Medieval Ireland and Iceland both possess a rich early vernacular literature. Possible connections between these two phenomena have been discussed over the past century by the few experts in the languages involved. These discussions remained inconclusive. Since early medieval Irish history begins almost half a millennium before early medieval Icelandic history, a possible connection between the two vernacular literatures would necessarily imply an Irish influence on Icelandic society. It will be argued here that recent research in the field of human genetics has immeasurably strengthened this hypothesis. In addition to that, vernacular literature will be considered here as just one manifestation of a more wide-ranging oral culture. Because oral culture can be investigated most profitably in these two societies, this essay will concentrate on Ireland and Iceland in the hope that ensuing case studies may in turn stimulate research of oral culture in other societies.1 Historical research should not be limited to written culture alone, for during the Middle Ages written culture pertained to only a minority of the population. Although the vast majority of the medieval population remained outside the reach of written culture, its practitioners continued to participate, to various degrees, in their oral environment.

Many historians object to investigations of oral tradition, arguing that we have no direct records of medieval oral culture. While this is indeed the case, medievalists continue to research numerous other subjects lacking similar direct records. For example, recently scholars have attempted to study the history of emotions.2 I believe a holistic

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2 See, for example, Barbara H. Rosenwein, Emotional communities in the Middle Ages (Ithaca and London, 2006).
approach, treating language in its historical manifestation as a defining element of humanity, is appropriate for the study of any given culture. Oral culture is always all-embracing and holistic because, by its very nature, oral communication has been practiced in daily life by all members of a given society.

Aron Gurevich’s inspiring research on the Weltbild (world view) of medieval man provides a particularly apt example of such a holistic approach. We should note that Gurevich maintained that this term, which was used in the German translation of his book, was more adequate than the title “Categories of medieval culture” used in the original Russian edition that has found its way into translated versions.3

Obviously, attempts to ascertain Weltbild are highly complex and entail the imposition of a modern construct on the past. However, such efforts exemplify what history in general is all about. The historian’s craft consists of extrapolating from surviving written records of the past the phenomena he or she seeks to investigate. Such efforts require not only technical skills to evaluate written sources of the past, but the imagination to make a plausible case for a given construct. Needless to say, no historical source ever speaks for itself; rather, the historian makes responsible use of it. Generally, a society’s history supposedly begins when its written sources appear for the first time.

Ireland, the island that the Romans knew by the name Scotia, emerged from pre-history in the fifth century. Significantly, the record began with sources linked to Christianity, which affected the westernmost island of Europe from ca. 400 onwards. Ireland’s proximity to the Roman Empire in general, specifically the provinces of Gallia and Britannia, was instrumental in the process of Christianization because the Emperor Theodosius had proclaimed Christianity the official religion of the empire in 391/2. In the West, Latin was the language of the Catholic Church and the lingua franca of the Empire as a whole. This meant that, from the point of view of language, few barriers existed for mass participation in Christianity. Quite appropriately, the Latin Bible, taking shape at that time, was later known as the Vulgate. The Book was articulated in one register of the general language of the vulgus, the common man.