

Rannsóknarsjóður Sigrúnar Á. Sigurðardóttur og Haralds Sigurðssonar
Styrknúmer 170191-4001: Lokaskýrsla
*Upphaf kortagerðar og saga íslenskrar landfræði/The Foundations of
Map-Making and Geography in Iceland*

Astrid E.J. Ogilvie

The origins specifically of map-making and geographical descriptions in Iceland may be sought primarily in the latter half of the sixteenth century when Icelanders distinguished themselves in a number of intellectual fields. Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson studied theology at the University of Copenhagen but could undoubtedly have become a prominent mathematician, had he wished, as he clearly had a special aptitude for the subject. It is known that he was in contact with the leading mathematicians of the day, and was familiar with current geographical and astronomical writings. Some time before 1575, he constructed a celestial globe accommodated to the latitude of Iceland. Although Guðbrandur's name does not appear on the maps there is little doubt that the maps of Iceland published in Ortelius' Atlas in 1590 and Mercator's Atlas in 1595 were taken from originals, possibly just one, drawn by him (Hermannsson, 1926). This period also saw other endeavours in the fields of geography, history and literature. The prime examples of geographical works are the descriptions of Iceland by Arngrímur Jónsson and Oddur Einarsson, entitled *Brevis commentarius de Islandia* ("A Brief Commentary on Iceland") and *Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiæ* ("A Brief Description of Iceland") respectively. The context for this activity was the rise of geographical works and map-making in Europe, particularly in Germany. The geographical works included a number of ill-informed "descriptions" of Iceland. Guðbrandur Þorláksson felt that a written refutation of such scurrilous works was necessary. After his appointment as Bishop of Hólar in the north of Iceland, the time he could devote to scholarly pursuits was cut down by his official duties (and poor health). Rather than attempting a refutation himself he therefore looked for a younger scholar who might undertake this task. His choice eventually fell on his relative, Arngrímur Jónsson, headmaster of the school at Hólar, and by the spring of 1592, Arngrímur had prepared the manuscript of his *Brevis commentarius*. This was published in Copenhagen in 1593. It cannot be said that the erroneous accounts of Iceland were no longer read, but the work did rouse considerable interest in certain circles. The references to medieval manuscripts contained in it were of great importance for northern history and literature, and gave scholars in Scandinavia, especially Denmark, the first hints that such material existed at all. The *Brevis commentarius* was considered sufficiently important at the time of its writing that an English translation was included in Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations* 1 (1598).

The *Brevis commentarius* is of considerable value today. Although not a systematic description of Iceland, it gives information that might not otherwise be known. Much of what Arngrímur writes fits well with the account written by his contemporary Oddur Einarsson. It was Oddur whom Guðbrandur first had in mind when he was seeking a young scholar to produce a refutation of the foreign accounts of Iceland. Oddur was at least as good a choice as Arngrímur. He was particularly interested in mathematics and astronomy and, whilst in Copenhagen, became a pupil of the Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe. For some reason he did not write the refutation that Guðbrandur asked for. What he did write, however, was an excellent description of Iceland both with regard to its people and the country itself. As an early geographical work his description, the *Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiæ*, is outstanding for its detail and accuracy.

The first geographical treatise written in Iceland in the seventeenth century was by Bishop Gísli Oddsson, *De mirabilibus Islandiæ* ("The Wonders of Iceland"), composed in 1638. Gísli was the son of Oddur Einarsson and appears to have inherited his father's love of learning and scholarship. Two other important seventeenth-century descriptions of Iceland were written by Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason and Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson (Benediktsson, 1943). The treatises are both quite short, but preserve some useful details. An early work on Iceland's natural history, the extremely interesting *Einn stutt undirréttung um Íslands aðskiljanlegar náttúrur* ("A Short Account of Iceland's Various Natures") was written by Jón Guðmundsson between 1640 and 1644 and also falls to some extent in the geographical genre (Hermannsson, 1924; Hreinsson, 2017). None of these seventeenth-century works were published until the twentieth century (Benediktsson, 1943, 1957; Burg, 1928; Hermannsson, 1917).

It is interesting to speculate on, for example, why Guðbrandur Þorláksson was moved to create a map (or maps) in the first place. Maps made in Europe, and later in Iceland, were generally created in the context of trade and travel, but the prime motive of men such as Guðbrandur appear to have been pure scholarship, and a desire to learn more of the natural world through finding a means to describe it. To some extent the same applies to the geographical descriptions of Iceland produced by Arngrímur Jónsson, Oddur Einarsson and Gísli Oddsson. Although the works of Oddur and Gísli were not published in their lifetimes, a further question concerns whether they nonetheless had an influence on their contemporaries, and whether they did in fact leave behind a legacy in the form of later geographical descriptions. A further interesting question concerns the influence of map-making in Europe on Icelandic map-makers. Þorður Þorláksson made his maps while studying in Copenhagen. Perhaps he was inspired in this by other European map-makers. Contending as they were with a harsh climate, volcanic eruptions, epidemics, poverty, and economic difficulties the intellectual endeavours of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Icelanders in terms of the drawing of maps and the writing of geographical treatises are extremely impressive.

It is also possible that hitherto undiscovered maps may be found. Thus, for example, a map drawn by Jón Guðmundsson the Learned that was believed to be lost was recently discovered by Viðar Hreinsson in the Royal Library in Copenhagen (pers.comm. Viðar Hreinsson, 2017; Hreinsson, 2016). The project has thus resulted in collaboration between Viðar Hreinsson and Astrid Ogilvie on early maps of Iceland. A joint presentation on this topic will be given at an international conference in Belfast in June 2019 (see below). This research on early maps of Iceland will thus continue beyond the life of the project. The seminal work on the topic remains that of Haraldur Sigurðsson (1971 and 1978). The project has resulted in a presentation at an international conference, and a conference publication. A further presentation at an international conference will be given in 2019. It is foreseen that this will result in a further publication. The project also features in a scholarly publication.

Published Conference Proceedings

Ogilvie, A.E.J. 2018. The foundations of map-making and geography in Iceland, *48th International Arctic Workshop, Program and Abstracts 2018*. Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR), University of Colorado at Boulder, USA 81-85.

International Conference Powerpoint Presentation

Ogilvie, A.E.J. 2018. *The Foundations of Map-Making and Geography in Iceland*, 48th International Arctic Workshop, Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR), University of Colorado at Boulder, USA, 4-6 April 2018.

Forthcoming International Conference Powerpoint Presentation

Ogilvie, A.E.J. and Hreinsson, Viðar. 2019. *New Knowledge Regarding Early Modern Maps of Iceland*, SCIENTIAE Early Modern Knowledge, Queen's University, Belfast 12-15 June 2019.

Scholarly Publication

Ogilvie, A.E.J. Stormy Weather: Climate and Sea-Ice Variations in the North Atlantic (Iceland Sector). (In) Natascha Mehler, ed., *German voyages to the North Atlantic islands (1400-1700)*, Northern World series, Brill, Leiden. In preparation.

Website

The project will be highlighted on the website of the Stefansson Arctic Institute.

References

- Benediktsson, J. ed., 1943, Two Treatises on Iceland from the 17th Century, Þorlákur Skúlason: Responsio Subitanea, Brynjólfur Sveinsson: Historia De Rebus Islandicis Relatio. In Jón Helgason (ed.) Bibliotheca Arnarnagana Vol III, Einar Munksgaard, Copenhagen.
- Benediktsson, J., ed. 1957, Arngrimi Jonæ Opera Latine Conscripta Vol. IV, Introduction and Notes. In Jón Helgason (ed.) Bibliotheca Arnarnagana Vol XII, Einar Munksgaard, Copenhagen.
- Burg, F., (ed. 1928), Qualiscunque descriptio Islandiæ, Veröffentlichungen aus der Hamburger Staats und Universitäts Bibliothek, Band I, Hamburg.
- Hakluyt's Voyages, Vol. I of the Foreign Voyages and Vol. 9 of the Principal Navigations, 1928, London-Toronto-New York. (First published in 1598).
- Hermannsson, H., ed. 1917, Annalium in Islandia Farrago and De Mirabilibus Islandiæ by Gísli Oddsson, Islandica X, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York.
- Hermannsson, H., 1924, Jón Guðmundsson and his Natural History of Iceland. Islandica XV, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York.
- Hermannsson, H., 1926, Two Cartographers Guðbrandur Thorláksson and Þórður Thorláksson. Islandica XV, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York.
- Hreinsson, Viðar, 2016, Jón lærði og náttúru náttúrunnar, Lesstofan, Reykjavík.
- Sigurðsson, Haraldur, 1978, Kortasaga Íslands: frá öndverðu til loka 16. aldar [útg. 1971] og Kortasaga Íslands: frá lokum 16. aldar til 1848 [útg. 1978].