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Last Man Standing

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Magnús Jónsson í Tjaldanesi (1835-1922) was one of the most prolific scribes of late 19th- and early 20th-century Iceland, producing in the course of his lifetime copies of hundreds of texts, the majority of them romances of one kind or another – *for-naldarsögur*, *riddarasögur*, translations of chapbooks etc. – which he collected into a huge anthology, 20 volumes in all, each of exactly 800 pages, to which he gave the title *Fornmannasögur Norðurlanda* (Sagas of ancient men of the north). There are multiple copies of each of the volumes, and it appears that he copied the entire collection at least four times.

I first encountered Magnús í Tjaldanesi in the early 80s, when I was investigating the transmission history of *Sigurðar saga þögla*. Like many of the indigenous Icelandic romances, *Sigurðar saga* is found in a large number of manuscripts – well over 60. Almost all of these contain texts of the longer version of the saga, a provisional edition of which by Agnete Loth had appeared in 1963, whereas it was the at that point unedited shorter version, preserved in the earliest of the extant manuscripts, AM 596 4to, from the second half of the 14th century, in which I was chiefly interested (my edition of it eventually appeared in 1992). Still, I obviously needed to check all the manuscripts in order at least to determine which version they contained. It was great fun, and, in retrospect, a major turning point in my (academic) life.

Three of the copies of *Sigurðar saga þögla* I looked at are in the hand of Magnús í Tjaldanesi. Two of these are in Landsbókasafn Lbs 1500 4to, written according to the title page in 1889, and Lbs 4718 4to, which is undated but appears to be from about a decade earlier. The third, one of several formerly owned by Böðvar Kvaran, is rather late, from 1912; it is, in fact, the youngest of all the surviving manuscripts of the saga.

I was intrigued by Magnús's manuscripts from the start, their sheer number, their content – which was pretty much everything that was in circulation in the second half of the 19th century –, their physical format – short and squat, ca. 20 x 16 cm, with broad margins and running titles, like printed books – and most of all Magnús's highly distinctive script and archaic spelling. All of this, and the fact that Magnús prefaced most of his texts with short descriptions of how he had got hold of his exemplars, convinced me that here was a 'case' well worth looking into further.

At about the same time as I encountered Magnús I made the acquaintance of the recipient of this *Festschrift*, Jürg Glauser – also, in retrospect, something of a turning point. My preliminary work on *Sigurðar saga* had been conducted under the auspi-

ces of of Davíð Erlingsson, who had offered a graduate-level course in “Fornaldar- og riddarasögur” at Háskóli Íslands in the autumn of 1984. Jürg, who was visiting Iceland, had recently published his ground-breaking study *Isländische Märchensagas* (Glauser, 1983), and Davíð had invited him to come and talk to us about his work. We were all intrigued by this quiet, unassuming, young Swiss scholar whose spoken Icelandic was perfect and knowledge of medieval Icelandic literature seemingly unlimited.

The following summer I met him again at the Saga Conference in Helsingør. One evening, at Louisiana, we had a long chat while watching a most spectacular thunderstorm. It was then, I think, that I mentioned Magnús í Tjaldanesi, whose manuscripts Jürg had naturally encountered in the course of his research. I told him, somewhat hubristically perhaps, that I intended one day to do a full-length study of Magnús and his manuscripts. He agreed that this would definitely be a worthy undertaking, and has encouragingly reminded me of my ‘vow’ on many occasions over the years. Although I have been gathering material on Magnús ever since, and have lectured and published various things on him (e.g. Driscoll, 2012), the full-length study, alas, remains unfinished.

Part of the problem – a small one, admittedly – is that manuscripts by Magnús keep turning up. Recently, for example, there has come to light what I believe to be the last manuscript ever written by Magnús, dated 1916. Although it bears the title *Fornmanna-sögur Norðurlanda, Týunda bindi*, and its format and layout are the same as in Magnús’s other volumes, the manuscript comprises only 384 pages, rather than the usual 800, so either Magnús left off copying the volume or it has for some reason been divided in two and the second half lost; that the former explanation is the more likely is suggested by the fact that there are two blank leaves at the beginning, following the title-page, presumably where Magnús had intended to add the prefaces. The obvious tremulousness of the otherwise ever so steady hand suggests too that this was not the work of a man in full vigour. Magnús, born in 1835, would have been 81 or 82 at the time.

The manuscript was given to Landsbókasafn in July 2013 by Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson along with around 40 others. Sigurjón acquired the manuscript in March 2007, or at least that’s when he contacted me, having heard that I was interested in Magnús, saying that he had recently (“um daginn”) got hold of one of Magnús’s manuscripts.

The manuscript, which has now been given the shelfmark Lbs 5690 4to, contains texts of just three sagas, the last breaking off before the end. The first of these is *Hálfðanar saga gamla og sona hans*, a text of which is also found in Lbs 1504 4to, copied by Magnús in 1895-1896, and in a further 16 manuscripts. It was also the basis for a set of *rímur* composed by Hannes Bjarnason in about 1822; these are found in about a dozen manuscripts and were printed in Reykjavík in 1878.

In the preface to Lbs 1504 4to, Magnús says that his text derives from a manuscript written by Gísli Konráðsson (1787-1877). The saga, he says, *er víst ecki gömul, máské upprunnin í Skagafirði, þvíat þangað vilja rekast upptök hennar* (“is clearly not

old, perhaps from Skagafjörður, for it is to there that its origins are to be traced"; my translation), a veiled reference to Jón Espólin, sheriff (*sýslumaður*) in Skagafjörður from 1803 until his death in 1836, to whom the saga was widely attributed (see Veturliði Óskarsson, 1999: 10-21).

The second text in the manuscript is *Starkaðar saga Áludrengs*, which Magnús says is also derived from a manuscript written by Gísli Konráðsson. There are two other copies in Magnús's hand, the aforementioned Lbs 1504 4to, and another manuscript formerly owned by Böðvar Kvaran, written in 1913. There are only two other manuscripts, Lbs 2081 8vo (written by Bjarnhéðinn Jónsson in 1912-1914) and Lbs 2500 8vo (written in 1930 by Sigfús Sigfússon), both apparently derived from Lbs 1504 4to.

The third and final text is *Fróða saga Friðleifssonar*, the beginning of which is shown here. Like *Starkaðar saga Aludrengs*, *Fróða saga* derives from Saxo (Power, 1984). Texts of this saga are found in two other manuscripts by Magnús, one in private ownership written in 1897 and the other in Lbs 1505 4to, written in 1900. No other copies are known to exist.

Magnús claimed his text of *Fróða saga Friðleifssonar*, which he also calls *Friðfróðasaga*, derived from an early 19th-century manuscript he borrowed from Ólafur Guðmundsson and Guðrún Oddsdóttir on Flatey which they had in turn got from Birget Jónsdóttir, an old woman from Sellátrar in the Westfjords. The manuscript, which Magnús frequently refers to in his prefaces as *Sellátra* (i.e. [the book] from Sellátrar), was the source of six of Magnús's texts in all; several of these, like *Fróða saga Friðleifssonar*, are otherwise unattested (see Power, 1984: 249-255; Driscoll, 2003: 265-266).

Magnús knew perfectly well that these sagas were rarities. In the preface to Lbs 1505 4to he says:

Aungva Friðfróða sögu hefði ek sétt eða heyrt getið um annarstaðar en þessa, svo at með sanni sagt verði, tilgátr ok ímindanir nockura manna um þat, at þá minni at þeir hefði heyrt getið um hana, eða jafnvel séð einhverstaðar, hefr at aungvu orðit; sagan hefr hvergi fundist þat ek til veit.

I have neither seen nor heard tell of any other [text of] Friðfróða saga besides this one, so that it may be said in truth that the speculations and fancies of certain people about how they remember that they had heard the saga mentioned or even seen it somewhere or other amount to nothing; the saga is not [otherwise] to be found, as far as I know. (My translation)

It seems somehow fitting that this should be, as it appears, the very last text ever copied by Magnús í Tjaldanesi – a saga which, had he not copied it, would not have survived at all.

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