accent marks is a noticeable feature of modern Icelandic orthography and the standard orthography of Old Norse. Its modern use arose in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, as a revival of what was thought to be a classical Old Icelandic practice of marking vowel length with acute accent marks. This accent use was advocated in the so-called First Grammatical Treatise (1GT) by an unknown scholar who demonstrated the need for length marking with minimal pairs, e.g., *goð* 'god,' vs. *góð* 'good.' The 1GT is the first and oldest in a 14th-century collection of grammatical treatises. The 1GT was composed in the middle of the 12th century and contains an Old Norse alphabet and proposals for how to spell Old Norse. The only extant copy of the 1GT does, however, not mark vowel length, except in the minimal pairs.

Here, I discuss two of the main Old Norse works that have a high percentage of long vowels with accent marks. One of these contains annals from Julius Caesar's time until the year 1306, *Annalis Regii* (AnR) in GKS 2087 4to. The other is the Stockholm Homily book (StH) in Holm. Perg 15 4to from around the year 1200. The AnR scribe uses the acute accent to mark all long vowels except in names, especially in names with two long vowels that are often without length marks (accents) (e.g., Óláfr).

Hreinn Benediktsson (1972) thought that the StH followed the proposals of the 1GT, but I show that vowel length is not the only factor that determines the use of accents. Thus around 67% of nouns that are monosyllables and end with a long vowel have accent marks. These are words like *á* 'river' and *fé* 'fee,' while the prepositions *á* 'on' and *hjá* 'by' seldom have an accent mark. Most names in the StH are Hebrew, and they usually have an accent mark on the last syllable (e.g., Adám, Moysés). This is reminiscent of the accent usage in the Anglo Saxon Wessex Gospels from around 990 where accent marks seem to be sporadically used to mark vowel length and word accents in Biblical names. The Wessex Gospels could have been known in Iceland and could have influenced the accent marking in the StH.

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