

GUÐBRANDUR VIGFÚSSON AS AN EDITOR OF OLD NORSE- ICELANDIC LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT. Guðbrandur Vigfússon, an Icelander born in Galtardalur, Dalasýsla, was without doubt one of the most influential scholars of Old Norse studies of his day. His diplomatic edition of *Flateyjarbók*, his critical edition of *Sturlunga saga*, and his anthology *An Icelandic Prose Reader* are still of use to those without access to the relevant manuscripts. In this essay, I would like to survey his career (in Copenhagen and Oxford) as an editor of Old Norse-Icelandic texts and the legacy that he has left to his successors in the field of Old Norse studies.

Árni Magnússon's unremitting and dedicated (not to mention a daring rescue mission to save the collection from fire) collecting and copying of Old Icelandic manuscripts started in the second half of the 17th century on the initiative of the King of Denmark and continued uninterrupted till the Icelandic collector's death. This introduced a multitude of more or less successful editions of Old Icelandic literature in Latin, Danish, German, and, later on, French and English. An Icelandic scholar, Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1827-1889), rendered considerable services to editing these manuscripts in the second half of the 19th century. He came from the University of Copenhagen, the main centre for research on the Arnamagnæan manuscript collection, and is now an almost entirely forgotten figure, referred to only (which is extremely unfair considering his contribution to Old Icelandic literature) in the context of his famous conflict—sometimes even called the “philological civil war” (Wawn 1997:469)—with the translator and philologist, Eiríkur Magnússon. This dispute was over a new translation of the *Bible* to Icelandic that was initiated by the British and Foreign Bible Society in the 1860s and eventually completed by

the latter (Wawn 2001:6)¹. Guðbrandur was an experienced authority in the domain of the Old Icelandic literature and the main representative of Scandinavian studies in the Victorian Era in Great Britain (cf. Næss 1962). This was also a recognized and renowned philologist who was invited, together with Grímur Thomsen, by George Webbe Dasent to work on a classic English translation of the *Njáls saga* from 1861 (see Wawn 1991). Oliver Elton was convinced about the true nature of his statements, such as “he was a sort of incarnation of his country and the treasurer of its classic writings” and “one of the great scholars of his time” (Elton 1906:31). However, the considerable output of Guðbrandur has not yet been discussed as a whole, apart from a collective volume issued on the centenary of his death (McTurk, Wawn 1989), a thorough, albeit over one-hundred year old, bibliographical sketch (Elton 1906), and a brief biographical entry written by Jón Þorkelsson in 1890 (Þorkelsson 1890).

The outstanding talent of Guðbrandur in editing works of Old Icelandic literature was first revealed in a voluminous, nearly two thousand page long, two-volume *Biskupa sögur* compilation (1858, 1878), which contains the most significant 13th and 14th century bishop's sagas (see Sigurdson 2016:35-47) and is equipped with an instructive introduction. It deals with Skálholt and Hólar bishops in a genre stretched between biography and hagiography. This all-embracing and pioneering edition (edited with the participation of Jón Sigurðsson on the basis of the manuscripts) included both the oldest bishop's sagas (among others, *Hungrvaka*, *Páls saga*, *Þorláks saga*, version S of *Jóns saga*), and the earliest, including three versions of the *Guðmundar saga* (version A, B and D; AM 399 4to, AM 657 c 4to, Holm Perg 5 fol.) as well as the saga about Lárentíus Kálfsson (*Lárentíus saga*), written by Einar Hafliðarson². Additionally, Guðbrandur's edition included the *Kristni saga*, preserved only in the *Hauksbók* manuscript from the first decade of the 14th century (AM 371 4to), whose main theme is *kristnitaka*, that is, the beginnings of Christianity in Iceland and the activity of Ísleifur Gissurarson and Gissur Ísleifsson, who were bishops of Skálholt, between 1056-1080 and 1082-1118 (Duke 1998-2001:346; cf. Vésteinsson 2000), respectively. When referring to the Latin translation of this saga from 1773, prepared for printing by members of the Arnamagnæan

¹ Guðbrandur and Eiríkur also fell out with each other over the activity of Mansion House Relief Committee, which provided Iceland residents with material assistance in the 1880s (see Harris 1978-1981). Neither limited their caustic remarks against the other in their professional lives, repeatedly finding faults in each other's publishing reviews.

² *Lárentíus saga* included in the discussed edition constituted the basis for the English translation several decades later by Oliver Elton (*The Life of Laurence, Bishop of Hólar in Iceland*, London 1890). It is worth noting that English translations of several other bishop's sagas were done by Mary Leith in the last years of the 19th century (*Stories of the Bishops of Iceland*, London 1895).

Commission (*Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission*)³, Guðbrandur questioned and challenged the hypotheses included therein concerning its dating and authorship. In his exhaustive foreword, the Icelandic scholar argued that the saga was not written at the beginning of the 14th century, as the publishers of the Latin edition claimed (Finnsson 1773:*Ad Lectorem*), but rather in the second half of the 12th century by either Oddr Snorrason, or Styrmir Kárason (Vigfússon, Sigurðsson 1858:xx-xxiii). Despite the fact that this theory—according to current knowledge—is as original as it is disputable, in the second half of the 19th century it started a stormy debate over these issues (see Duke 1998-2001; Kauferschmied 2009) that involved, among others, such researchers as Konrad Maurer (*Über Ari Thorgilsson und sein Isländerbuch* 1870), Oskar Brenner (*Über die Kristni-Saga* 1878), and Finnur Jónsson (*Hauksbók* 1892-96).

The original idea of including the *Kristni saga* in the anthology of bishop's sagas is essentially imitated; however, there are obviously exceptions to this rule in the contemporary editions of *biskupasögur*. An example is the well-known book series, *Íslensk fornrit*, which presents the most important works of Old Icelandic writings: the 15th volume (2003) dedicated to the bishop's sagas opens, similarly to Guðbrandur, with the *Kristni saga*. In the discussed edition of Guðbrandur, sagas and *þættir* were grouped chronologically. It seems that this system makes it possible to exhaustively reconstruct the history of the Church and bishopric in Iceland, starting with the first missions of Friðrekr and Þorvaldr Koðránsón in 981, through the island's conversion to Christianity (in 999 or 1000), and ending at the turn of the 17th century. Therefore, among others, it seems that Guðbrandur's offer of *biskupasögur* systematization is a much more advantageous solution than the thematic or geographical criteria (division of sagas of bishops of northern and southern dioceses) used by some contemporary editors of bishop's sagas⁴.

Despite several overly risky and controversial theses such as attributing *Árna saga biskups* to Árni Helgason (Vigfússon, Sigurðsson 1858:lxxix), *Biskupa sögur* is characterized by its professionalism and high editorial standard. This should be especially appreciated in the context of the then scant experience in editing Old Icelandic literature of Guðbrandur, as he was thirty-one when the first volume was published. As has been mentioned, the edition triggered an urgent debate and established a method for compiling the bishop's sagas, which had previously been outside the main areas of interest. While to

³ The Arnamagnæan Commission was established in 1772 by King Christian VII. At that time, its members were: Bolle Luxdorph, Jakob Langebek, Jón Eiríksson, Peter Frederick Suhm and Hannes Finnsson, a later bishop of Skálholt (Mósesdóttir 2006:24).

⁴ The division into sagas about Skálholt and Hólar bishops was used by Guðni Jónsson in a three-volume edition *Byskupa sögur* (Reykjavík 1948). The *Kristni saga* was not included in this edition.

Guðbrandur himself, it gave an opportunity to establish a close relationship with German scientific milieu (see Fix 2015), which bore fruit in a form of an edition issued in Leipzig with Theodor Möbius and prefaced by Maurer entitled *Fornsögur* (1860). This included three less known Icelandic family sagas: *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Hallfreðar saga* and *Flóamanna saga*.

Moreover, in 1864 a critical edition of *Eyrbyggja saga*—“the most amorphous and troublesome of the family sagas”, as Theodore M. Andersson, quite rightly, argued in the past (Andersson 1967:160)—was also published in Leipzig. This edition was to a great extent based on 17th century copies of the *Vatnshyrna* manuscript, whose original (from approximately 1400) went up in flames during the fire of Copenhagen in 1728. Guðbrandur was probably the first to emphasize the fragmentary and scattered structure of the saga; however, he was not so radical in his judgments as some contemporary researchers and, especially, Gabriel Turville-Petre, who expressed his opinion on the case in highly indignant tone, saying that *Eyrbyggja* “has none of those excellencies of construction which are admired in many sagas” (Turville-Petre 1953:242). It is fair to recognize that the discussed edition received a mildly warm reception. Despite the positive reviews of, among others, Maurer, there were many sceptical opinion-makers such as Hugo Gering, the author of the first German translation of *Eyrbyggja saga* from 1897, who accused the Icelander of sometimes getting carried away by his imagination. He also did not appreciate the author's *modus operandi*, which was based on an attempt to copy the *Vatnshyrna* text with simultaneous emending on the basis of other preserved manuscripts of the saga (Gering 1897:xxvii-xxix). Nevertheless, Guðbrandur's publication constituted a basis for later Icelandic editions of Þorleifur Jónsson (1873) and Valdimar Ásmundarson (1895), as well as two translations: in Swedish, by Carl Johan Lönnberg in 1873; and in English in 1892 by William Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon (Simpson 1973:366, 373)⁵. Its indisputable and non-obsolete values are introductory considerations concerning, most of all, text transmission and preserved manuscripts of the saga which were divided into three classes (A, B, C)⁶ and discussed in detail.

In the 1860s, Guðbrandur simultaneously worked with a Norwegian philologist, Carl Richard Unger, on preparation for printing of the *Flateyjarbók* codex, the most precious and extensive Old Icelandic manuscript (GKS 1005 fol.; *Codex Flateyensis*), written from 1387 to 1394, first by Jón Þórðarson, and

⁵ Previously, British readers had access only to the English abstract of the saga from 1814, created by Sir Walter Scott and published in *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities*, edited by Robert Jamieson and Henry Weber. The first Latin edition of *Eyrbyggja saga* (by Grímur Jónsson Thorkelín) was published in 1787 but received many negative reviews (Fjalldal 2008:325-326).

⁶ Apart from 17th century copies of *Vatnshyrna* (among others, AM 448 4to and AM 442 4to), excerpts from the saga have been preserved in the 14th century manuscript currently in Wolfenbüttel (Cod. Guelf. 9.10 4to), and the 15th century *Melabók* manuscript, AM 445 b 4to (Vigfússon 1864:xxiii-xxv).

then, after his departure to Bergen, by Magnús Þórhallsson (Ashman Rowe 2000:441-442). Among others, it includes four kings' sagas (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, *Óláfs saga helga*, *Sverris saga*, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*) and numerous *þættir* as well as an eddic poem, *Hyndluljóð*. It should be emphasized here that a three-volume edition published in Oslo (1860, 1862, 1868)—recognized as the most valuable publication ever conceived by Guðbrandur—was the first all-embracing compilation of the 14th century codex⁷. In contrast to the aforementioned Icelander's editions, which were standardized with regard to spelling and typography, *Flateyjarbók* is quite accurate in maintaining the non-uniform spelling of the manuscript as well as its punctuation and lexical peculiarities. Guðbrandur's efforts related to the most possible accurate decoding of the Old Icelandic codex were appreciated by the editors of the day and are still appreciated by present-day editors. Sigurður Nordal even called him “one of the shrewdest readers of manuscripts who ever lived” (Fjalldal 2009:320).

In 1866, Guðbrandur—tempted by Dasent's offer of finishing an Icelandic-English dictionary by Richard Cleasby (*An Icelandic-English Dictionary* 1874)⁸—decided to move to Oxford, where he started working with Clarendon Press, a prestigious publishing house of that time, and Frederick York Powell (1850-1904), a young historian who so far had assisted him with all his publishing projects. Despite the Icelander's financial problems and other difficulties he encountered during his stay in Oxford, he managed to undertake several interesting projects related to Old Icelandic literature. The first was two-volume edition of *Sturlunga saga* from 1878, including contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*), mostly dealing with the most influential Icelandic families of the last forty years (about 1220-1260) of *Sturlungaöld*, that is, the Age of the Sturlungs (Byock 1986:27). The texts included in this edition were arranged in the following order: *Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns*, *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, *Sturlu saga*, *Prestssaga Guðmundar Arasonar*, *Guðmundar saga biskups*, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, *Íslendinga saga*, *Þórðar saga kakala*, *Svínfellinga saga*, *Þorgils saga skarða*. According to Guðbrandur, *Sturlunga* was compiled by Þórður Narfason from Skarð in the last years of the 13th century (Vigfússon 1878:civ), and his hypothesis is currently unanimously confirmed by researchers of contemporary sagas (Bragason 2003:483)⁹.

It should be emphasized here immediately that Guðbrandur's highly professional publication was not duly appreciated then, mainly due to two

⁷ In 1930, a facsimile edition of *Flateyjarbók* was published (with an introduction by Finnur Jónsson) in *Corpus codicum Islandicorum medii aevi* series (volume 1).

⁸ The dictionary finished by Guðbrandur was the first publication of its kind in the Victorian market if one does not take into account Dasent's translation (*A Grammar of the Icelandic or Old Norse Tongue*, 1843) of *Anvisning till isländskan eller nordiska fornspråket* by Danish linguist Rasmus Rask.

⁹ The contemporary sagas were first analysed in the 17th century (Skrzypek 2015:117).

factors, as Andrew Wawn astutely observed: the prohibitive price dictated by the publisher which restricted the edition to only a narrow group of readers¹⁰, despite increasing interest in Old Icelandic literature in the Victorian Era; and a lack of reviews in the magazines of that time (Wawn 1997:467-468). On the other hand, there were some individual (although not very loud) expressions of acclaim for the Icелander's edition of, among others, Willard Fiske¹¹, Gering, and, most of all, Jón Hjaltalín. Jón called for Guðbrandur's 200-page prolegomena (written in English) added to the *Sturlunga* edition to be published as a separate book entitled "A History of Old Icelandic Literature", but his idea went unheeded (Wawn 2002:347). Indeed, although since the publication of *Sturlunga* two syntheses of Icelandic literature in English have appeared in print (Einarsson 1957; Neijmann 2006) and, especially recently, several studies focusing exclusively on the issues of Old Icelandic literature (O'Donoghue 2004; Clover, Lindow 2005; McTurk 2005; Clunies Ross 2010), the Guðbrandur's prolegomena remains essential in this scope; the achievement of its author is the expansion of the state-of-the-art with new research fields.

The introduction to *Sturlunga* repeatedly shows the comparative inclinations of Guðbrandur; especially, when he compares the sagas with Elizabethan dramas or indicates possible relations between the 14th century *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and the Anglo-Saxon epic poem, *Beowulf*. Spotting many similarities in *Beowulf* confronting Grendel and Grettir confronting Glámur, Guðbrandur pushed through the thesis of a common Scandinavian source of both works¹². As proof of an analogy between the poem and saga, he mentioned the words used to signify a sword, *hapax legomena* in the Old English and Old Icelandic literature, of almost identical root: *hæftmece* in *Beowulf* (verse 1457); and *heftisax* in chapter 66 of *Grettla* (Vigfússon 1878:xlix). This issue kindled the imagination of researchers who, soon after the publication of *Sturlunga*, eagerly followed the Icелander's steps by conjecturing and offering increasingly original (but not always apt) comparative analyses of both works. The interpretation of Guðbrandur created over a century ago is still intriguing and has many followers today, although some counter-arguments were provided by the book of Magnús Fjalldal, *The Long Arm of Coincidence* (Fjalldal 1998)¹³. Additionally, it should be emphasized that the concept of

¹⁰ The price of *Sturlunga* was forty-two shillings (about one hundred and fifty pounds sterling in modern terms).

¹¹ After examining a copy of *Sturlunga*, Fiske told Guðbrandur that "you deserve the thanks of the whole English speaking community of scholars for providing them with such an apparatus" (Wawn 2002:348).

¹² This point constitutes repercussions of Grímur Thorkelín's opinions, who, in the foreword to the Latin edition of *Beowulf* from 1815, claimed that "the poem is a Scandinavian one translated into Old English" (Bjork 1996:295).

¹³ There are numerous studies concerning *Grettla* and *Beowulf* relations. The most significant theories are summed up by Liberman (1986).

Guðbrandur initiated the first comparative perspectives for Old Norse and Old English literature; for instance, the pioneering study of Frederick Metcalfe, *The Englishman and the Scandinavian* (1880).

Furthermore, Guðbrandur was the first scholar who searched for Celtic influence within the area of eddic poetry, claiming with full confidence that the majority of *Elder Edda* poems might have been written in the British Isles. To confirm his hypothesis, he referred to numerous words of Celtic provenance which were preserved in their structure, e.g. *karta*, *rígs* (Vigfússon 1878:clxxxvi-clxxxvii)¹⁴. His concept was broadly discussed at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and soon gained both ardent enthusiasts (e.g. Norwegian philologist, Sophus Bugge) and fierce opponents, especially among fellow countrymen Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal and Finnur Jónsson, who argued for the Scandinavian (and more precisely: Norwegian) roots of the oldest eddic poems. In the light of the convictions of the time, which denied the existence of this type of relations, the bold and simultaneously original opinions of Guðbrandur expressed in the preface to *Sturlunga* introduced a breath of fresh air to the slightly conservative studies concerning eddic poetry in the second half of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, although it would be hard to defend the whole theory of Guðbrandur today, the issue of the place of creation of individual poems—especially, the mythological *Rígsþula* (preserved in *Codex Wormianus*)—developed by him has since been approved by many contemporary researchers of *Edda*, starting with Ursula Dronke or Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (Dronke 1997:203, 207; Sveinsson 1957:6)¹⁵. In addition, Guðbrandur indicated references to eddic poetry that had previously been omitted by researchers (and, especially, to *Hávamál*) in the passion hymns of the most significant 17th century Icelandic poet, Hallgrímur Pétursson (*Passíusálmar* 1666)¹⁶. In the context of the discovery of *Codex Regius* (1643) and the first editions of *Edda* (*Edda Islandorum* by Peder Hansen Resen 1665), this seems to be an interesting research perspective.

In the thirty-six paragraph prolegomena, Guðbrandur also proved himself to be an extremely discerning editor, especially in the final parts where he precisely located and classified preserved manuscripts and their copies. Furthermore, it is peculiar that he briefly introduced the history of the first book editions of Old Icelandic chronicles and sagas in the three publishing centres in Iceland: in Skálholt, where, between 1688 and 1689, the *Landnámabók*, *Íslendingabók* and *Kristni saga* appeared in print thanks to the efforts of bishop

¹⁴ The Iclander was most probably inspired by the deliberations of Matthew Arnold, included in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* from 1866 (Chesnutt 2001:154).

¹⁵ Currently, it is said that the author of *Rígsþula* was an Iclander, although there are also opinions that he was a Norwegian (Vries 1967:127).

¹⁶ In his letter, written in 1886, to Guðbrandur, Oliver Elton suggested an English translation of Pétursson's *Passíusálmar* (Wawn 2002:348).

Pórður Þorláksson; in Hólar, where in 1756 several family sagas were first published (among others, *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Hávarðar saga*); and in Hrappsey (first edition of *Egils saga* from 1782). Emphasising the need for more intense activity in the field of Old Icelandic literature, for which, as he said, “there will always be a demand” (Vigfússon 1878:ccviii), the Icelander gave practical advice within this scope and introduced his own project of a total (ten-volume) edition of the most significant works of Old Icelandic literature. Surprisingly, he showed a rather unenthusiastic attitude towards increasingly numerous English translations of the saga¹⁷, claiming expressly that one should first focus on issuing the original works of Old Icelandic literature, and he held this opinion till the end.

Not be underestimated are the scientific value of the prolegomena and the author’s innovative understanding of Old Icelandic literature, which was mostly based on searching for context. However, his evaluative and arbitrary divisions of the sagas might be glaring, as might some depreciating opinions on artistic values of less-known legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), which were frankly recognized as “the lowest and most miserable productions of Icelandic pens” (Vigfússon 1878:cxcvi). This is also true of the circumstantial evidence of the sagas’ superiority over *Edda*’s poems in the context of searching for genuinely Icelandic genre forms.

When discussing the Oxford publishing period of Guðbrandur, one must mention the *An Icelandic Prose Reader* (1879) anthology, which contains excerpts of the most significant prose works of Old Icelandic literature; among others, texts by Ari Þorgilsson and Snorri Sturluson as well as several family sagas. In the preface to this anthology, which was pioneering in the British publishing market, he emphasized the continuous life force of Icelandic literature, claiming that “Icelandic literature is not merely the dying echoes of a dead language, nor a mouldering body of antiquarian learning, but a living voice appealing to the sympathies and the heart” (Vigfússon, Powell 1879:v). The significance of this edition might be proven by the fact that for years it was used as a textbook for Old Icelandic language classes at the universities of Wisconsin, Dakota and Kansas (Flom 1907:7, 25, 36)¹⁸. It was considered a type of a reference book that “every tourist should possess” (Oswald 1882:56) when travelling to Iceland as it included a glossary and a pithy language course.

A supplement to this publication was a two-volume *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (1883)¹⁹, a bulky selection of *Edda*’s poems and skaldic poetry from the period between the 9th and 13th centuries, additionally expanded by an

¹⁷ The exception here were translations by John Sephton and, especially, his translation of *Eiríks saga rauða* from 1880, highly valued by Guðbrandur (see Wawn 1992).

¹⁸ The *Reader* was considered “a most valuable book which ought to be in the hands of every student” (Sweet 1895:iii).

¹⁹ The edition was first entitled *Corpus Poetarum Aulicorum*.

exhaustive introduction to the issues of Old Icelandic poetry²⁰. Bearing in mind the practice of entitling the editions of Old Icelandic literature in the second half of the 19th century, the Latin title used by the Icelander might be puzzling. As one may guess:

perhaps this was Vigfússon's way of rejecting the new so-called *kritisk metode* [scientific methodology] of his colleagues in Copenhagen and declaring his affinity with the generation that preceded them, unabashedly speculative scholars like Grímur Thorkelín and Finnur Magnússon, with whom he may have felt greater affinity (Fjalldal 2009:316).

It is characteristic fact that Copenhagen researchers were the fiercest critics of *Corpus*, led by Finnur Jónsson²¹, who over the years found Guðbrandur's edition completely useless (Jónsson 1936:72); however, it should be duly noted that this opinion is too harsh. On the other hand, *Corpus* received a warmer welcome in the British publishing market, and one of "The Academy" reviewers even put Guðbrandur forward as a model for editors of the Victorian Era (Clover, Lindow 2005:165). Although the edition of *Edda's* poems was nothing extraordinary in the second half of the 19th century²², gathering several dozen skaldic poems in one volume played an important part in arousing interest in some aspects (especially metrical) of the poetry of the skalds on British soil²³. *Corpus* included works by most of the poets (Icelandic *skáld*) mentioned in *Skáldatal*, the catalogue of skalds preserved in *Codex Upsaliensis* and in the 17th century copies of the *Kringla* manuscript (among others, AM 761 a-b 4to [Nordal 2001:121]), for instance, Bragi Broddason's *Ragnarsdrápa*, Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa*, Markús Skeggjason's *Eiríksdrápa* or Einarr Skúlason's *Geisli*.

²⁰ For instance, Guðbrandur was the first scholar to draw parallels between *Edda* and *Íslendingasögur*, arguing that *Laxdæla saga* and *Gísla saga* are both modelled on or indebted to the eddic heroic poems. As he remarked, "it is a strange thing that one rich branch of Northern literature (the *Íslendinga Sagas*) has never been examined with a view to discover the echoes of old long-lost *Teutonic ballads* which are undoubtedly to be found there. The fact is that sufficient attention has not been paid to the comparative physiology and psychology of the *Saga*" (Vigfússon, Powell 1883:501).

²¹ Guðbrandur and Finnur expressed totally different opinions on Old Icelandic literature. The former aimed to search for relations between Old Icelandic literature and other European literatures, and Finnur definitely dissociated himself from this type of practice (Fjalldal 2011:330-331).

²² In 1787, the Arnamagnæan Commission began to publish a fully edited text of the *Codex Regius* (GKS 2365 4to) and other eddic poems. The first substantial English translation of the *Edda* dates from 1797 (*Icelandic Poetry, or the Edda of Sæmund* by Amos Cottle). Cf. Larrington (2007).

²³ Versification of skaldic poetry was the focus of interest for Oxford philologist, William A. Craigie. The fruit of his research was, among others, the study entitled *On Some Points in Skaldic Metre*, published in 1900 in "Arkiv för nordisk filologi".

The last publication prepared for printing by Guðbrandur was volume 88 of the ambitious *Rolls Series* (1887)²⁴, which was funded by the British government. This edition of two 13th century sagas included *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, written by Sturla Þórðarson, the nephew of Snorri Sturluson, and the *Orkneyinga saga*. It should be also mentioned here that—several years after Guðbrandur's death—there was a two-volume edition of *Origines Islandicae* (1905), in which were published, among others, excerpts from selected sagas and laws of the Icelandic Commonwealth period (*Grágás*); however, it is hard to unequivocally determine the Icelander's contribution to its editing.

Guðbrandur Vigfússon, whose profile and output are recalled in this study, contributed considerably not only to codification of knowledge of Old Icelandic literature (as the author of the first history of Old Icelandic literature in English), but also to a specific trend of editing sagas that was observed in Victorian Great Britain. Although the method he used for editing texts did not always fall on fertile soil, and clashes between colleagues often led to a negative reception of his publishing undertakings, the part he played in popularising Old Icelandic literature cannot be overestimated, especially when one considers the fact that he managed to either fully or partially edit all its important works. The concern for dissemination of the Old Icelandic legacy that motivated him was combined with an ability to form a contextual and synthetic view of the issues of the literature of medieval Iceland, and that was his distinguishing feature in relation to other researchers and editors of the second half of the 19th century.

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²⁴ *Rolls Series*, that is, *Rerum Britannicarum medii aevi scriptores* or *The Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages*.

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