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## **"Promoting Nordic Studies in Italy. An Interview with Prof Gianna Chiesa Isnardi".**

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*In what ways do the Università degli Studi di Genova and your Department in particular promote the knowledge of the Nordic cultures and, amongst them, of the Icelandic one?*

The Department of Scandinavian Studies has been operating at the *Università degli Studi di Genova* since the academic year 1992-93 and it offers a broad variety of courses that can be taken as a minor in connection with major degree lines in "stronger" European languages and cultures (e.g. English and German). On average, we have between 20 and 25 new students enrolling every year. The undergraduate programme organises units dedicated to learning Nordic languages and units dedicated to the history and culture of the Nordic countries as well as to their literature and society. Specifically, the undergraduate programme is structured as follows:

To first-year students we offer an introductory course on the cultural history of the Nordic countries and another on the linguistic structure of the Nordic languages belonging to the Germanic group, i.e. Icelandic, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish. To second- and third-year students we offer an in-depth course, which changes every academic year, dealing with specific topics concerning Nordic culture, literature, and society. Also, we offer to our second-year students a course dealing with specific topics pertaining to the Swedish language, centred upon exercises in textual analysis. To third-year students we offer an in-depth course on the history of the Nordic languages and their comparative grammar. Furthermore, we have courses devoted to Master's students and teaching programmes tailored to suit the needs of students from other Faculties. The units dedicated to learning Nordic languages require the study of Swedish as mandatory, since it is the most widely spoken Nordic language, and there are several courses aimed at different levels of competence in Swedish, from beginners to advanced students. In addition, our advanced students pursue supervised research projects concerning specific themes in Nordic cultures and languages. The same students benefit from specialists' seminars aimed at them only, which we organise when possible and necessary. Further activities in Nordic studies are held, publicised and/or recommended to the benefit of our students, such as conferences, forums, and participation in relevant cultural events.

Thanks to the Socrates Programme it is possible to obtain scholarships for exchange studies at the Universities of Umeå (Sweden), Oslo (Norway), Reykjavík (Iceland), Århus (Denmark), and München (Germany). Other bursaries are available in order to attend courses at Swedish *folkhögskolor* ("people's high schools"). Funds are also available from the governments of Iceland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark in order to pursue advanced studies in higher education centres of these countries, such as work with undergraduate degree theses, graduate research projects, Master's degree programmes. Besides, we can accommodate and assist in the attendance of courses in all the Nordic languages, at different levels of competence, offered by officially recognised institutions in the Nordic countries, as well as work stages by cultural institutions and Nordic enterprises. Exchange programmes apply to teachers too. Last year, for example, we hosted Prof. Katharina Schubert from the University of München, who held an intensive seminar on modern Icelandic. Her lessons were extremely successful and attracted even students that were not attending any other course in Nordic studies.

*Amongst contemporary Italian scholars, you are certainly one of the most active in promoting the knowledge of the Icelandic culture in Italy. What is the origin of this interest of yours?*

My love for the Nordic countries was born when I was a university student and I was given the opportunity to study Nordic philology, with special regard to runic inscriptions and the Icelandic masterpieces of the Middle Ages. In particular, the encounter with the latter and with the culture that they express was for me a truly fascinating "discovery".

*Do you visit Iceland very often? Which aspects of this country attract you the most?*

I can hardly visit Iceland as often as I would like to! My latest visit took place last summer [Summer 2007], upon an invitation by the Icelandic Academy in relation to a cultural event held in Kiðagil in Bárðardalur. Nevertheless, I can state that I visit Iceland often, where I make use of my avidly-read Icelandic literary references as travel guides around the country. The Icelandic landscapes, possibly those left "untouched" by cars and concrete, so vividly portrayed in such references, especially sagas and folk tales, are always lingering within my soul. You must realise that my introduction to Iceland and its cultural heritage and language took place through such sagas and folk tales. In particular, I recall with special fondness the books of Hermann Pálsson (1921–2002), who deserves the highest praise for his work as a scholar and a promoter of Icelandic culture abroad. He was very erudite and competent, yet very kind and approachable. I admired him immensely already before meeting him, which happened by sheer chance in an antiquarian bookshop in Reykjavík, where I started talking with a stranger about my fondness for Icelandic sagas, especially Órvar-Odds saga, which I had recently read in English translation. Then I uttered my admiration for the translator, who then introduced himself to me. It does not happen very often that one can meet a special person like that! And it was really tragic to lose such a friend some years ago, as he died killed in a car accident during his holidays.

*Are you currently working on any project aimed at promoting Iceland and its culture?*

At the present moment I am working with a new book in Italian on the cultural history of the Nordic countries, much of which is devoted to the Icelandic one. It is meant to be the first book of this type, open both to the narrower audience of scholars and to the general public.

*What kind of Italians, in your experience, have developed an interest in Iceland and its culture?*

Probably those who wish to explore less-known areas of the vast European heritage and fresh cultural horizons.

*What kind of idea do you think Italians have, in general, of Iceland and of the Nordic countries? And has this idea changed in time?*

It is a difficult question. My personal experience has led me to think that Iceland still is, to many Italians, some sort of "last frontier", which is certainly due to sheer geographic reasons. Indeed I believe that they think of Iceland like the poet Hannes Pétursson described it: "a ditch of fire inside the ocean, with the blue-ice wall on the other side" [*Eldgröf í sæ, með ísbláan múrinn á aðra hlið* - "fossa di fuoco nel mare, colla parete blu ghiaccio dall'altro lato"]. The differences with respect to the Mediterranean landscapes are perceived very strongly. And even if the recent development of tourism has taken many Italians to Iceland, the direct contact with the Icelandic reality has hardly modified this notion, also because the itineraries set up by tourist operators privilege exactly the dramatic elements of the Icelandic morphology and nature.

*And what about your students? What kind of interest do they have in the Nordic world and in the Icelandic one?*

The students attending our courses in Nordic studies are typically highly motivated since the very beginning. Very few enrol out of sheer curiosity. Each of them is therefore driven by fairly clear personal reasons, whether due to occupational perspectives, an interest in Nordic languages or literature, in specific traits of Nordic cultures (e.g. music, art, society, politics). In particular, the students that fall in love—this is the right term to use—with Iceland are enraptured by medieval literature and the sagas. Often they want to learn the Icelandic language, which is perceived as a real "challenge", given that it represents some kind of "unicum" in the European context, at least at the level of national languages. It is analogous to learning Latin or classical Greek, with the difference that Icelandic, although still medieval in both essence and form, is a living language, which has been adapted to

present-day needs. Indeed, it is possible for the common Icelander to understand and appreciate the sagas, in a way that is not available to the common Italian, who is no longer able to understand and appreciate Latin texts. However, in my latest trips to Iceland, I must lament some degree of decay of the national language, which is borrowing expressions and forms from other languages (especially English).

*What should be done in order to better promote the Nordic world in Italy?*

As regards the academic world, I believe that teachers cannot do more than what they do already, which indeed is a lot, considering the endemic lack of adequate funds. In order to improve the current situation, which most certainly ought to be improved, there should be more generous budgets available the Institutions and to their staff. Also, the Italian cultural world at large should be more open to the variety of offerings coming from the North. Too often we remain anchored to safe, celebrated "giants", such as Andersen, Ibsen, Strindberg and Bergman, whereas there has been insufficient courage *vis-à-vis* granting access to other, less-known opportunities. Incidentally, this "conservatism" is detrimental to the knowledge of the Icelandic culture. In truth, it is only in the last few decades that attempts have been made in order to explore new roads and the success that they have met should be encouraging, letting us persevere in this direction. Icelandic literature used to be hardly known and the little that was known was often translated in turn from German or English versions. In this perspective, we must praise the active rediscovery of Icelandic literature made by some publishing houses in Italy (Iperborea, among others). I think that it would be very important to translate the works by Steinunn Sigurðardóttir, since she is one of the most interesting voices of today's Icelandic literature. Analogously, we must praise the "brave" introduction of Icelandic theatre to Italian audiences made by Sergio Maifredi, who has been a true innovator at the *Teatro della Tosse* of Genoa.

*What kind of idea do you think the Northern Europeans have of Italy?*

I hope they do not keep considering us the country of spaghetti and mandolin players... Jokes apart, there are still too many stereotypes also from this perspective. I am quite surprised by how resilient have proven the denigrating notions of the Italian as mafioso, corrupt, devious, lazy, disorganised, jealous and unreliable. These notions are offensive to the many Italians that have nothing to do with the mafia and that lead a genuinely honest life, working hard and contributing to diverse, successful activities in many areas. Moreover, I know many Italians displaying behaviours that would be typically labelled as "Nordic" and, vice versa, many Northerners that could be seen as "Mediterranean". Stereotypes should be torn down. Today's European citizens are much more alike than they used to be in the past.

*Why do you think Finland is the only Nordic country where the old Italian 4-year university degrees (300 ECTS) are recognised as equivalent to today's Master's level (240-300 ECTS), whereas in all the other countries they are taken to be equivalent to the BA level only?*

It is a complex matter, for one should ponder upon the evaluations passed by each country's competent ministry. Possibly, given its national history, Finland needs to feel more "European" than the others, hence it facilitates the integration with the other European countries also from a normative point of view.