The Old Icelandic “Brut”

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Breta Sögur, or *The Saga of the Britons*, is more or less extant in several manuscripts, all of Icelandic origin.¹ They are supplemented by a series of fragments and paper copies. It is commonly accepted that there are two versions of the *Breta Sögur*. The so-called “shorter version”, found in a 14th-century manuscript called *Hauksbók*, is described as an abridged version. The so-called “longer version”, transmitted principally in Copenhagen, Arnamagnæan Institute, AM 573 4to, is said to be closer to Geoffrey’s *De gestis Britonum* than the shorter version, and more interested in chivalrous narrative developments. These assumptions are partially true but need to be studied further. It is, indeed, simplifying to refer to these two manuscripts as “two versions”, and the qualifiers (“shorter” as opposed to “longer”) do not always do justice to the text copied in both manuscripts. Moreover, other important witnesses of the *Breta Sögur* need to be taken into account. There are two 19th-century editions of the *Breta Sögur*, but neither, though very useful, offers a complete synoptic view.² This is unfortunate, since the saga is an important witness to the *DGB*’s transmission in northwestern medieval Europe.

Hauksbók (hereafter “Hb”) is a codex divided into three parts. The part bearing shelfmark AM 544 4to contains, among other materials, a translation of *The Fall of Troy* by Dares Phrygius and a “Brut” starting with a Virgilian prologue. This version (and this version only) includes a versified translation of the *PM* called *Merlínussþá*, written by the Icelandic monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson around

- 1 *La Saga des Bretons*, ed. and trans. H. Tétrel (forthcoming, Classiques Garnier); S. Gropper, “Breta Sögur and Merlínussþá”, in M.E. Kalinke (ed.), *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus’ Realms* (Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, 5), Cardiff, 2011, 48–60; J. Louis-Jensen, “Breta Sögur”, in P. Pulsiano and K. Wolf et al. (eds.), *Medieval Scandinavia, An Encyclopedia*, New York, 1993, 57–58; A.G. Van Hamel, “The Old Norse Version of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* and the Text of Geoffrey of Monmouth”, *Études celtiques* 1 [1936], 197–247.
- 2 *Hauksbók*, *udgiven efter de arnamæanske håndskrifter n° 371, 544 og 675 4to samt forskellige papirhåndskrifter* [*Hauksbók*, edited from manuscripts n° 371, 544 og 675 4to and paper copies], ed. F. Jónsson and E. Jónsson, Copenhagen, 1892–96; *Annaler for nordisk Oldkyndighed og historie* [Annals for Nordic antiquities and history], ed. J. Sigurðsson, Copenhagen, 1848–49.

1200.³ This part of the codex is now kept in Reykjavik at the Árni Magnússon Institute. It was compiled in the 14th century by an Icelandic historiographer, Haukr Erlendsson, who wrote a part of the book and had other parts written by Norwegian and Icelandic scribes. *The Saga of the Britons*, though not always closely translated, is complete in this manuscript.

AM 573 4to is an Icelandic manuscript kept in Copenhagen at the Arnamagnæan Institute; it was written in the 14th century and contains a translation of *The Fall of Troy*, a translation of the *DGB* §§6–178 starting with a Virgilian prologue and concluding at the end of Arthur's reign, and a small excerpt of the part of the *Conte du Graal* called *Valversþáttur* ("the story of Gawain") which breaks off abruptly with the manuscript itself. Two parts (and two hands) appear in this manuscript (hereafter "573A" and "573B"). Hand 1 wrote *The Saga of the Trojans* and *The Saga of Aeneas and the Briton Kings* until King Uther's reign.⁴ About this scribe (a man or a woman, see below), it is essential to note that he/she also wrote the Galfridian section in Copenhagen, Arnamagnæan Institute, AM 764 4to. Hand 2 copied the text from the beginning of Uther's reign to the end of Arthur's and the small portion of Gawain's story. 573B is the part that includes original narrative developments which must have been influenced by chivalric literature.

AM 764 4to (hereafter "764") is a universal history compiled at the end of the 14th century in Iceland and attributed to a group of scribes (Icelandic male scribes working in collaboration with the abbey of women at Reynistaður), a part of which is now lost.⁵ In it, an abridged Galfridian translation is interlaced with other historical materials; only two small sections of this translation are still extant: a brief but complete "Aeneas-Brut" paragraph adapting the *DGB* until the Incarnation, and an acephalous rendering of the end of the *DGB* (§196 to §208), kept on a now loose folio. The former was cut voluntarily: in this book, the histories of all *regna* are developed in parallel until the Incarnation. The latter, on the other hand, is accidentally deprived of its beginning. Since part of the codex is now lost, we cannot be sure of its original content, but it is very likely that more Galfridian material was contained in it.

3 *Merlínussþá*, ed. and trans. R. Poole, "Merlínussþá", in M. Clunies Ross (ed.), *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, VII: Poetry in Fornaldarsögur*, Turnhout, 2017, pp. 38–189.

4 *Trójumanna Saga*, ed. J. Louis-Jensen, *Trójumanna Saga* (Editiones Arnamagnæanæ. Series A, 8), Copenhagen, 1963; *Isländische Antikensagas, Die Saga von den Trojanern, die Saga von den Britischen Königen, die Saga von Alexander dem Grossen*, trans. S. Würth (Gropper), Munich, 1996.

5 S. Óskarsdóttir, "Universal History in Fourteenth-century Iceland, Studies in AM764 4to", unpublished doctoral dissertation, University College, London, 2000.

Stockholm, Royal Library, Icelandic Papp. 58 (hereafter “O1”) is a paper copy of *Ormsbók*, a lost Icelandic 14th-century codex, made in 1690 by an Icelander. In O1, *The Saga of the Britons* starts with a Virgilian prologue and ends within the *DGB* §79 in the middle of a sentence. Like the others, this version is preceded by a translation of *The Fall of Troy*.

A fragment of a 14th-century copy of the Icelandic “Brut” has been used in the binding of a book now kept in Dublin, Trinity College Library, under shelfmark 1023a. It contains partly legible fragments of the *DGB* §106 and §107. Finally, there are modern copies of Hb of various interest at the National Library in Reykjavik and three in Dublin, Trinity College Library.

The “Aeneas-Brut” combination, including the specific Virgilian prologue, that is found in all these versions was probably already available in the Latin exemplar, since a similar arrangement can be found in French texts.⁶ Besides, the Virgilian narrative was used by the author of the Icelandic *Veraldar Saga*, who also mentions the Trojan war. Since all the Icelandic texts share the same version of *The Fall of Troy* and the same version of the Virgilian narrative, the probability that a Latin manuscript containing a complete cycle (“Troy-Aeneas-Brut”) came into the hands of a translator seems higher than that of a separate transmission.

The part of *The Saga of the Britons* that is common to Hb, 573A, 764, and O1 corresponds to the Virgilian prologue and the *DGB* §§6–64. The *DGB* §§64–79 are rendered in Hb, 573A and B, and O1. A collation of these two parts of the *Breta Sögur* with the edited texts of the *DGB* revealed that all Icelandic texts probably derive from the same original translation.

The part of the saga represented by Hb and 573A alone (*DGB* §§80–134) betrays use of the same source; so does the part represented by Hb and 573B (*DGB* §§135–96), though one would expect the use of a different model with the change of hands in 573. The collation of Hb with 764, fol. 38r on the *DGB* §§196–208 brought the same result. There is therefore no reason to believe that another Galfridian source was used other than the common one by any of the Icelandic redactors or copyists, though this does not preclude personal knowledge and, therefore additions, by one or several of the copyists/authors.

573A and 764 have been copied by the same hand and belong to the same environment; collation has confirmed they are closer to one another than each one is to Hb. A further comparison showed that O1 is closer to 573A than to Hb. Therefore, the *stemma codicum* can be roughly described as such: all versions

6 H. Tétrel, “Trojan Origins and the Use of the *Æneid* and Related Sources in the Old Icelandic Brut”, *JEGP* 109:4 (2010), 490–514.

derive from the same source (the first translation into Old Norse, from a Latin text which most probably contained the entire “Troy-Aeneas-Brut” cycle); 573A and B, 764, and O1 are different but closely related (the situation of “573B” is less certain) while Hb stands on its own. Therefore, a subdivision in “two versions” is only partially true. It is still unknown where the Dublin fragments must be positioned.

It is difficult to know if the *PM* was included in the Latin source, since it is a separate text in Icelandic. Gunnlaugr Leifsson's *Merlínusspá* could have been adapted from an independent *libellus*, “little book”, from the same model as the one that was used by the first translator of the *DGB*, or it could have been translated from another *DGB* text.⁷

Unlike Wace's *Roman de Brut*, but like the majority of the “Bruts” in Europe, *The Saga of the Britons* derives from a standard (“Vulgate”) version of the *DGB*. It belongs, more precisely, to the “Sexburgis” family of the Vulgate *DGB* texts,⁸ although some readings could point to a First Variant Version (or to a mixed version).⁹ It is not irrelevant to underline that the saga shares this particularity with the Llanstephan 1 version of the Welsh *Brut y Brenhinedd* (“History of the Kings”).¹⁰

Finally, it is difficult to decide when the first translation was made, but 1200, as Steffanie Würth already suggested, is a likely hypothesis.¹¹

The Icelandic “Brut”, as represented by all its versions, shows interesting particularities. Some additions are probably derived from the Latin source, some of them may have taken place in the first, now lost, Icelandic translation, and some of them may have been introduced by the redactors of the Icelandic versions that have come down to us.

DGB §5 has been replaced by a Virgilian prologue which is not translated from the *Aeneid* but from a shorter, glossed version of it. Long enough to form

7 R. Poole, “The Textual Tradition of Gunnlaugr Leifsson's *Merlínusspá*”, in H. Tétrel and G. Veyseyre (eds.), *L'Historia regum Britannie et les Bruts en Europe, Tome II, Production, circulation et réception (XII^e–XVI^e siècles)* (Rencontres 349, Civilisation médiévale, 32), Paris, 2018, pp. 195–223.

8 See Crick, *DR*, p. 93 and M.D. Reeve, “The Transmission of the *Historia regum Britanniae*”, *Journal of Medieval Latin* 1 (1991), 73–117, at p. 91.

9 *First Variant Version*, ed. Wright.

10 B. Roberts, “*Brut y Brenhinedd* ms. National Library of Wales, Llanstephan 1 version”, in H. Tétrel and G. Veyseyre (eds.), *L'Historia regum Britannie et les “Bruts” en Europe, Tome I, Traductions, adaptations, réappropriations (XII^e–XVI^e siècle)* (Rencontres 106, Civilisation médiévale, 12), Paris, 2015, pp. 71–80, at p. 79.

11 S. Würth, *Der “Antikenroman” in der isländischen Literatur des Mittelalters. Eine Untersuchung zur Übersetzung und Rezeption lateinischer Literatur im Norden* (Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie, 26), Basel: Frankfurt am Main, 1998, p. 81.

an independent narrative, this prologue shows an obvious interest in battles, heroes, and even pagan gods, at least in the 573 and *Ormsbók* versions, where gods and goddesses appear as characters. This prologue discarded Canto VI, a choice that seems relevant to its historical perspective. It also contains a few interesting additional passages; one of them, found in all redactions, tells about Pallas's tomb and its epitaph.¹² Hb and 573/*Ormsbók* have a different version of this famous passage originally found in William of Malmesbury's *Deeds of the English Kings*, but the addition must have been already interpolated in the Latin source.

Another difference from the *DGB*, common to Hb and 573B but probably due to the first Icelandic translator, is the reorganization of the *DGB* §§155–56. Both Icelandic versions have a new development telling about Arthur's fight against giant Ritho. In Geoffrey's narrative, this episode is briefly referred to at the end of §165. The fame of the episode might explain why it is given a particular role in the *Saga*. On closer look, nevertheless, it does not show use of any source other than the *DGB* §165. It is sensible to ascribe this invention to the first Icelandic translator, whereas, in the case of the Virgilian prologue, similarities in the French “Brut” tradition point to the Latin source.

Hb is said to be shorter than 573, but this is not always true. It sometimes displays episodes which have been discarded by other Icelandic versions. This is the case with the episode of the giant stones raised by Merlin in the *DGB* §§128–30. In this part of the saga, only 573A and Hb are available. 573A does not have any trace of the *DGB* §§127–30. Hb, on the other hand, has kept the story, although it is a rather short recension of it. Another example showing that Hb does not look for brevity at all costs is the reinsertion of *Merlínusspá*.

However, it is true that 573B contains several longer narrative additions which are not shared by Hb. Two original amplifications draw attention. The first one appears shortly after the beginning of 573B and tells about King Uther's treasonous seduction of Igera (*DGB* §137). In this version, a new development occurs: Igera refuses to accept Uther as her husband, and Uther is forced to ask Merlin to concoct a love-potion. Another addition appears at the end of 573B and deals with the relationship between Guinevere and Mordred. Neither of them display evidence of the use of another source than the *DGB*, but, together with other particularities (for example, the fact that 573B stops rendering the *DGB* after Arthur's reign, that it is followed by an episode of the *Conte du Graal*, etc.), they increase the reader's impression of a more chivalric version of the text. It is important to remember that this part of the manuscript

12 R. Patzuk-Russell, “The Legend of Pallas' Tomb and its Medieval Scandinavian Transmission”, *JEGP* 118:1 (2019), 1–30.

is copied by hand B and is only concerned with Arthurian times. Though there is no evidence of a Galfridian source other than Hb's in this part of the saga, it is obvious that the narrative is meant for an Arthurian readership. Since only 573B and Hb have this part, it is hard to tell if 573B is responsible for the additions, or if these additions were included in the first Icelandic translation and discarded by Hb. Marianne Kalinke has suggested that some of the additions included in the Arthurian part of 573 derive from the first Icelandic translation and were influenced by Wace's *Brut*.¹³ I would be more tempted (without certainty) to ascribe these additions, if they come from Wace, to the redactor of 573B, who wrote at a time when Wace's *Brut* had overwhelmed the Anglo-Norman and French "Brut" tradition, rather than to a translator from the end of the 12th century. But it is difficult to tell if *The Saga of Arthur* (573B) displays evidence of external Arthurian influence, and if so, when those influences took place. Research on this corpus, when entirely edited, should bring some answers.

13 M. Kalinke, "Arthur, king of Iceland", *Scandinavian Studies* 87 (2015), 8–32.