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MAGIC, MARGRÉTAR SAGA AND ICELANDIC MANUSCRIPT CULTURE¹

MARGRÉTAR SAGA, the Life of St. Margaret of Antioch, survives in three Old Norse-Icelandic translations.² Medieval copies fall broadly into two categories: large folio collections of saints' legends and tiny duodecimo volumes in which *Margrétar saga* and other legends of virgin martyr saints take centre stage.³ St. Margaret was the patron saint of childbirth, and an episode in the saga in which St. Margaret prays for the health of mothers and neonates includes a specific request for the protection of those living in places where her *vita* is physically present.

Pregnancy and childbirth are unsurprisingly the central concern of many medieval *Margrétar saga* manuscripts. AM 433 c 12mo contains a number of items relating specifically to childbirth and labour, including *Margrétar saga*, prayers for women in labour and a Latin hymn to St. Margaret.⁴ Stefán Karlsson examined the scribal marginalia in AM 433 a 12mo and concluded that it had been produced for the scribe's daughter.⁵ Another copy, AM 431 12mo, was produced by the priest Jón Arason in the Westfjords and contained both *Margrétar saga* and obstetrical charms.⁶

- 1 Many thanks to Margrét Eggertsdóttir and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on this article. This project, grant no. 218209-051, was supported by the Icelandic Research Fund.
- 2 Kirsten Wolf, *The Legends of the Saints in Old Norse-Icelandic Prose* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 217–21. On the cult of St. Margaret in Iceland, see Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland: Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400*, Subsidia hagiographica 78 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1994), 121–22.
- 3 Three folio and ten duodecimo manuscripts survive of *Margrétar saga*. Two leaves also survive from a fourteenth-century quarto copy of *Margrétar saga* (now AM 667 I 4to); this may have originally been part of a larger volume, but nothing is recorded of its provenance.
- 4 Hans Bekker-Nielsen, “En god bøn,” *Opuscula* 2.1 (1961): 52–58.
- 5 Stefán Karlsson, “Kvennahandrit í karlahöndum,” *Stafkrókar: Ritgerðir eftir Stefán Karlsson í tilefni af sjötugsafmæli hans* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, 2000), 378–82, at 380–81.
- 6 Ásdís Egilsdóttir, “Handrit handa konum,” *Góssið hans Árna: Minningar heimsins í íslenskum handritum*, ed. by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, 2014), 51–61.

In a seminal paper, Jón Steffensen drew scholarly attention to the dozens of post-medieval copies of *Margrétar saga* in circulation and concluded that *Margrétar saga* continued to be used as a childbirth aid in Iceland long after the Reformation.⁷ One of Steffensen's key observations about *Margrétar saga* is that only two seventeenth-century copies of the saga are known: the vellum fragment AM 677 VIII 4to (used as bookbinding material) and JS 43 4to, which is a thick paper manuscript from c. 1660–1680 that according to its title-page was compiled by the well-known Icelandic scribe Magnús Jónsson of Vigur (1637–1702). By contrast, there are at least thirty-five copies from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As discussed below, Jón Steffensen concluded that *Margrétar saga* was associated with witchcraft in the seventeenth century and that during what he called the “witch-hunting age” from 1554 to 1719 the copying of *Margrétar saga* almost ceased but was revived in the eighteenth century.⁸ However, the number of currently surviving manuscripts does not necessarily reflect the status or popularity of works in manuscript circulation within the community at a given time. For instance, Árni Magnússon states that Magnús Jónsson's son-in-law Páll Vídalín (1667–1727) owned a now-lost copy of the prologue to *Margrétar saga* in a quarto volume in the hand of the Rev. Magnús Ketilsson (1675–1709), which would be unusual if the saga were indeed closely associated with sorcery.⁹

The concept of the codicological unit is useful for studying the place of *Margrétar saga* in the seventeenth century, since it can capture the changing uses and functions of manuscripts over time. This paper focuses on a single manuscript, AM 428 a 12mo, which was deliberately altered and augmented with newly copied religious material in 1689–1690 for the benefit of a woman named Helga Sigurðardóttir. When viewed in context with other evidence on *Margrétar saga*, manuscript culture, childbirth and magic in early modern Iceland, there is little to suggest that the saga was seen as dangerous or spiritually damaging reading, although it could be potentially misused in connection with obstetrical magic.

7 Jón Steffensen, “*Margrétar saga* and Its History in Iceland,” *Saga-Book* 16 (1965): 273–82.

8 Jón Steffensen, “*Margrétar saga* and Its History in Iceland,” 281.

9 Árni Magnússon, *Arne Magnussons Private Brevveksling* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1920), 95.

Margrétar saga as birthing aid

Prayers for safe delivery were – and still remain – central to women’s birthing practices in many cultures. The 1541 Icelandic Church Ordinance included instructions translated from Danish on the spiritual preparation of midwives and pregnant women for childbirth, which under Lutheran teaching was the responsibility of the parish minister.¹⁰ Official Lutheran prayers for the mother and child during labour were to be directed to God alone, but before the Reformation it had been common practice to turn to saints as intercessors.¹¹

One such powerful intercessor was St. Margaret of Antioch, who according to her legend was an early fourth-century Christian martyr. She was tortured and executed during the Diocletian persecution by Olybrius, a wicked Roman official who wished to marry her or take her as his concubine. Having already dedicated her virginity to God, Margaret rejected Olybrius’s unwanted attention and was not swayed by imprisonment, torture or threats of public execution. In the legend’s most famous scene, St. Margaret is confronted by a dragon that swallows her alive after she prays to see her true enemy. Undaunted, she makes the sign of the cross and is spectacularly delivered from the belly of the dragon, which explodes and releases her. Before receiving the crown of martyrdom, St. Margaret makes a prayer asking that women who call on her during childbirth be granted a safe delivery, and likewise that no child be born blind, dumb, possessed or witless to those who copy, read or buy her *vita* or have the book in their house.¹²

Her encounter with the dragon is widely interpreted as St. Margaret’s primary connection to childbirth: she is a female dragon-slayer, whose expulsion from the dragon is a symbolic form of birthing process.¹³ The

¹⁰ *DI* 10, 127, 152–55, 210–13.

¹¹ On medieval Icelandic birthing practices, see Margaret Cormack, “Fyr kné meyio: Notes on Childbirth in Medieval Iceland,” *Saga-Book* 25.3 (2000): 314–15.

¹² Kirsten Wolf, “*Margrétar saga II*,” *Gripla* 21 (2010): 61–104, at 75. The precise content of the prayer and the protection offered by the presence of the *vita* varies among redactions of *Margrétar saga*.

¹³ Ásdís Egilsdóttir, “St. Margaret, Patroness of Childbirth,” *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz (1922–1997)*, ed. by Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann, *Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia* 7 (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2002) 319–30. See also Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and Árni Heimir Ingólfsson, “Dýrlingar og daglegt brauð í Langadal: Efni og samhengi í AM 461 12mo,” *Gripla* 30 (2019): 107–53.

virgin martyr's bodily suffering at the hands of temporal and demonic forces can also be interpreted as echoing women's labour pains in childbed, which according to Genesis 3:16 of the Old Testament are the curse of Eve for disobeying God's command and thus associated with female shame and weakness. Through her faith, St. Margaret transforms this intense suffering into a triumphant experience of salvation and female *imitatio Christi*.¹⁴

Jón Steffensen's argument that copies of *Margrétar saga* were openly used as a birthing aid before the Reformation period in Iceland (1541–1550) and covertly used for the same purpose after the Reformation is credible. Seeking saintly intervention in childbirth was encouraged in late medieval Europe, as attested in birth miracles that describe the use of saints' belts and other objects as effective in difficult births.¹⁵ The provision of support for pregnancy and childbirth could be a lucrative practice, as demonstrated in a birth miracle found in the Old-Norse Icelandic Life of St. Thomas Becket, in which a wealthy woman in difficult labour makes a secret vow to the saint and sends a messenger with a golden ring to purchase holy water.¹⁶ By the time the holy water arrives, the woman is dead and her husband has gone mad, but the husband's honourable cousin sends another ring and asks for a priest to bring relics of St. Thomas, which not only successfully revive the woman and enable her to give birth to a healthy son but also cure the husband's madness.

Although the above example concentrates on the efficacy of vows and relics, the use of inscribed objects as birthing aids is well documented in medieval Europe, as testified to by the obstetrical charms in AM 431 12mo. These include the well-known formula "Anna peperit Maria" and directions for binding a prayer to a woman's right thigh in labour.¹⁷ Such charms were church sanctioned before being repositioned as popery under the teachings of reformers in Denmark and elsewhere. Birthing rolls or

14 Allison Adair Alberts, "Spiritual Suffering and Physical Protection in Childbirth in the South English Legendary Lives of Saint Margaret," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 46.2 (2016): 289–314.

15 Hilary Powell, "The 'Miracle of Childbirth': The Portrayal of Parturient Women in Medieval Miracle Narratives," *Social History of Medicine* 25.4 (2012): 795–811.

16 C. R. Unger, (ed.), *Thomas Saga Erkebiskups: Fortælling om Thomas Becket Erkebiskop af Canterbury: To Bearbejdelser samt Fragmenter af en tredje* (Oslo, 1869), 482.

17 The obstetrical charms in AM 431 12mo are edited in Kristian Kålund (ed.), *Alfræði íslenskr: Íslandsk Encyklopædisk Litteratur* (Copenhagen: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 1908–1918), 3:86–90.

girdles that could be bound to the body were popular aids for pregnancy and childbirth and could be widely rented from religious houses in the late medieval period.¹⁸

No such birthing rolls have survived in Iceland, but the use of *kveisu-blöð* ('ailment-leaves') is indirectly documented in warnings from the late sixteenth century against these and other magical practices.¹⁹ One man was executed for sorcery in 1667 for binding an inscribed roll to the body of a sick woman, and another was executed in 1677 for possession of magical writings that included a similar roll.²⁰ The only known roll of this type to survive is Lbs fragm 14, which is a narrow strip of parchment (10.8 cm wide and 58.4 cm long) dating from c. 1600. The roll surfaced in a collection of historical documents from the diocese of Hólar and has been interpreted as a prayer roll to be tied onto the body for healing; it was presumably discovered and sent to Hólar in the early seventeenth century for investigation, where it found a practical use as a wrapper for an official document.²¹

The association of *Margrétar saga* with magic during the seventeenth century rests mainly on a passage in the vehemently anti-witchcraft and anti-Catholic *Hugrás*, written in 1627 by the Rev. Guðmundur Einarsson of Staðarstaður (c. 1568–1647), who was provost for Snæfellsnes from 1624. In *Hugrás*, the provost rails against the use of Latin incantations, prayers and readings of *Margrétar saga* during childbirth. According to *Hugrás*, which should be interpreted cautiously due to the nature of the work, Icelandic practitioners of sorcery received "schooling" from their masters in subjects that included the safe delivery of children:

18 Sarah Fiddymment et al., "Girding the Loins? Direct Evidence of the Use of a Medieval English Parchment Birthing Girdle from Biomolecular Analysis," *Royal Society Open Science* 8 (2021): 202055; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–1580*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale, 2005).

19 AÍ 2: 255; *Su rietta Confirmatio* (Hólar, 1596), [95].

20 Magnús Már Lárusson, "Eitt gamalt kveisublað," *Árbók Hins íslenska fornleifafélags* 51 (1951–52): 81–90.

21 Magnús Már Lárusson, "Eitt gamalt kveisublað," 81–90. Whoever repurposed the prayer roll must not have been particularly afraid of physical contact with the object. Magnús Már Lárusson observes that the Latin text copied onto the prayer roll comes from the humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam's Latin New Testament and that the accuracy of the copying points to an educated scribe with a good knowledge of Latin.

Þessir sómu sem j Christi sköla gátu alldre lært Credo nie Pater noster, þeir geta strax lært j þezum skola (j hvorn þeir eru nu komner) ... alla lavsnar bokina, með sijnum øllum stófum, reglum, jnntókum og excipitur, einkum ad binda þetta við lærid ä Jodsiukre kvinnu: Anna peperit Mariam, Maria Christum, Elizabeth Johannem, Cilicia Remigium, eorum dat salutarior ed redemptio, qvando parias filium tuum, sæc fæmina, og lesa þar epter Margretar Sögu, in nomine P.F.S.S.²²

(‘These same [men] who could never learn *Credo* [‘The Apostles’ Creed’] or *Pater noster* [‘Our Father’] in Christ’s school, they [masc.] can immediately learn in this school (into which they have now entered) ... all their delivery book, with all of its characters, rules, intakes and *excipitur*, in particular: to bind this to the thigh of a woman in labour – *Anna peperit Mariam, Maria Christum, Elizabeth Johannem, Cilicia Remigium. Eorum dat salutarior et redemptio, qvando parias filium tuum, hæc fæmina* – and thereafter to read *Margrétar saga, in nomine p[atris] f[ilii] et] s[piritus] s[ancti].’*)

As a polemic, *Hugrás* does not aim to document a specific set or order of birthing rituals carried out by practitioners of magic or to describe the existence of a literal “delivery book” but instead to associate ownership of magical tracts with membership in a community of evil. The immediate targets of its attack were two handwritten books of charms associated with the self-taught scholar Jón Guðmundsson *lærði* (‘the Learned,’ 1574–1658), which Guðmundur Einarsson had at hand in composing *Hugrás*, and it is likely that the garbled Latin prayer “Anna peperit Mariam” quoted here, which is also found in AM 431 12mo, was part of an obstetrical charm copied directly from Jón Guðmundsson’s book.

It is worthwhile noting that Guðmundur Einarsson repeatedly invokes the imagery of schooling and textbooks in *Hugrás* to contrast inscribed charms with Christian literacy and schooling in the religious teachings of the Church.²³ In this wider context, Guðmundur Einarsson draws the reader’s attention to a dangerous segment of the population that he claims is in secret alliance with destructive diabolical forces. One aspect of their

22 Lbs 494 8vo, 55r–v.

23 Einar G. Pétursson, *Eddurit Jóns Guðmundssonar lærða* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1998), 1:77.

wicked nature is presented as their incapability to learn the Latin alphabet and memorise the basic articles of faith in spite of their supposed aptitude for the characters and incantations of black magic. *Margrétar saga* itself is not the direct subject of Guðmundur's attack.

Giving birth in early modern Iceland

Instructions for preparation of midwives (or female birth attendants) in the 1541 Church Ordinance focus on their role in ensuring the salvation of mother and child in cases of pregnancy complications and imminent maternal or neonatal death.²⁴ This is the earliest surviving text in Icelandic outlining the midwife's role in a domestic context. The Church Ordinance emphasises the activities of midwives as they relate to the spiritual health of the mother and child, highlighting that women of all social classes were to be attended by a midwife during their labour, and not merely those women who had the financial means to pay for these services.

Under Lutheran teaching in the early modern period, birthing was both a physical experience and a religious one: women's birthing pains were a cross to be borne patiently, and the midwife acted as a spiritual guide through this pain. The Church Ordinance stipulated that the midwife performing this role must have a strong moral character and required the parish minister to prepare her in the event of a difficult or dangerous labour. Baptism was not normally a rite that early modern women were permitted to carry out, but an exception was made in the event that a newborn was weak and signs of life seemed to be fading, in which case the midwife and other honourable women present at the birth were permitted to join together to perform an emergency baptism.²⁵ The Church Ordinance adds that if the midwife is present at a stillbirth then her concern should be entirely for the mother in her need.²⁶ Neither she nor the mother had cause to fear for an unbaptised infant's salvation under Christian teachings, nor had she been made unclean by her birthing experience.

²⁴ *DI* 10, 127, 210–12.

²⁵ “Enn hvar barnvíd er j lífsneyd þegar það er nu skjirt þa skal yfersetukonan með audrum gudræddum danndikuinum sem þar eru wídstaddar bjfala það gudi með þessum edur þuilkum ordum.” *DI* 10, 211.

²⁶ “Alleinasta skulu þær kappkosta að su manneskia sem fyrir liggur oc j neydinni er staudd meigi hialpast.” *DI* 10, 211.

Clearly, not all provisions of the 1541 Church Ordinance applied to Iceland, such as the section on schools for children in market and cathedral towns, which addresses educational reform in Denmark and Norway but was not adapted for the Icelandic context into which it was translated.²⁷ However, in 1590, Bishop Oddur Einarsson confirmed that midwives – or the most pious of men – could be entrusted with performing emergency baptism, and he emphasised the importance of teaching girls and women the prayers that midwives were required to know under the Church Ordinance.²⁸

Additional provisions were made in the Church Ritual of 1685 for the education, preparation and certification of midwives in the kingdom of Denmark-Norway, and it was furthermore stipulated that they had the right to fair payment from those who could afford to pay for their services but were to aid poor women free of charge.²⁹ It is uncertain how closely it was possible to follow the instructions in the Church Ritual in Iceland: midwives were instructed to use only prayer and natural, utile and Christian remedies to aid the birthing process and to seek the help of the nearest doctor or barber-surgeon. There were no practising physicians in Iceland before 1760, however, when Bjarni Pálsson arrived in Iceland after completing his medical education at the University of Copenhagen the previous year. The first professionally licensed midwife to practise in Iceland was a Danish woman who came to the country in 1761, Margrethe Katarine Magnussen (1718–1805).

In spite of various practices associated with magic being punishable by death in early modern Iceland, there are no known instances of a woman described as a midwife being accused of witchcraft or sorcery.³⁰ Guðmundur Einarsson's attack on the use of obstetrical magic in *Hugrás* certainly does not target women: he argues that the obstetrical charm he

27 Cf. Morten Fink-Jensen, "Teaching and Educational Reforms in Denmark and Norway, c. 1500–1750," *Exploring Textbooks and Cultural Change in Nordic Education 1536–2020*, ed. by Merethe Roos, Kjell Lars Berge, Henrik Edgren, Pirjo Hiidenmaa and Christina Matthiesen (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 16–28. Iceland's two cathedral schools taught only more advanced students of Latin.

28 *Al* 2, 177–81, 185–87.

29 *Lovsamling for Island* 1, 444–48.

30 Midwives were not widely prosecuted for their practices in late medieval and early modern Europe, cf. David Harley, "Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-witch," *Social History of Medicine* 3.1 (1990): 1–26.

describes belongs to a larger system of magic associated primarily with male practitioners such as Jón Guðmundsson *lærði*. In this interpretation, the binding of a Latin prayer on a woman's thigh represented spiritually dangerous male intervention in the female space of childbed.

The obstetrical charm has parallels in late medieval leechcraft and is perhaps more likely to have been transmitted as part of a larger remedy book than as an independent "delivery book" as portrayed by Guðmundur Einarsson. One such surviving fifteenth-century remedy collection from England includes instructions for binding a Latin prayer to the right thigh of a woman in labour that includes the "Anna peperit Mariam" motif.³¹

When considering the role of *Margrétar saga* in pre-modern birthing practices, it is important to emphasise that seventeenth-century Icelandic attitudes to the manuscript circulation of medieval religious literature were vastly different from attitudes to the production of amulets and charms that would physically bind words to the body.³² Whereas medieval Icelandic poems celebrating the Virgin Mary and the saints circulated openly in Icelandic manuscripts, the production of written magic such as that described in *Hugrás* was framed as dangerous and anti-social behaviour.³³

In practice, not all forms of magic were met with equally strong opposition during the early modern period. The use of seedpods as protective amulets in childbirth is well attested in the North Atlantic region.³⁴ In Iceland, these *lausnarsteinar* (lit. 'delivery stones') were used until the twentieth century and were often in the possession of trained midwives.³⁵ A *lausnarsteinn* was among the objects found the *biskupskista* ('bishop's chest') at Hólar in 1525, and there is no reason to believe that the practice

31 CAL MS Additional 9308, cf. Lea Olsan, "The Corpus of Charms in the Middle English Leechcraft Remedy Books," *Charms, Charmers and Charming: International Research on Verbal Magic*, ed. by Jonathan Roper (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2009), 214–37.

32 On pre-modern textual amulets such as those described in *Hugrás*, see Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

33 Katelin Marit Parsons, "Text and Context: *Mariukvæði* in Lbs 399 4to," *Opuscula* 15 (2017): 57–86.

34 Torbjørn Alm, "Exotic Drift Seeds in Norway: Vernacular Names, Beliefs, and Uses," *Journal of Ethnobiology* 23.2 (2003): 227–61, at 234–37, 242–46.

35 Unnur B. Karlsdóttir, "Móðurlíf," *Kvennaslóðir: rit til heiðurs Sigríði Th. Erlendsdóttur Sagnfræðingi* (Reykjavík: Kvennasögusafn Íslands, 2001), 466–75, at 469.

of using a *lausnarsteinn* for a difficult birth was vigorously suppressed in the centuries to follow.³⁶ Both Arngrímur Jónsson *lærði* (1568–1648) and Þorlákur Skúlason of Hólar (1597–1656) discussed the phenomenon of these “stones” with Ole Worm (1588–1654), who explained their natural origins in more southerly parts of the world.³⁷

It was not until the eighteenth century that the potentially dangerous nature of birthing practices and antenatal care of mother and child as practised in Iceland began to receive significant attention, a trend that continued into the nineteenth century.³⁸ By this time, emphasis was on medical rather than spiritual preparation for midwifery, with women instructed in life-saving practices and interventions.³⁹ With the growing separation of sacred and secular practices in everyday life, midwives engaging in “superstition” were not seen as endangering souls but rather physical bodies.

Saintly stories for pious girls

St. Margaret of Antioch was not the only popular virgin martyr saint in post-Reformation Iceland. Van Deusen has examined the transmission of the legends of virgin martyr saints in Iceland after the Reformation and concludes that the narratives were considered suitable for young girls as models of Christian behaviour.⁴⁰ Piety, patience, chastity and obedience to God were among the virtues strongly valued in young girls, and texts such as the legends of virgin martyrs provided source material that described

36 *DI* 9, 297.

37 Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, *Landfræðissaga Íslands* (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1892–1904), 2:165–66.

38 Loftur Guttormsson, *Bernska, ungdómur og uppeldi á einveldisöld: Tilraun til félagslegrar og lyðfræðilegrar greiningar* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1983), 139–42; Loftur Guttormsson and Ólöf Garðarsdóttir, “The Development of Infant Mortality in Iceland, 1800–1920,” *Hygiea Internationalis* 3.1 (2002): 151–76.

39 The oldest midwifery textbook in Icelandic dates from 1749 and was printed at the initiative of Bishop Halldór Brynjólfsson, cf. Bragi Þorgrímur Ólafsson, “‘Sá nýi yfirsetukvenna-skóli’: Uppruni og viðtökur,” *Ljósmeðrablaðið* 85.1 (2007): 28–33. On the professionalisation of midwifery in Iceland, see Sigurjón Jónsson, *Ágrip af sögu ljósmeðrafræðslu og ljósmeðrastéttar á Íslandi* (Reykjavík: n.p., 1959).

40 Natalie Van Deusen, “St. Agnes of Rome in Late Medieval and Early Modern Icelandic Verse,” *Saints and Their Legacies in Medieval Iceland*, ed. by Dario Bullitta and Kirsten Wolf (Cambridge: Brewer, 2021), 307–32.

ideals of Christian behaviour. In the case of upper-class women, there was also greater emphasis in early modern Iceland on women's virtues (including purity) as a marker of their social suitability as role models for their community, particularly in the case of women who married clergymen.⁴¹

Just as during the medieval era, when *Margrétar saga* and other popular legends of saints were translated multiple times into Old Norse-Icelandic, early modern Icelandic audiences did not necessarily seek to engage with a single version of a given narrative. Retellings were popular; Van Deusen's study concentrates on works about St. Agnes, whose legend was the subject of narrative poems that include *Agnesarrímur* and the popular *Agnesarkvæði*.

Like St. Agnes, St. Margaret of Antioch remained a popular subject for Icelandic poets after the Reformation. Two *rímur* or narrative verse cycles about St. Margaret of Antioch have survived: a *Margrétar rímur* from 1787 composed by the poet Gunnar Ólafsson and a fragment of a second anonymous *Margrétar rímur* of unknown date.⁴² *Margrétarkvæði* ("Svo er skrifað suður í Róm"), a verse narrative based on the legend of St. Margaret, has been tentatively dated to the first quarter of the eighteenth century and is found in over fifty manuscripts.⁴³ What is arguably unusual about *Margrétar saga* is that the medieval prose version continued to circulate in active manuscript transmission alongside younger versions of the narrative.

Whether for use as a birthing aid or as spiritually fortifying reading material, *Margrétar saga* is closely associated with women's manuscript ownership in later transmission.⁴⁴ A dedicatory verse at the end of

41 Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, "Um íslensku prestskonuna á fyrri öldum," *Konur og kristmenn: Þettir úr kristnisögu Íslands*, ed. by Inga Huld Hákonardóttir (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1996), 217–47; Þórunn Sigurðardóttir, "Helga Aradóttir in Ögur: A Lutheran Saint?" *Sainthood, Scriptoria, and Secular Erudition of Medieval and Modern Scandinavia: Essays in Honor of Kirsten Wolf*, ed. by Dario Bullitta and Natalie M. Van Deusen, *Acta Scandinavica* 13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 341–64.

42 Finnur Sigmundsson (ed.), *Rímnatal* (Reykjavík: Rímnafélagið, 1966), 1:339–40.

43 For a list of known manuscripts preserving the poem, see Kirsten Wolf and Natalie M. Van Deusen, *The Saints in Old Norse and Early Modern Icelandic Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 156.

44 Peter Rasmussen, "Tekstforholdene i Margrétar saga" (Specialeafhandling til magisterkonferens i nordisk filologi ved Københavns Universitet, 1977), 7–8; Margrét Eggertsdóttir, "Heilög Margrét í vondum félagsskap?" *Geislabaugur fagður Margaret Cormack sextugri*, 23. ágúst 2012 (Reykjavík: Menningar- og minningarsjóður Mette Magnussen, 2012),

Margrétar saga in Lbs 1197 8vo from 1773 states that it is the property of the scribe's adored wife, Björg Ólafsdóttir.⁴⁵ The scribe Sigríður Jónsdóttir also copied *Margrétar saga* for herself in ÍBR 3 8vo in 1773.⁴⁶

A place for *Margrétar saga*

Jón Steffensen examined the context in which *Margrétar saga* was transmitted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manuscripts in the collection of the National and University Library of Iceland and concluded that they were – unlike medieval copies of the legend – preserved neither in collections of saints' lives nor with obstetrical formulae and prayers. They tended instead to be found in collections of material intended for entertainment or in eclectic miscellanies.⁴⁷ He concluded that this was evidence for their covert use as a birthing aid:

It seems rather as if in Lutheran times the saga is given a place with material that is quite unconnected with it and, as far as can be seen, quite arbitrarily selected. The idea comes to mind that attention is being drawn away from the saga, that it is being hidden [...]. There can be little doubt but that the reason for this is that the use of the saga in childbirth was counted wizardry.⁴⁸

The argument that preservation with other material constitutes concealment is weak, given that miscellanies reflect the diverse identities, inter-

64–67; Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir, *Á hverju liggja ekki vorar göfugu kellingar: Bókmenning íslenskra kenna frá miðöldum fram á 18. öld*, Sýnisbók íslenskrar alþýðumenningar 20 (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2016), 148–49.

45 “Margretar søgu eiga aa / mijn audar naa / blessud og blijd i linde / Biørg Olafsdøtter heiter hwn / med hijra brwn / sw er mitt einagtt Jnde / þess bid eg hier / þad fyrir mier / er aafatt nw / vel virde sw / því skrifadi eg med skinde.” Lbs 1197 8vo, 59v. See Margrét Eggertsdóttir, “Script and print in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Iceland. The case of *Hólar í Hjaltadal*,” *Opuscula* 15 (2017): 156–61.

46 Sigríður's scribal colophon at the end of *Margrétar saga* reads: “Þess [sic] blod a eg Sigrydur Jonsdotter skrifad ä þui are 1773.” ÍBR 3 8vo, 114r. It is not entirely certain that Sigríður was the scribe, as an ownership statement in the first person could be written by another individual, cf. Margrét Eggertsdóttir, “Heilög Margrét í vöndum félagsskap?” 64–65.

47 Jón Steffensen, “*Margrétar saga* and its History in Iceland,” 280. It should be noted, however, that Lbs 404 8vo and Lbs 405 8vo preserve both *Margrétar saga* and a prayer for women in labour stated to have been sent by the Virgin Mary.

48 Jón Steffensen, “*Margrétar saga* and Its History in Iceland,” 280–81.

ests and needs of the individuals who produced and/or owned them.⁴⁹ Although *Margrétar saga* is unusual for being a prose legend of a saint that circulated widely after the Reformation, female saints continued to be a popular subject in post-medieval vernacular Icelandic poetry. In this context, material on saints could often be found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century miscellanies.⁵⁰ It seems particularly unlikely that Icelanders would have feared the wrath of their local ministers so greatly that they would attempt to hide their copies of *Margrétar saga* in books of *rímur* and prose romances. Prose romances and *rímur* on non-religious subjects were targets of Lutheran orthodoxy, and a clergyman vehemently opposed to *Margrétar saga* would hardly have been more pleased to discover it bound together with titles like *Nikulás saga leikara* (as in Lbs 2098 8vo) or *Bósa rímur* (as in Lbs 2856 8vo).

Although seminal in shifting the focus from the text of *Margrétar saga* to the function of *Margrétar saga* manuscripts, Jón Steffensen's investigation of the saga's transmission predated the rise of material philology in post-medieval Icelandic manuscript studies.⁵¹ It therefore did not take into account the more recent concept of the codicological or production unit, which is a useful tool for distinguishing between the manuscript as currently bound and/or stored on an archive shelf and the manuscript as it circulated within a community over time.⁵² The present paper employs the codicological unit (CU) as defined by Gumbert: one or more gatherings in a manuscript written consecutively and over a more-or-less continuous period of time.⁵³ Through division into codicological units, one can distinguish systematically between items bound together in the archive and

49 Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir, „Í hverri bók er mannsandi“: *Handritasýrur – bókmenning, þekking og sjálfsmynd karla og kvenna á 18. öld*, *Studia Islandica* 62 (Reykjavík: Bókmennta- og listfræðastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2011).

50 Cf. e.g., Margrét Eggertsdóttir, “The Once-Popular and Now-Forgotten *Veróníkuvæði*,” trans. by Margaret Cormack, *Sainthood, Scriptoria, and Secular Erudition of Medieval and Modern Scandinavia: Essays in Honor of Kirsten Wolf*, ed. by Dario Bullitta and Natalie M. Van Deusen, *Acta Scandinavica* 13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 365–96.

51 For an overview, see Davíð Ólafsson, “Post-medieval Manuscript Culture and the Historiography of Texts,” *Opuscula* 15 (2017): 1–30.

52 Beeke Stegmann, “Árni Magnússon's Rearrangement of Paper Manuscripts” (PhD thesis, Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen, 2016).

53 J. P. Gumbert, “Codicological Units: Towards a Terminology for Stratigraphy of the Non-Homogenous codex,” *Segno e testo* 2 (2004): 17–42.

items that were created or circulated together. One can also distinguish between monogenetic (single-scribe) manuscripts, allogetic manuscripts assembled from a patchwork of CUs and homogenetic manuscripts produced by more than one individual within the same scribal network.

Although scribal hand changes are more commonly associated with medieval manuscripts, there are certainly examples of more than one post-medieval scribe working together to complete a manuscript, such as the nineteenth-century copy of *Margrétar saga* in Lbs 405 8vo, where there is an abrupt change of hands at l. 12 of f. 6v. Since this hand change takes place mid-gathering, a single CU is at issue. However, a single scribe can produce separate CUs that are later bound into the same book: the first eight-leaf gathering of Lbs 2532 8vo is a copy of *Margrétar saga* completed on 11 June 1854 by the scribe Klemens Björnsson (1829–1888) for Margrét Dórothea Bjarnadóttir (1820–1901), while the second five-leaf gathering contains a copy of the dream-vision of Magnús Pétursson, also copied in 1854 by the same scribe but for Margrét's husband Sigurður Björnsson (1824–1902). The boundary between CUs is nearly invisible when seen from a manuscript catalogue but helps to illustrate how *Margrétar saga* is closely associated with women's literacy.

Closer examination of Sigríður Jónsdóttir's copy of *Margrétar saga* in ÍBR 3 8vo demonstrates that *Margrétar saga* originally formed its own distinct CU, not containing the other texts with which it is now bound. The saga begins on f. 103r at the start of a distinctly new gathering, the first leaf of which is more darkened and worn than the others. The saga ends on f. 114r with a scribal colophon, but f. 114v has been left blank and would have once served to shield *Margrétar saga* from dirt and damage. This is also the sole CU written by Sigríður Jónsdóttir, one of only six female scribes in Iceland in the eighteenth century to identify herself by name.⁵⁴

Although these are only two of many extant copies, they demonstrate that *Margrétar saga* could circulate in contexts comparable to the duodecimo vellum copies observed by Jón Steffensen. They also suggest a practical reason why Jón Steffensen found *Margrétar saga* in the archive in a somewhat different context from that in which it was originally produced. Manuscript owners in pre-modern Icelandic manuscript culture did

54 Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir. „Í hverri bók er mannsandi,” 311.

not necessarily bind small booklets of eight or twelve paper leaves. When examining nineteenth-century Icelandic manuscript collections that have either not entered a formal archive or not been reorganised and rebound in the archive, single-gathering items generally either lack a binding altogether or are protected by a paper or cardboard cover, which may be as simple as a sheet of old newspaper cut to size. These tiny booklets are fragile and can sustain significant damage over time. For practical reasons, small booklets were often bound together in larger assemblages such as ÍBR 3 8vo, which is their most common survival context.

Vellum copies of *Margrétar saga* were robust objects even in duodecimo format, and it is worth noting that of the two surviving seventeenth-century copies of *Margrétar saga*, one is a vellum copy and the other belonged to a wealthy landowner and patron of the arts, Magnús Jónsson of Vigur.⁵⁵ Paper became the dominant medium for writing in Iceland during the second half of the sixteenth century, which coincides well with the period during which Steffensen believed that copying of *Margrétar saga* ceased.⁵⁶

AM 428 a 12mo

The diminutive AM 428 a 12mo is one of ten duodecimo copies of *Margrétar saga* in Árni Magnússon's collection.⁵⁷ It also provides important material evidence of how *Margrétar saga* was used in Iceland in the seventeenth century, since its manuscript context was reorganised during this period.

The manuscript when it entered Árni Magnússon's collection in 1728 consisted of two very distinct sections: a fourteenth-century copy of *Margrétar saga*, beginning on f. 3r with a full-page illumination of St. Margaret standing on the defeated dragon, and a much younger prayer book that begins on f. 19r and combines medieval (Catholic) and

55 As Ezell observes, manuscript texts have a significantly higher chance of being preserved among upper-class families with established residences. Margaret J. M. Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 40–41.

56 Arna Björk Stefánsdóttir, "Um upptöku pappírs á Íslandi á sextánda og sautjándu öld," *Sagnir* 30 (2013): 226–36.

57 For a discussion of AM 428 a 12mo's relationship to other *Margrétar saga* manuscripts and an edition of the text, see Kirsten Wolf, "Margrétar saga II," *Gripla* 21 (2010): 61–104.

Protestant prayers.⁵⁸ The text of *Margrétar saga* itself ends on f. 17v. Three prayers in Latin and Icelandic have been added on ff. 17v–18v.

According to a note on f. 48v, Helga Aradóttir owned the manuscript and Bishop Jón Arason before her, and the priest Þorkell Guðbjartsson of Laufás (d. 1483) before them. The note is dated 27 December 1689 and signed “J. Þ. S. m.e.h.” (‘J. Þ. S. in his own hand’), with the explanation that their names were all on the manuscript’s final leaf before it was bound. Immediately below this is a verse in a different, unknown hand, dated 3 February 1716, thanking the book’s owner:

Fyrer bokar länid bid eg ydur blessan sende
 Raunum ollum ríett af vende
 Ríjkur gud *med* sinne hende
 (‘For the loan of the book I ask bountiful God to send you blessings: may His hand turn away all troubles’)

The final prayer on f. 18v is defective, supporting the existence of a discarded leaf describing the manuscript’s provenance. However, Christopher Sanders dates the hand on f. 18v to the sixteenth century, after Þorkell Guðbjartsson’s death.⁵⁹ It is conceivable that the prayer was added in the sixteenth century to a penultimate leaf that had remained blank throughout the fifteenth century, but f. 18v shows signs of wear consistent with it having been the final leaf for some time. This raises the possibility that the names on the missing leaf were misinterpreted or even invented in the late seventeenth century to provide an impressive provenance; the manuscript’s provenance will therefore be examined more closely below.

Clearly, production of the prayer book coincided with a major reorganization of the manuscript. The last leaf of the existing manuscript was discarded, but it was also at this time that two title-pages were added at the front of the manuscript (now ff. 1–2). The first, written in red on f. 1r, reads in large and ornate letters:

58 Wolf concurs with Kälund’s dating of ff. 3r–19v to the fourteenth century. Wolf, “*Margrétar saga II*,” 61–104.

59 *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose: Indices* (Copenhagen: Den arnamagnæanske kommission), 466. The Latin and Icelandic prayers have been edited in Svavar Sigmundsson (ed.), *Íslenskar bænir fram um 1600* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, 2018), 106–108.

Margret
ar
Saga
Hamingia filger og
heijll maargföll
þeijm ä
(*Margrétar saga*. May happiness and manifold good fortune accompany
[the book's owner(s)].')

The second, on f. 2r, is written in ornate red and gold letters and reads:

Þessa Bök
A
Helga Si
gurdar Dötter
A Þig Dröttenn Treý
ste eg
(‘This book belongs to Helga Sigurðardóttir. In you, Lord, I put my
trust.’)

Helga Sigurðardóttir's ownership of *Margrétar saga* is reconfirmed at the end of the prayerbook: the initials HS are concealed in the elaborate heading of the final prayer on f. 45r; the heading is written in red. Although some of the prayers are certainly Catholic (and some are in Latin), their rubrics characterise them as old texts, and they are accompanied by Lutheran prayers on ff. 36v–45v.⁶⁰ Some prayers are also noted as having been copied from old “kalfskinz Bokum” (‘vellum manuscripts’) on f. 45v, implicitly contrasting these with the more modern paper manuscripts produced in the seventeenth century. The scribe finished copying the prayers on 16 March 1690 (MDCXC) according to a scribal colophon on f. 46r.

A striking feature of the manuscript is that the prayer-book section and the title-pages are written on vellum, creating the impression of a much older manuscript: this is one of only a handful of Icelandic manu-

⁶⁰ As Svavar Sigmundsson observes, the texts of the older prayers copied in this part of the manuscript are often garbled, and some take the form of charms. See Svavar Sigmundsson (ed.), *Íslenskar bænir fram um 1600*, 108–16.

scripts to use vellum in the second half of the seventeenth century.⁶¹ The choice to use vellum rather than paper is a deliberate one, since anyone who could afford to use imported colour throughout a manuscript could obviously afford enough imported paper for a tiny duodecimo manuscript. The use of vellum creates a unified aesthetic and suggests an antiquarian influence, but anachronistic features such as the use of ‘þ’ for ‘ð’ and ‘c’ for ‘k’ have not been introduced. The claim that at least one medieval leaf was discarded in the process of reorganising the manuscript points away from a scholarly project; the aesthetic appeal of the finished product as a continuous unit outweighed the historical value of the leaf.

Finding Helga

Jón Arason (1484–1550) and Helga Aradóttir (c. 1538–1614) are well-known figures in seventeenth-century Iceland. He was the last Catholic bishop of Hólar and a fierce opponent of Lutheranism, executed at Skálholt together with his sons Björn and Ari. Helga was Ari’s daughter and a powerful and self-assertive landowning woman who married the poet and *sýslumaður* Páll Jónsson of Staðarhóll (d. 1598) against the wishes of her family. She later separated from him and lived independently with her daughter Elín Páldóttir (1571–1637) and son-in-law Björn Benediktsson (1561–1617), who managed the former Munkaþverá monastery from 1601.

One interpretation of the title-page could be that it was a replacement of an older and badly damaged title-page, and that this Helga Sigurðardóttir was the partner of Bishop Jón Arason of Hólar, but this is highly unlikely. Title-pages are almost never found in Icelandic manuscripts before 1600 and only rarely before 1650.⁶² The assumption that Bishop Jón Arason owned a copy of *Margrétar saga* for household use is plausible.

61 Arna Björk Stefánsdóttir identified only six of 682 manuscripts produced in 1651–1700 as being written on vellum (0.8%). Arna Björk Stefánsdóttir, “Um upptöku pappírs á Íslandi á sextánda og sautjándu öld,” 231.

62 Silvia Hufnagel, “Title Pages in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Icelandic Manuscripts: The Development and Functions of Print Features in Manuscript Form,” *Manuscript Studies: A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies* 6.2 (2021): 300–37; Silvia Hufnagel, “Projektbericht ‘Alt und neu’: Isländische Handschriften, Bücher und die Gesellschaft des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts,” *Quelle und Deutung III: Beiträge der Tagung Quelle und Deutung III am 25. November 2015*, ed. by Balázs Sára (Budapest: Eötvös-József-Collegium, 2016), 147–68.

ible, but in his role as a priest he might also have owned a portable duodecimo copy of *Margrétar saga* for use as a birthing aid within the wider community. This could also explain why the priest at Laufás in the fifteenth century owned such an object. The manuscript lost any church-sanctioned function during the transition to Lutheranism and passed at some point to his granddaughter Helga Aradóttir, either as her inheritance or as a personal gift.

Árni Magnússon received the manuscript in a package sent from Jón Halldórsson of Hítardalur (1665–1736) that arrived on 10 July 1728, just three months before the disastrous Fire of Copenhagen that destroyed Árni's home. Árni had already discarded the seventeenth-century binding that might have provided more insight into its later history, possibly in the hope that it contained the missing leaf. A letter from Jón that accompanied *Margrétar saga* describes it as “fylgiande hiatruarfullum papiskum bænum” (‘accompanied by superstitious popish prayers’) but does not state its origins.⁶³ However, Jón's son Vigfús Jónsson identified the manuscript's owner (and the scribe behind the *Margrétar saga* rebinding project) as the late Jón Þórðarson of Bakki in Melasveit.⁶⁴

Jón Þórðarson (1648–1719) was the illegitimate son of Þórður Hinriks-son (d. 1652), who held the administrative position of *sýslumaður* and later *landsskrifari*. Þórður sailed to Copenhagen as a young man for his university studies in 1626, and his first wife was a Danish woman, Anna Pétursdóttir (d. 10 July 1647), who returned with him to Iceland. The couple and their children lived at Innri-Hólmur on the Akranes peninsula, which is presumably also where Jón was born, although his mother's name is unknown. Þórður remarried in 1648, and his second wife was Þórlaug Einarsdóttir, but he had no children by his second wife, making Jón his youngest son. Although Jón's father died when he was only four, he was fortunate in that he was fostered by his step-mother, Þórlaug, who was a well-to-do widow. Þórlaug gave Jón an initial share of the Bakki farm in 1668, when he reached the age of twenty. She promised additional property to Jón on the unusual condition that he show her deference and obedience:

63 Árni Magnússon, *Arne Magnussons Private Brevveksling*, 191.

64 Jón Samsonarson, “Ævisöguágrip Hallgríms Péturssonar eftir Jón Halldórsson,” *Afmálisrit til Dr. Phil. Steingríms J. Þorsteinssonar prófessors 2. júlí 1971 frá nemendum hans* (Reykjavík: Leiftur, 1971), 74–88, at 83.

their written contract ensured her foster-son's legal rights in the event of her death, but she did not hand over her wealth without providing for her own interests.⁶⁵ Nearly two decades later, on 29 November 1687, Þórlaug and Jón made a second written agreement following up on the first, which again contained provisions for Þórlaug's support during her lifetime.⁶⁶

Jón was a member of the *Lögretta* law council that met annually at the Alþingi at Þingvellir, and he seems to have had a keen interest in medieval manuscripts. Árni Magnússon received two medieval manuscripts from Vigfús Jónsson that Jón Þórðarson had formerly owned: a copy of *Lárentíus saga* (AM 406 a I 4to) and a copy of *Stjórn* (AM 617 4to). Almost nothing is known about Jón's wife, Helga Sigurðardóttir, except that her parents were the landowning farm couple Sigurður Árnason (1622–1690) and Elín Magnúsdóttir (1636–1723) of Stóru-Leirargarðir, who married in 1651 and had at least eleven children, of whom eight were alive at the time of the 1703 census. Helga had died before 11 June 1691, when her brothers Bjarni and Halldór drew up a contract concerning the division of property inherited from their late father and deceased sisters Helga and Margrét.⁶⁷ The formal contract between Þórlaug and Jón in 1687 likely anticipated his marriage, since it provided for his wife's financial security more concretely than his former agreement with his foster-mother.

In an important article on the transmission of medieval manuscripts in early modern Iceland, Susanne Arthur demonstrates the importance of kinship ties, especially maternal and matrimonial connections, in tracing the movements of manuscripts.⁶⁸ She points out that manuscripts were considered appropriate gifts for a groom and his family to present to his bride (a supplement to the dowry known as the *tilgjöf*), and she traces the provenance of several medieval manuscripts in this way. New manuscripts were also created as bridal gifts, and a surviving example of this practice is JS 232 4to, copied by Skúli Guðmundsson in 1688–1689 at the

65 Gunnar F. Guðmundsson (ed.), *Jarðabréf frá 16. og 17. öld: Útdráttir* (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska fræðafélag í Kaupmannahöfn, 1993), 29.

66 Gunnar F. Guðmundsson (ed.), *Jarðabréf frá 16. og 17. öld*, 40. In 1694, Jón bought a minor share in the Bakki farm from Þórlaug's nephew, Gísli Nikulásson, and it may be that that Þórlaug died in that year and left some property to her siblings' children.

67 Gunnar F. Guðmundsson (ed.), *Jarðabréf frá 16. og 17. öld*, 202.

68 Susanne Arthur, "The Importance of Marital and Maternal Ties in the Distribution of Icelandic Manuscripts from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century," *Gripla* 23 (2012): 201–33.

request of his nephew Einar Jónsson and gifted to Einar's bride, Guðný Hjálmarsdóttir.⁶⁹

It is entirely possible that Jón reorganised the manuscript into a unique wedding gift for Helga. This would be consistent with the age of the younger material and would also explain the extensive use of rich, imported colours and the ornate title-pages celebrating Helga's ownership of the book. One of the younger Lutheran prayers added to the *Margrétar saga* manuscript is a prayer for a husband or wife for the protection of his/her partner and household members from sin, shame and the dangers of fire and water, as would be appropriate in a gift from groom to bride.⁷⁰

The note on f. 48v indicates that the manuscript's provenance held special significance for its seventeenth-century owners, pointing to a tentative connection between them and Helga Aradóttir. In tracing the manuscript's history from Helga Aradóttir and Helga Sigurðardóttir, it is worthwhile noting that Þórður Hinriksson was the nephew of Guðrún Gísladóttir, whose husband Magnús Björnsson was Helga Aradóttir's grandson and lived at Munkaþverá during Helga Aradóttir's final years. Magnús and Guðrún gifted AM 61 fol. to Þórður's sister, Jórunn Hinriksdóttir, and it is possible that *Margrétar saga* travelled from Munkaþverá to the south-west of Iceland in the first half of the seventeenth century due to these marital ties.⁷¹ In this case, its owner after Þórður's death would presumably have been his second wife, Þórlaug Einarsdóttir, who chose to not marry again and to raise Jón as her son and primary heir. Given Jón's social status and close family connections with the Icelandic elite, it seems highly unlikely that he would have forged a provenance for the vellum.

Although Jón Halldórsson may have found the book's content superstitious, the verse from 1716 on f. 48v suggests that someone within the local community in West Iceland did have use for AM 428 a 12mo. Given the manuscript's content, this unknown user of the manuscript may have been specifically interested in *Margrétar saga* – perhaps in connection with a difficult pregnancy or labour.

69 Katelin Marit Parsons, "Songs for the End of the World: The Poetry of Guðmundur Erlendsson of Fell in Sléttuhlíð" (PhD thesis, School of Humanities, University of Iceland, 2020), 188–94.

70 AM 428 a 12mo, 39r–40v.

71 Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson, "Magnús Björnsson og Möðruvallabók," *Saga* 32 (1994): 103–51, at 142.

Helga was sadly not long the owner of the beautifully rebound *Margrétar saga*, and the widowed Jón never remarried after Helga's death. He had a 21-year-old illegitimate daughter named Solveig who was living with him at the time of the 1703 census. Jón seems to have lived in comfort at Bakki to the end of his days: the 1703 census lists eight servants employed in his household. Jón had passed away by the time that Árne received *Margrétar saga*, but this and his other manuscripts were well cared for during his lifetime.

Conclusion

At least for some early modern owners, a medieval copy of *Margrétar saga* represented an object of considerable prestige. The showy rebinding of *Margrétar saga* in AM 428 a 12mo, with new title-pages declaring its owner's name in red and gold and the conspicuous intermingling of newly copied Lutheran and Catholic prayers, is strong evidence against suppression of the saga in the seventeenth century. This is consistent with the findings of earlier research on medieval and Neo-Latin religious literature in early modern Iceland.⁷²

Although early modern Icelandic clergymen must have been aware that *Margrétar saga* was associated with birthing practices, this was not sufficient to support the systematic destruction of copies of the saga. The legend of St. Margaret of Antioch received a positive reception from early modern Icelandic audiences, and the transition from vellum to the more fragile medium of paper provides the most obvious explanation as to why so few copies of her saga survive from the seventeenth century, especially in instances where the saga was originally copied as a small booklet. *Margrétar saga* in AM 428 a 12mo belonged to an upper-class Icelandic

72 Guðrún Nordal, "Á mörkum tveggja tíma: Kaþólskt kvæðahandrit með hendi sið-bótarmanns, Gísla biskups Jónssonar," *Gripla* 16 (2005): 209–28, at 224–25; Einar Sigurbjörnsson, "Ad beatum virginem," *Brynjólfur biskup – kirkjuböfðingi, fræðimaður og skáld: Safn ritgerða í tilefni af 400 ára afmæli Brynjólfs Sveinssonar 14. september 2005*, ed. by Jón Pálsson, Sigurður Pétursson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2006), 64–77; Einar Sigurbjörnsson, "Lilja: Erindi á málþingi um biblíuleg stef í íslenskum forn-bókmenntum," *Rit Röð Guðfræðistofnunar* 15 (2001): 155–75; Einar Sigurbjörnsson, "Má hún vel kallast makleg þess ...: Um Maríu Guðs móður," *Tímarit Háskóla Íslands* 5.1 (1990): 105–15.

woman, Helga Sigurðardóttir, whose husband not only valued vellum manuscripts but had the financial means to preserve them well.

That *Margrétar saga* circulated in paper booklets of one or two gatherings is a plausible explanation for why so few seventeenth-century copies have survived. If, as Jón Steffensen suggests, *Margrétar saga* indeed experienced a post-Reformation revival in popularity after a period of deliberate suppression, this period was considerably briefer than he posited: a revival must have already started in the later seventeenth century among wealthier landowning families such as those of Magnús Jónsson of Vigur and Helga Sigurðardóttir and Jón Þórðarson of Bakki. However, it is equally likely that these are the surviving remnants of an essentially continuous tradition that was never vigorously opposed. Unbound paper copies of *Margrétar saga* circulating between tenant farms and in fishing camps would hardly have had a long lifespan, particularly if they were actively used as birthing aids within the community.

The medieval provenance of *Margrétar saga* is in the foreground in AM 428 a 12mo, and it is here argued that this is partly due to the antiquarian interests of Jón Þórðarson. AM 428 a 12mo showcases one woman's matrimonial connections with Iceland's literary past, and as such the book can be considered a signifier of cultural capital.⁷³ This was amplified through the use of vellum as the writing support for the additions in 1689–1690, allowing the new leaves to blend in with the medieval material. Ultimately, whether the manuscript was reorganised in the seventeenth century to support Helga Sigurðardóttir in her devotional practices, aid her in childbed or preserve the memory of the literature of the past, her *Margrétar saga* was a book with a proud and conspicuous presence in the home.

73 Þórunn Sigurðardóttir, "Constructing Cultural Competence in Seventeenth-Century Iceland: The Case of Poetical Miscellanies," *Opuscula* 15 (2017): 277–320.

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AM 61 fol.

AM 428 a 12mo

AM 433 c 12mo

Handritasafn Landsbókasafns Íslands – Háskólabókasafns, Reykjavík

ÍBR 3 8vo Lbs 1197 8vo

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ÁGRIP

Galdur, *Margrétar saga* og handritamenning síðari alda

Efnisorð: *Margrétar saga*, heilög Margrét, AM 428 a 12mo, barnsburður, fæðingarhjálp, handritafræði, handrit kvenna á árnýöld

Dýrlingurinn Margrét frá Antíokkiu hefur lengi verið nátengd við fæðingu. Margrét á að hafa verið tekin af lífi snemma á fjórðu öld e.Kr. vegna trúar sinnar eftir að hafa hafnað rómverskum greifa sem vildi eignast hana og fá hana jafnframt til þess að láta af trúnni. Samkvæmt sögu Margrétar bað hún, rétt áður en hún var tekin af lífi, fyrir heilsu fæðandi kvenna og barna þeirra og sér í lagi ef eintak sögunnar væri til á heimilinu. Þíslarsaga Margrétar var talin búa yfir verndarmætti í barnsnauð og allnokkur handrit *Margrétar sögu* hafa varðveist frá miðöldum í litlu broti sem bendir til mögulegrar notkunar á barnssæng. *Margrétar saga* finnst í fjölda yngri handrita sem eru skrifuð eftir siðaskipti en aðeins tvö handrit eru frá sautjándu öld. Þeirri skýringu hefur verið varpað fram að vegna tengsla *Margrétar sögu* við fæðingarhjálp hafi sagan verið tengd við galdur í hugum fólks og að fæstir skrifarar hafi þorað að skrifa hana á liðlega 150 ára tímabili (um 1550–1719).

Greinin rekur eigendasögu AM 428 a 12mo á 17. öld og færir rök fyrir að *Margrétar saga* hafi ekki farið huldu höfði á Íslandi á þessum tíma. Handritið geymir *Margrétar sögu* frá fjórtándu öld en einnig tvær skreyttar titilsíður og ýmsar kaþólskar og lútherskar bænir sem Jón Þórðarson á Bakka í Melasveit (1648–1719) lét skrifa á bókfell á árunum 1689–1690. Af titilsíðunum má sjá að eigandi handritsins var kona Jóns, Helga Sigurðardóttir (d. fyrir 11. júní 1691). Litríku titilsíðurnar benda til þess að ekki hafi þótt óviðeigandi fyrir íslenska konu á seinni hluta sautjándu aldar að eiga glæsilegt eintak af *Margrétar sögu*. Líkur eru leiddar að því að stækkaða og endurinnbunda handritið hafi verið gjöf Jóns til Helgu og jafnvel brúðkaupsgjöf. Framsetning Jóns á *Margrétar sögu* leggur áherslu

á tengingu handritsins við kaþólska fortið en meðal fyrri eigenda handritsins voru Jón biskup Arason (1484–1550) og Helga Aradóttir (c. 1538–1614). Því miður lifði Helga Sigurðardóttir ekki lengi eftir að hún fékk handritið en annar óþekktur notandi handritsins þakkaði afar innilega fyrir bókarlánið 3. febrúar 1716.

Pappír ruddi sér til rúms í íslenskri handritamenningu á fyrstu áratugum sautjándu aldar. Væri *Margrétar saga* skrifuð á pappír í svipuðu broti og AM 428 a 12mo væri endingartími kversins væntanlega ekki langur. Þetta kann að skýra hvers vegna *Margrétar saga* finnst ekki oft í handritum frá 17. öld. Það er ósennilegt að sagan hafi verið sérstaklega tengd við iðkun galdurs á brennuöldinni. Aftur á móti voru gömlu skinnhandritin líklegri til þess að lifa af notkun og komast síðan í hendur safnara.

SUMMARY

Magic, *Margrétar Saga* and Icelandic Manuscript Culture

Keywords: *Margrétar saga*, St. Margaret of Antioch, AM 428 a 12mo, childbirth, birthing practices, codicology, early modern women's manuscripts

Using the evidence of AM 428 a 12mo, this paper argues that ownership of *Margrétar saga* in early modern Iceland was not closely associated with witchcraft, as has been previously argued. *Margrétar saga* in AM 428 a 12mo dates from the fourteenth century but was rebound in 1689–1690 for an Icelandic woman named Helga Sigurðardóttir (d. before 11 June 1691), the wife of the landowner Jón Þórðarson of Bakki in Melasveit (1648–1719). A century earlier, it had belonged to the matriarch Helga Aradóttir (c. 1538–1614), and before Helga it had been owned by Jón Arason (1484–1550), the last Catholic bishop of Hólar. Although *Margrétar saga* continued to be associated with women and childbirth after the Reformation, its traditional use as a birthing aid did not lead to systematic suppression of its circulation in manuscript form. The transition from vellum to less durable paper is the most likely reason for the poor survival of early modern copies of the saga. AM 428 a 12mo is unusual in that Jón Þórðarson added new vellum leaves to the manuscript for Helga Sigurðardóttir, including two elaborate title-pages decorated with red and gold, and it is suggested that the volume was Jón's bridal gift to Helga. Jón's use of vellum was a deliberate aesthetic choice that served to protect the older fourteenth-century leaves until the volume came into the collection of Árni Magnússon.

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