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As regards the availability of source material on population development and population structure, Iceland is comparable to its Nordic neighbours. Traditionally, Nordic societies were relatively homogenous and all countries adhered to the Lutheran religion. The Lutheran church was closely connected to the state and eventually parish ministers were given various non-religious or quasi-religious obligations. In both Denmark-Norway and Sweden the registration of life-course events was made obligatory during the mid-17th century. Parish ministers were eventually obliged to report to central authorities on the number of marriages, births and deaths (Sköld 2001; Johansen 2002). Such decrees were not issued for Iceland. There are, nevertheless, examples of parish records dating back to the late 17th and early 18th centuries. With a decree in 1735 Icelandic parish ministers were requested to report on vital events to central authorities. A few parishes have uninterrupted series of registers on marriages, baptisms and burials dating from the early 18th century and the coverage is rather good from the late 18th century onwards (Hansen 1966; Guttormsson 1987; Guðnason 1953).

Even though there are similarities between the Nordic countries with respect to demographic sources, there are also important differences both as regards timing and structure of the source material. The most notable differences are between Sweden and Finland on the one hand and Denmark, Norway and Iceland on the other hand. Finland was part of the Swedish kingdom until 1809, and as a rule, regulations on reports from parish ministers to central authorities applied in both countries. Likewise there were similar regulations in Denmark, Norway and Iceland as these countries shared the same king.

Iceland was a part of the Danish kingdom until 1918 and regulations on parish registration and on the taking of censuses were generally analogous with Denmark. There were, however, exceptions to this general rule. An interesting feature of the Icelandic source material is the relatively extensive collection of catechetical registers. It is a well-known fact that Sweden (and Finland) had a strong tradition of keeping catechetical registers where detailed information on household position and the literacy of the population was recorded (Sköld 2001; Guttormsson 1990). This was not the case in Denmark and Norway. In sparsely populated Iceland, on the other hand, a decree that enjoined all parish ministers in Iceland to keep catechetical registers was passed in 1746. It has been argued that the existence of catechetical registers in Iceland can be explained by the fact that home instruction under the supervision of the clergy was (as in Sweden) an important feature of the education system (Guttormsson 1981).

Another important difference between Iceland and other parts of the Danish kingdom is the number of nominal censuses that were carried out in Iceland during the 18th century. The first census was carried out in 1703 and is unique as it contains information of the entire population at such an early date. The main objective of this census was to assess the number of paupers and vagrants. Throughout Western Europe, the late 17th century had been characterized by harvest failures and high food prizes. In the case of Iceland this was a period of extremely harsh living conditions, shortage of hay and poor fishing catches. This caused subsistence crises and very high mortality rates by the end of the 17th century. This situation moved Danish authorities to send two officials to Iceland to carry out a census which first and foremost was to map out the extent of pauperism and vagrancy in the country (Guðmundsson and Garðarsdóttir 2005; Guttormsson and Garðarsdóttir 2005).

In 1729 another census was taken in three counties in Iceland. The motives for this census were ideas put forward by Danish authorities to transport a group of Icelanders to Greenland. The intention was to start a new settlement of Nordic people in Greenland. However, these plans were never put into force but they resulted in a census covering the south-western part of the country, the area that was seen as a recruitment base for the transportation to Greenland (Hansen 1975). Two other censuses are available from 18th century Iceland, one from 1762 and one from 1769. The census 1769 was carried out in the entire Danish kingdom. It was not nominal and consisted of tables of population structure in

every parish of the kingdom. All Icelandic censuses from the 19th century were analogous to censuses in Denmark and Norway, the first one dating from 1801.

Iceland was a late-comer to the scene of the discipline of historical demography. Also as regards the digitalization of population sources, Icelandic historians fall way behind their Nordic neighbours. When Icelandic historians started to pay attention to historical demography, Sweden, Denmark and Norway had taken the first steps towards a large-scale digitalization of population sources. Most Icelandic historians who have dealt with historical demography since the 1980s have created their own private datasets. At the time a relational database had been created that was intended for medical (genetic) research (GDU or the genealogy database of the *Genetical Committee* of the University of Iceland). Unfortunately access to data from this database was largely restricted to scholars in medical research. It was constructed by linking the census of 1910 to the Icelandic National Registry, which was founded in 1953. The data were made complete for all Icelanders born after 1840 by adding information on the period 1840 to 1910 from parish records and censuses.

Another relational database comparable to GDU is *Íslendingabók*, a collaboration project between the private research centre deCODE Genetics and Friðrik Skúlason who started to collect information from censuses and parish registers in the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> During the 1990s, Daniel Vasey created a database on vital events using data available at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS).

Since the early 2000s an effort has been made to digitize Icelandic censuses and nearly all Icelandic censuses from 1703 to 1930 are now available in a digitized form. During the 1970s, Statistics Iceland computerized the 1703 census and in his project Daniel Vasey digitized the censuses of 1801, 1845 and 1870 on the base (Vasey 1997). Within the framework of an international project led by Steven Ruggles, head of the *Minnesota Population Center* (MPC), Ólöf Garðarsdóttir and Eiríkur G. Guðmundsson worked on the transcription of the censuses 1880 and 1901 in 2003 and 2004 and since then the *National Archive of Iceland* (NAI), under the supervision of Guðmundsson, has transcribed the remaining 19th century censuses together with the 1910 and 1920 censuses<sup>2</sup>. The so-called *North Atlantic Population Project* (NAPP) is currently working with census data from 1703 to 1910 in collaboration with Ólöf Garðarsdóttir and the National Archives of Iceland. The NAPP project brings together complete census micro data from the US, Canada and nine European countries into a single harmonized database. The MPC co-ordinates harmonization of the database and its main objective is to make historical census data comparable across borders and to promote comparative studies within the field of social sciences (Roberts *et al.* 2003).

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1 decode Genetics <http://www.decode.com/>.

2 NAI. <http://www.manntal.is/Upplýsingar/>