

Icelandic Medieval Documents: From *Diplomatarium Islandicum* to Digital Publishing

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From the 17th century onwards scholars investigating Scandinavian medieval history have been keenly aware of the importance of Icelandic medieval texts. It was thus not unexpected that, following the appearance of the first volume of *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* in 1848, it would soon be decided to publish a similar collection of Icelandic documents. The publisher was *Híð íslenska bókmenntafélag* (The Icelandic Literary Society), a fellowship founded in Reykjavík and Copenhagen in 1816 and dedicated to the promotion of Icelandic literature.

A central figure in the decision to publish Icelandic documents was Jón Sigurðsson (1811–1879). He was employed on a more or less permanent stipend at the Arnarnaghnæan collection of Icelandic manuscripts in Copenhagen from 1835, and from 1837 he was a continuous member of the board of The Icelandic Literary Society in Copenhagen, becoming its president in 1851. Jón was also an elected member of the Icelandic parliament from its foundation in 1845, and the acknowledged leader of the Icelandic movement for independence. Jón was a prolific editor of Old Icelandic texts, and in 1845 he had already conceived the idea of a collection of documents which would be called *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, and was making a registry of documents to that end. In 1854–1855, the board of the Arnarnaghnæan Collection managed to extract funds for this purpose from the Danish parliament.¹

From 1855 to 1874 Jón Sigurðsson received an annual grant to work on this publication. He resolved to publish the documents in chronological order, a principle more or less adhered to by later editors. The first volume was devoted to documents dating from 834 to 1264, and was published in four segments in 1857, 1859, 1862 and 1876.² This particular volume was different from the ones that were to follow, primarily due to the lengthy historical essays preceding most of the manuscripts. This is due to the particular circumstances in which the editor found himself at the time. Jón Sigurðsson was a man of many responsibilities but limited means. While an employee of the Danish government, he worked tirelessly and selflessly to promote the cause of Icelandic independence, and took it upon himself to represent his fellow

¹ Cf. Páll Eggert ÓLASON, *Jón Sigurðsson*, 5 vols, Reykjavík 1929–1933, III., p. 359.

² P. E. ÓLASON, *Jón Sigurðsson*, III., p. 360–361. Little work has been done on the methodology of this early edition although the edition prepared for print is available at the National Library in Iceland, cf. Már JÓNSSON, *Gamli sáttmáli 1862*, in: *Varði reistur Guðvarði Má Gunnlaugssyni fimmtugum* 16. September 2006, Reykjavík 2006, p. 87–89.

Icelanders in Copenhagen in any way possible, which proved to be a drain on the resources of a man with a modest salary.³ He was thus prone to accept any salaried commission in his field of study, even if he had limited time to devote to it. One such commission was a generous subsidy by an Englishman named G. E. J. Powell to write a general history of Iceland, which Jón received in 1866.⁴ Despite this general grant, Jón never managed to compose such a work. It is, however, probable that he intended his micro-essays on Icelandic history in *Diplomatarium Islandicum* to form the basis for the composition of the overview requested by Powell.

In the prologue, written on the publication of the last segment in 1876, Jón states his intention to publish all Icelandic documents written before 1600.⁵ In fact, later editors only managed to continue the collection up to the year 1570. Work on the second volume only began in 1886, thanks to a joint grant from the Danish and Icelandic authorities.⁶ The editor responsible for this volume, and the subsequent ten volumes of the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* was Jón Þorkelsson (1859–1924), who was the national archivist (Ic. *þjóðskjalavörður*) in Iceland from 1900. Upon the death of Jón Þorkelsson, the work was continued by Páll Eggert Ólason (1883–1949), professor of history at the University of Iceland (Ic. *Háskóli Íslands*). Four volumes edited by Páll Eggert appeared in 1925–1950, the last three exclusively devoted to the years 1551–1570. These editors did not follow the custom of Jón Sigurðsson of preceding each document with an extensive historical essay; the editorial remarks are usually brief and confined to the manuscript provenance of each text.

The first four volumes of the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* were published in Copenhagen, the fifth jointly in Copenhagen and Reykjavík, but the remaining eleven in Reykjavík only. This circumstance is connected with the fate of the Icelandic Society of Literature, which operated in two divisions, one in

³ Cf. Lúðvík KRISTJÁNSSON, *Á slóðum Jóns Sigurðssonar*, Hafnarfjörður 1961, p. 69–117.

⁴ Cf. P. E. ÓLASON, *Jón Sigurðsson*, IV., p. 41–49; L. KRISTJÁNSSON, *Á slóðum Jóns Sigurðssonar*, p. 205–341.

⁵ *Diplomatarium Islandicum. Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn, sem hefir inni að halda bréf og gjörninga, dóma og máldaga og aðrar skrár, er snerta Ísland eða íslenzka menn*, I. 834–1264, ed. Jón SIGURÐSSON, Copenhagen 1857–1876, p. iii.

⁶ *Diplomatarium Islandicum. Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn, sem hefir inni að halda bréf og gjörninga, dóma og máldaga og aðrar skrár, er snerta Ísland eða íslenzka menn*, II. 1253–1350, ed. Jón ÞORKELSSON, Copenhagen 1893, p. iii.

Copenhagen and the other in Reykjavík, until 1911. At that time, they were merged into a single society resident only in Reykjavík.⁷

A sixteenth volume was published in seven segments between 1952 and 1972, edited by the historian Björn Þorsteinsson (1918–1986). This volume mostly contained documents pertaining to Anglo-Icelandic and Germanic-Icelandic relations, which Björn Þorsteinsson himself had unearthed in English and German collections. Due to the circumstances of their late discovery, this volume is more thematically coherent than the others, as it is almost entirely devoted to international relations in the 15th and 16th centuries.⁸

In 1963 philologist Stefán Karlsson (1928–2006) published in a single volume all dated and sealed Icelandic documents preserved in the original manuscript written before 1450.⁹ This edition contains 337 documents (plus another 15 in the appendix), which is only a fraction of the manuscript material pertaining to this period. This edition is generally a more reliable indication of the grammatical and orthographical features of the documents it contains than the version printed in *Diplomatarium Islandicum*. In addition, the digitalization of Old Norse-Icelandic manuscripts has led to some Old-Norse Icelandic manuscripts being available online. Only a minute fraction of these, however, can be characterized as documents.¹⁰

The *Diplomatarium Islandicum* is supposed to cover all Icelandic documents originally composed before 1570, also those which only have been preserved in later copies. There are, however, some lacunae in the collection, mostly concerning documents written after 1480.¹¹ In addition, there are incomplete series of diplomatic material covering the decades immediately following 1570. The most noteworthy of them is *Alþingisbækur Íslands* (lat. *Acta comitorum generalium Islandiæ*), a series started by Jón Þorkelsson in 1912 and finished in 1991, which contains the complete minutes of the highest court in Iceland from 1570 to 1800. The documents of some of the 17th century

⁷ Cf. Einar LAXNESS, *Bókmenntafélagið*, in: *Íslandssaga a-h. Alfræði Vöku-Helgafells*, Reykjavík 1995, p. 78–79.

⁸ *Diplomatarium Islandicum. Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn, sem hefir inni að halda bréf og gjörninga, dóma og máldaga og aðrar skrár, er snerta Ísland eða íslenzka menn*, XVI. 1415–1589, ed. Björn ÞORSTEINSSON, Reykjavík 1952–1972, p. [iii].

⁹ *Íslandske originaldiplomer indtil 1450. Tekst*, EA, Series A, vol. 7, ed. Stefán KARLSSON, Copenhagen 1963, p. xiii.

¹⁰ Cf. <http://am.hi.is/WebView/>. In addition, the text of the first eleven volumes of *Diplomatarium Islandicum* is available digitally at: <http://www.archive.org/details/diplomatariumisl01kaupuoft/>.

¹¹ *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, XVI., p. [iii].

Icelandic bishops have been edited; among them are *Bréfabók Guðbrands Þorlákssonar* edited by Jón Þorkelsson in 1919; *Úr bréfabókum Brynjólfs biskups Sveinssonar* edited by Jón Helgason (1899–1986) in 1942; *Bréfabók Þorláks biskups Skúlasonar* edited by Ingvar Stefánsson (1935–1971) in 1979; *Prestastefnudómar og bréfabók Gísla Þorlákssonar* edited by Júníus Kristinsson (1944–1983) in 1983, and three volumes edited by the historian Már Jónsson (1959) appearing in 2005, 2006, 2008, concerning the bishops Brynjólfur Sveinsson, Þórður Þorláksson and Jón Vídalín.¹²

¹² They are: *Guðs dýrð og sálnanna velferð. Prestastefnudómar Brynjólfs biskups Sveinssonar árin 1639–1674*, ed. Már JÓNSSON, SÍÁ 10, Reykjavík 2005; *Í nafni heilagrar guðdómsins þrenningar. Prestastefnudómar Jóns biskups Vídalíns árin 1698-1720*, ed. Már JÓNSSON – Skúli S. ÓLAFSSON, SÍÁ 12, Reykjavík 2006; *Eftir skyldu míns embættis: prestastefnudómar Þórðar biskups Þorlákssonar árin 1675–1697*, ed. Már JÓNSSON – Gunnar Örn HANNESSON, SÍÁ 13, Reykjavík 2008.