

Icelandic Scribes: Results of a 2-Year Project

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Abstract. This paper contributes to the conference theme of History and introduces an online catalogue of an early modern library: the main digital output of the author’s individual research project “Icelandic Scribes” (2016–2018 at the University of Copenhagen). The project has investigated the patronage of manuscripts by Icelander Magnús Jónsson í Vigur (1637–1702), his network of scribes and their working practices, and the significance of the library of hand-written books that he accumulated during his lifetime, in the region of Iceland called the Westfjords. The online catalogue is meant to be a digital resource that reunites this library virtually, gives detailed descriptions of the manuscripts, and highlights the collection’s rich store of texts and the individuals behind their creation. The present paper also explores some of the challenges of integrating new data produced by this and other small projects like it with existing online resources in the field of Old Norse-Icelandic studies.

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1 Project Background

The EU-funded project “Icelandic Scribes” has over the past two years conducted research into a collection of manuscripts that has previously been praised as being largely representative of the vast majority of the literature available in Iceland in the seventeenth century [5]. This collection was commissioned by the wealthy landowner Magnús Jónsson í Vigur (1637–1702), whose importance for the history of Icelandic literature has long been recognised but on whom only little systematic work has previously been carried out [5, 9, 14, 15]. The project has focused on this patron’s network of scribes who worked to copy the books for him, and by analysing the manuscripts themselves the project has considered the working practices of these scribes through the personal traces they left on their work, such as colophons and notes to the reader. In these, the scribes often identify themselves along with the date and location of their writing. In addition to an assessment of the patron and his scribes, the project has considered the literary-historical and cultural significance of this library of manuscripts that Magnús Jónsson accumulated between about 1654 and 1700 (the dates of his first and last known commissions) in a region of Iceland called the Westfjords,

which is recognised as one of the most important areas of manuscript production after the Icelandic Reformation of 1550 [15].

The seventeenth century in particular was a time that saw a renewed flourishing of manuscript production in Iceland that had a lasting impact on scribal culture and book production in later centuries. There has accordingly been a recent increase in new research covering this period of Icelandic literary and cultural history, especially through the consideration of the manuscripts themselves and the circumstances of their production [3, 6, 7, 16], falling, methodologically, broadly within the field of Material or “New” Philology [1, 12, 13, 18]. New copies of Old Icelandic sagas were made at this time, and alongside this continued reception and transmission of medieval literature, newer entertaining and edifying stories and annalistic works were also translated into Icelandic from other languages in the seventeenth century, usually through Danish intermediaries. Magnús Jónsson is a particular example of a man of means with a strong appetite for both medieval and contemporary early modern literature (poetry and prose, religious and secular). He commissioned for himself copies of such literary material alongside various other types of writing (historical, geographic, ethnographic, etc.), from print and hand-written sources alike.

Whereas manuscripts were still written out by hand just as they had been for centuries during the Middle Ages, the appearance of these early modern Icelandic manuscripts, now almost always copied onto paper instead of parchment, was in many cases also strongly influenced by the physical appearance of early modern printed books, especially, for example, title pages [2, 6, 7]. Considering the material properties of these post-Reformation saga manuscripts alongside the significance of the various works of literature and other texts that they contain has therefore provided important insights into both early modern reading practices in Iceland and the reception of medieval Icelandic literature after the Reformation, during what is elsewhere in Europe primarily considered to be an age of print.

2 Digital Output

Research outputs from the “Icelandic Scribes” project include a series of up-to-date electronically encoded catalogue descriptions (following TEI standards for XML encoding) of the manuscripts in Magnús Jónsson’s seventeenth-century collection, as well as an online resource that is, as of February 2018, newly launched [8]. In the first instance this resource is a “work-in-progress” that is still under development. This online resource, made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence (CC BY-SA 4.0), will host the electronic descriptions, in order to make them readily available to scholars and students alike, alongside the project’s other historical findings, which are discussed in section 3 below. The project’s cataloguing work is ongoing; in some cases it builds upon two previous and ongoing digital cataloguing projects that are making and have made available Old Norse-Icelandic manuscripts, in varying degrees of detail.

2.1 Existing Resources

The first of the existing digital resources is Handrit.org [4], a large joint and ongoing initiative for a comprehensive online catalogue and digital image repository that has been online since 2009 and coordinated among the National and University Library of Iceland, the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík, and the Arnarnagæan Institute in Copenhagen. The second existing digital resource is the online catalogue, bibliography, and electronic edition produced by the project “Stories for All Time: The Icelandic Fornaldarsögur” [17], a smaller time-limited collaborative research project carried out at the Arnarnagæan Institute in Copenhagen from 2011–2014 and funded by the Velux Foundation. The catalogue descriptions produced by the “Stories for All Time” project have in some cases duplicated existing manuscript descriptions from Handrit.org, but many of them have also increased the amount of information available for some manuscripts, offering more detailed or updated descriptions, while also creating new data for manuscripts not covered by the scope of Handrit.org, for example, manuscripts kept in the British Library in London.

2.2 Duplication of Data

A certain amount of data overlap, although far from ideal, is likewise unavoidable with the creation of an online resource for the “Icelandic Scribes” project, as new descriptions not covered by either of the existing catalogues just mentioned cannot necessarily be easily added to them. In the case of the online materials from the “Stories for All Time” project, its nature as a self-contained research project that has since ended, not to mention its strict scope in terms of literary genre — that is, manuscripts containing *fornaldarsögur* (sagas of ancient times, also sometimes called legendary sagas) — rules out the possibility of integrating the new data generated by the “Icelandic Scribes” project. In a similar manner, the platform provided by Handrit.org, while more inclusive in terms of the exponentially greater number of manuscripts containing texts from all genres instead of only one, is at the same time also more limited in terms of the scope of participating institutions.

There is not at present a ready mechanism to include manuscripts from institutions that are not already among the small list of contributing partners. At the same time, individual studies of literary corpora and the manuscripts in which they are preserved should of course not be restricted to items held by institutions that are involved in existing digital projects and resources. This tension between existing resources and initiatives on the one hand, and smaller projects and studies with targeted objectives and research questions on the other, poses challenges for the creation and augmentation of data.

2.3 Benefits of a New Resource

However, a great benefit gained from the creation of a separate, self-contained online resource for the material produced by the “Icelandic Scribes” project is its ability to digitally reunite a now disparate group of manuscripts housed in various institutions in

northern Europe. To be able to more easily conceptualise this small group of handwritten books as something that was at a point in the past a carefully curated collection owned by a single wealthy individual thus invites fresh perspectives on the reception of medieval and early modern literature in Iceland at the time of the collection's creation in the seventeenth century. The reunification of Magnús Jónsson's library in digital form also provides an opportunity to consider the afterlives of these books and how they made their way from one private library on an island in the Westfjords of Iceland (now a relatively remote area, but then a well-connected hub) to their various current institutions. Above and beyond the various electronic manuscript descriptions (which moreover include a greater level of detail than many existing descriptions, see Fig. 1), the project's digital catalogue also presents historical research generated by the project, providing context for, and interpretation of, some of the data. It aims in this way to be much more than simply yet one more online catalogue.

The screenshot shows the website 'ICELANDIC SCRIBES' with the subtitle 'Scribal networks in 17th-century Iceland: The patronage of Magnús Jónsson í Vigur'. The navigation menu includes 'ABOUT', 'PATRON', 'SCRIBES', 'MANUSCRIPTS', and 'BIBLIOGRAPHY'. The main content area displays 'ADD. 4857' and 'Manuscript Contents'. A list of institutions holding the manuscript is shown, including Copenhagen, Arnemagnæan Institute, Copenhagen, Royal Library, London, British Library, Reykjavik, Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Reykjavik, National and University Library, and Stockholm, National Library of Sweden. The beginning of the catalogue description for Add. 4857 is shown, featuring a diplomatic transcription of the title page on fol. 1r. The text is as follows:

Agiætar historiur
 Af
 Jymsum kóngum kóngasonum og
 Velbornum Frægdar mönnum
 Vtann landz þeirra hreyste verkum
 Og Margföldum manndöms
 Giöringum sem þeir ä sijnnum
 Dögum fræmdu, Miög skient-
 elegar Ad lesa og Heira, Ei Sydur
 Nitsamlegar, sier Göd Dæme af ad
 Draga.
 Ad Nyu yfer siednar Og

On the right side of the page, there is a 'Following Icelandic Scribes' button, a 'NEWS ARCHIVE' section with 'January 2018 (1)', a 'RESOURCES' section with 'Handrit.org' and 'Stories for all time: The Icelandic fornaldarsögur', and a 'Tweets by @IcelandScribes' section with a tweet from 'Icelandic Scribes Pro...'.

Fig. 1. Screenshot from the “Icelandic Scribes” website showing the header, navigation menu, and beginning of the catalogue description for Add. 4857, featuring a diplomatic transcription of the title page on fol. 1r that also visually reproduces the carefully tapered layout of the text.

2.4 Towards Future Standardisation

Further work within the field of digital Old Norse-Icelandic studies is required to move towards standardising disparate catalogues and other projects with digital components that include information about the same items, in order to make it possible to reliably recombine them if and when it may be deemed necessary by, for example, third-party sites and projects in the future. The most basic requirement should be first and foremost to agree upon a standard set of identifiers for a wide range of individual items that have come under investigation in digital projects and catalogues, that is, the plethora of manuscripts, texts, genres, authors, scribes, historical and modern locations, etc. Such is, unfortunately, not as straightforward a task as might be hoped.

Beyond the standardisation of identifiers, a system of project/resource cross-referencing should also, ideally, be developed and incorporated, first, into the various existing online resources and, subsequently, into each new digital project resource. Existing catalogue entries could link directly to other versions of the data that are presented on other project websites on an entry by entry basis, and the homepages of existing resources could likewise acknowledge and link to each other. Such a system of cross-referencing would make it easier to locate, compare, and contrast the relevant data generated by different digital resources, allowing historians, codicologists, those who study literature, and others to use and build on it in future research. To the extent that this is possible, the “Icelandic Scribes” project website has endeavoured to cross-reference and link to other catalogue descriptions (see Fig. 2).

Repository: Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, København
Collection: Arnamagnæan
Shelfmark: AM 284 4to
Other identifier: No. 1017 in Kålund's catalogue (1888: 536)
Other catalogue descriptions: [Handrit.org](#) | [Stories for All Time](#)

Catalogued by SMW | [Download xml description](#)
 Last updated: 2018-02-01

Fig. 2. Screenshot from the “Icelandic Scribes” website showing the end of the catalogue description for AM 284 4to, including the possibility for the user to compare this description with the other existing descriptions on Handrit.org and the “Stories for All Time” website.

Alternatively (or in addition to a cross-referencing system), a single curated online space that could be regularly and easily updated and that gathers together links to the disparate online resources could also be something to work towards in the field so as to increase the visibility and reach of small project outputs alongside larger ones. It is needless to say that, going forward, more collaboration in the field is highly important, although this has so far been to a certain extent difficult to establish and maintain — a sentiment that has been indicated in a recent overview of the state of digital humanities in Old Norse-Icelandic studies [19]. Some of the same constraints on time as well as financial and human resources that have limited collaboration and development of new

standards in the past now also prevent “Icelandic Scribes” as an individual 2-year project from making any great strides forward in these areas. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the benefits of the digital resources the project has created, as noted above, make up for some of the disadvantages of data duplication that have also been discussed.

3 Historical Findings

Information about the manuscripts, scribes, and patron under investigation by the “Icelandic Scribes” project has never before been gathered together as a cohesive whole, neither in print nor digitally. Previous work has instead tended to consider, in isolation, individual texts preserved within various manuscripts in the collection, usually for the purposes of textual criticism alone [e.g. 5], or Magnús Jónsson’s role in the greater phenomenon of the renewal of early modern Icelandic manuscript production [e.g. 16].

By taking a wider view of Magnús Jónsson’s collection and also considering individual manuscripts as examples of the work of individual scribes done for an individual patron, the project has also produced significant historical findings now in progress and awaiting print publication [e.g. 10, 11]. These deal with for example the ways in which scribes carried out their work both individually and in collaboration with each other, the preferences held by their patron, and the different types of relationships evident between scribe and patron. These findings have been arrived at through historical and codicological research involving the consideration of for example paratextual features of the manuscripts such as title pages, indexes, and scribal notes. By considering the production circumstances of the manuscripts, insights have also been gained into how Magnús Jónsson as patron wished to access and read the stories these books contained, something which has had a lasting impact on the transmission and preservation of medieval Icelandic literature.

The dual-stranded outlook of the project — both digital and historical with a strong emphasis on the analysis of manuscripts — has yielded important results that would not necessarily have been possible had the project relied solely on single-discipline, traditional methods. It is in turn hoped that the digital output of the project will also support further research on the manuscripts, their texts, and the people who copied and read them, from historical, literary, codicological, and other perspectives. To name just one example of an area of further research that the digital outputs might support, there is still far too little work on the post-medieval transmission history of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. The catalogue descriptions, which include detailed incipits and explicits for all texts, could be useful indicators (in the first instance, before studying the physical manuscripts) of which versions of the text are preserved in these manuscripts. This is something that has not been possible to investigate in the present project, given that the manuscripts in Magnús Jónsson’s library encompasses over 250 individual texts. Related to this, the identification of some of the texts preserved in these manuscripts still remains to be done, particularly when it comes to sets of *ævintýri* (exempla or short tales) that, until now, have not been itemised.

The outputs of the “Icelandic Scribes” project can furthermore be seen as case studies on which future studies of other concentrated groups of manuscripts or scribes could be modelled, especially when it comes to the significant amount of material available from seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Iceland that still remains to be investigated.

4 Conclusion

No existing online resource in Old Norse-Icelandic studies currently accounts for all of the manuscripts known to have been part of the remarkable collection of the seventeenth-century Icelander Magnús Jónsson í Vigur, despite there being significant ongoing efforts to catalogue and make available manuscript images and descriptions through both long-term collaborative projects spanning multiple institutions in different countries (like Handrit.org) and short-term smaller-scale collaborative projects (like “Stories for All Time”). Despite a limited but necessary amount of data duplication, the digital catalogue of the “Icelandic Scribes” project builds on some of the open data generated by these existing resources and at the same time produces new data for manuscripts that lie beyond their current reach: the mutual acknowledgement of different online resources and more work in the field towards the standardisation of data may allow for the future integration of competing (and complementary) data sets.

The “Icelandic Scribes” project offers furthermore a new online resource with both a broader focus and a narrower scope than the existing resources discussed in this paper, as it is more than just a catalogue listing manuscripts’ contents and physical properties. Rather, the project’s digital output focuses on bringing together, virtually, a small collection of highly bespoke hand-written books, and in many cases creates more detailed data about the texts that these books contain. A special focus is moreover placed on paratextual materials in order to present a clearer picture of the people behind the manuscripts, both scribes and patron. Finally, the use of existing digital materials alongside the creation of new ones has enhanced those project outputs which are, more strictly speaking, historical.

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