CHAPTER 20

Narrative, Evidence and the Reception of Járnsíða

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The currently accepted narrative of the introduction of the first law-book commissioned by King Magnús Hákonarson for the Icelanders, known as Járnsíða, goes like this: In the summer of 1271, the king sent his men and Sturla Þórdarson to Iceland with the law-book. Later that summer, only some parts of the book were sanctioned in the Alþingi because Icelanders were unhappy with its contents; they quarrelled about it, and the book was ratified two years later. This narrative is solidly based on the sources, aside from the unhappiness and quarrelling – these are inferred from the sources.

The name Járnsíða itself is only recorded in an eighteenth-century manuscript of Resensannáll (AM 424 4to x, c.1700) in the entry for the year 1271: ‘Sturla arrived in Iceland with the law-book Járnsíða.’¹ Fourteenth-century annals speak either of the ‘law-book’ (Elztu annálar and Konungsannáll) or the ‘Norwegian law-book’ (Lögmannsánnáll).² The fullest entry is found in the Konungsannáll:

King Magnús sent to Iceland Þorvarðr Þórarinsson, the lawmen Sturla Þórdarson, and Eindriði bögull with the law-book. And then the payment of fines to the king was accepted in Iceland. And then the section ‘Þingskabálkr’ from the law-book was also ratified, as well as two chapters from ‘Erfðabálkr’ on the children of betrothed women and adoption.³

¹ ‘Sturla com vt [með] logboc Jarn siðv.’ Islandske Annaler indtil 1578: 28. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. The datings of manuscripts are taken from Ordbog over det norrone prosasprog, unless stated otherwise.
² Elztu annálar or Annales vetustissimi (AM 415 4°, c.1310): ‘Arrival in Iceland of Þorvarðr Þórarinsson and Sturla Þórdarson with the law-book’ (vt kvama Þorvarðar Þorarins sunar ok Sturlo Þorþar sunar með logbok…). Lögmannsannáll (AM 420 b 4to, c.1362–1390): ‘The Norwegian law-book arrives in Iceland’ (komu norren logh a Island). Islandske Annaler, 49 and 259, respectively. The passage in Annales regii or Konungsannáll (GKS 2087 4to, c.1300–1328) is transcribed in the following footnote and translated above.
³ ‘Magnús konungr sendi til Islanndz Þorvarð Þórarins sun. ok Sturlv Þóðar son lógmannot ok Eindriði böngvl með lögþök. ok var þá iatat konungi þegningar á Íslandi. þá var ok logtekinn þingskabálkr í lögþókinni. ok .i. j. capitvalr i erfðabelki. vm fastarkonv börn ok vm arfleiding.’ Islandske Annaler: 138.
Konungsannáll and Elztu annálar also record subsequent ratifications of the other parts of the law-book in the years 1272 and 1273. These sources are unforthcoming when it comes to the Icelanders’ mood about the law-book, and as this was an event without precedent in Iceland, it is not possible to state with certainty whether the gradual ratification signified a troublesome reception. Whatever the king’s expectations, the Icelanders might have felt entitled to take their time to examine the new laws.

The fullest account of Járnsíða is found in Árna saga biskups, the oldest copies of which date from the middle of the fourteenth century. The saga is the main source for the events of the so-called staðamál, Bishop Árni’s attempt to gain control of the churches which were owned by the laity, and the account of Járnsíða is interspersed with accounts of the staðamál. According to the saga chronology, Járnsíða was brought to the country in 1271 when the troubles with staðamál, which began in 1269, were in full swing:

In this summer the venerable lord King Magnús sent to Iceland Þorvarðr Þórarinsson and Eindriði böggull, his retainer, along with Sturla Þórðarson, with the Norwegian law-book, and then later in the summer Þingfararbálkr, two chapters from Erfðabálkr on the children of betrothed women and adoption, and the payment of fines to the king were accepted over all the country, but nothing more.

As also happens in the annals, this brief account is complemented by two other passages on the gradual ratification of the other parts of the book. This has led scholars to speculate why the law-book was not accepted at the first sitting.

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4 Islandske Annaler: 139 (Konungsannáll) and 49 (Elztu annálar).
5 Only a few leaves survive from fourteenth-century manuscripts of the saga: three leaves from AM 122 b fol., ca. 1375–1400 (Reykjarfjarðarbók) and two leaves from AM 220 vi fol., ca. 1340–1360. Modern editions rely on seventeenth-century manuscripts. Árna saga biskups, Ed. Þorleifur Hauksson: vii–xxxi; Biskupa sögur iii: lii–lvi; Stefán Karlsson, ‘Ritun Reykjafjarðarbókar’.
6 For a discussion of the staðamál, including a review of scholarship, see Magnús Stefánsson, Staðir og staðamál: Studier i islandske egenkirkelige og beneficalrettslige forhold; a summarized version of the book is found in Magnús Stefánsson, ‘Um staði og staðamál’.
7 ‘Á þessu sumri sendi virðuligr herra Magnús konungr til Íslands þorvarð þórarinsson ok Eindríðróggúl, hirðmann sinn, þar með Sturlu þórðarson með lögþók norræna, ok var þá eptir um sumarit jatât þingfararbálki ok tveimur kapitulunum or erfðalphelið; um festarkonu born ok um arfleiðing ok þegngildi um allt land, en eigi fleira.’ Árna saga biskups, in Biskupa sögur iii: 1–212, 27.
8 Biskupa sögur iii: 29, 43–44. See discussions below.