

Zeitschrift: Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien
Band: 59 (2017)

Artikel: A small prayer book travels from Iceland to Germany
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858082>

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A Small Prayer Book Travels from Iceland to Germany

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In a diminutive prayer book preserved in the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, Germany, Cod. Guelf. Extravagantes 315, fol. 2r, the manuscript's owner has written *Elen Thorlaks dötter ä kvered. 1659* ("Elín Þorlaksdóttir owns the book, 1659", cf. Margrét Eggertsdóttir, 2004: 223-244). It contains prayers by the German theologian Johann Habermann (1516-1590), *Christliche Gebet für alle Not vnd Stende der gantzen Christenheit*, printed in Germany in 1567 and translated into Icelandic and printed at Hólar, first in 1621 and several times after that.

Elín (1639-1726) was the daughter of the bishop of Hólar, Þorlákur Skúlason, who, along with Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson at Skálholt, was a key figure in the intensified interest in medieval Icelandic literature during the 17th century. The two episcopal sees can reasonably be thought of as manuscript centres, in the sense that many old vellum manuscripts were preserved and copied there. The bishop had great ambition for his only daughter and sent for a governess from England so that she might receive the best possible training in the feminine arts. It is to Elín Þorlaksdóttir and her teacher that an embroidered portrait of the bishop is attributed, a work unique among extant examples of Icelandic needlework (Elsa E. Guðjónsson, 1985: 57-58).

Elín owned the manuscript and possibly also copied it herself. The printed Icelandic translation of the prayers always uses the masculine form of pronouns and adjectives, but in the manuscript there are at least two examples where feminine forms occur. A morning prayer on Friday has *läted mig komast / heilbrygda ä þen-nann dag* ("[You have] let me wake up today in good health")¹ and one prayer for every day *Ja alla mig befala eg þier minn kiæraste Gud og drottinn* ("Yes, I commit myself wholly to you, my dearest God and Lord"). A few years later, in 1668, Elín sent the manuscript as a gift to her cousin and namesake Elín Hákonardóttir (b. 1644), who lived in Bræðratunga, close to Skálholt, as can be seen on the last page: *Elen Häkonar dotter ä kuerid med riettu 1668* ("Elín Hákonardóttir rightfully owns the book 1668"). This latter Elín subsequently gave the book to her younger brother, Vigfús (b. 1647), probably in the same year as she received it, because then, in 1668, he travelled abroad to study in Copenhagen. Neither Elín Þorlaksdóttir nor Elín Hákonardóttir, on the other hand, ever seem to have had the opportunity to travel outside Iceland.

¹ All translations are my own, ME.



Elín Þorlaksdóttir's Prayer-Book, 1659 (© Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel)

Nothing is known about how the manuscript got to Germany. However, in the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic studies in Reykjavík, a manuscript is preserved which sheds light on this matter. AM 96 8vo, ff. 38-67, has *Ættartala og Æfisaga þessa erlega ættgøfuga og heidarlega saluga vnga mans Wigfusar Hákonar sonar blesadrar minningar* (“The genealogy and biography of the honourable, noble and honest late young man, Vigfús Hákonarson, of blessed memory”). It gives an account of his trip to Germany in the year 1669 and information on the education he received in Iceland before he went to Copenhagen. The manuscript, written in the late 17th century, was borrowed by the manuscript collector Árni Magnússon from Pórdís Jónsdóttir in Bræðratunga, as can be seen by a note in his hand that follows the manuscript. Pórdís (1671-1741) was the second wife of Magnús Sigurðsson in Bræðratunga, but his first wife was Jarþrúður Hákonardóttir, the sister of Elín and Vigfús, who owned the prayer book now preserved in Wolfenbüttel. In his novel *Íslandsklukkan* (Iceland’s Bell), Halldór Laxness (1902-1998) used Pórdís as a model for Snæfríður, the woman “whose love Arnas [Arnæus, a thinly disguised Árni Magnússon] betrays in order to devote himself to saving the manuscripts of the Old Norse sagas, poetry and mythology” (Ástráður Eysteinsson & Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir, 2006: 405).

The manuscript also contains the biography of Vigfús’s mother, Helga Magnúsdóttir and a eulogy composed by Pórður Þorláksson, bishop in Skálholt, and recited by him at her funeral in 1677 (see *Líkpredikun Pórðar biskups Þorlákssonar*). Helga had seven children, three of whom died in infancy. Vigfús was the only one of her sons to reach adulthood. Helga Magnúsdóttir is still remembered for her assistance to Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson’s daughter, Ragnheiður, who sought refuge with her when she became pregnant and had a child out of wedlock in 1662, to her father’s great grief and society’s general indignation.

The biography of Helga describes her situation when she became a widow, at that time only 29 years old, pregnant and the mother of three children. She made every effort, it says, to give her children a proper education, becoming both “their mother and father”. In particular, she wanted her son to get the best education possible. Vigfús was sent to a well-known priest, where he studied “Latin, writing and music” for two years, then to another learned priest to learn more Latin and other skills. After that he was deemed qualified to attend the cathedral school at Skálholt, where he stayed for six years. On the 14th of September 1668, he matriculated at the University of Copenhagen, where he chose Christian Ostenfeld (1619-1671), the rector of the University and a famous professor of medicine, to be his patron. Vigfús had only been one semester in Copenhagen when he got the opportunity to participate in an excursion by Danish noblemen to Germany, on the occasion of the birth and baptism of the Kurfürst of Dresden, Johann Georg II’s, newborn child. The child’s mother was Anna Sofie (b. 1647), daughter of King Frederik III of Denmark. The king sent his representative, who also was to be the child’s godfather, Just Høg (1640-1694). The importance of travelling and becoming acquainted with other people’s customs is discussed in the biography. The journey started on the 2nd of Janu-

ary 1669 and went via Jutland to Germany, through Hamburg, Magdeburg, Leipzig and finally to Dresden.

The manuscript describes the city and the baptism ceremony, which Vigfús attended, and mentions a feast, to which he was not invited. On the way home he was in Wittenberg and around Easter back in Copenhagen. In the small prayer book Vigfús has written: *Petta lited Bænakuer heffe eg thil eignar feinged Augusto Heiland og thil merkis mitt nafn under skriffad. Vighus Hakonarsohn* (“I have given this small prayer book to August Heiland and signed it as confirmation”). All we know about August Heiland is that he matriculated at the University of Leipzig in 1659-1660. Why Vigfús gave the prayer book to him and how it came into the library of Herzog August is unknown.

When Vigfús had spent a few weeks in Copenhagen he set off again for another trip, this time along with Þórður Þorláksson, to Norway, among other things to visit the royal historiographer, Tormod Torfæus or Þormóður Torfason, who then lived in Stangeland. In the autumn he was back in Copenhagen, studying, but in the summer 1670 he travelled back home to Iceland. The reason for this is not given; it is only said: *fieck hann j sinne sins fodurlands afftur ad vitia, kann vera og aff radi og forlagi sinnar Ehrugoffugu modur* (“He got a longing for visiting again his fatherland; perhaps advised and encouraged by his noble mother”). It is difficult to say why Helga Magnúsdóttir might have wanted to have her son home before he had finished his studies abroad. In November he was still in Iceland, then he came down with measles, a sickness which led to his death, at the age of only 23.

There is no doubt that Vigfús’s mother, Helga Magnúsdóttir, had had great expectations for the future career of her son. Most likely she hoped that he would become a bishop, either at Hólar or Skálholt, as did his cousin Þórður Þorláksson, who had been his travel companion in Norway. Þórður (1637-1697) was better educated and more widely travelled than most of his contemporaries and a pioneering figure in several respects; he brought baroque culture with him on his return to Iceland (Margrét Eggertsdóttir, 2014: 165) and had the printing press moved to Skálholt in 1685, where he had examples of saga literature printed for the first time in the history of Iceland.

His sister, Elín Þorláksdóttir, provided Árni Magnússon with important medieval manuscripts, as did her cousin, Elín Hákonardóttir. Thus they all contributed to the cultural history of Iceland. Vigfús, on the other hand, would be entirely forgotten, had he not left the little prayer book in Germany. And the prayer book itself would have been forgotten, if the author of this article – after spending a year in Tübingen in Germany, in the company of the newly hired professor Jürg Glauser – had not, during her first stay in Wolfenbüttel in 1996, been asked by a member of staff to take a look at a small “Swedish prayer book”, as Elín Þorláksdóttir’s manuscript is defined in the library’s catalogue.

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