TRANSLATING ENGLAND IN MEDIEVAL ICELAND: GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH’S HISTORIA REGUM BRATANNIE AND BRETA SǪGUR

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Breta sǫgur (c. 1200) is the Old Norse translation of the more famous Historia regum Britannie [HRB] written by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1100-1155) in the first half of the twelfth century. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia regum Britannie, completed in the 1130s during his years as magister at Oxford, nearly two generations after the Norman Conquest, contains the stories of the kings of Britain from Brutus to Cadwallader, divided into twelve books, with books 9 to 11 containing the stories of King Arthur and Merlin. Geoffrey’s Prophetiae/Libellus Merlini – The Prophecies of Merlin – was originally an independent work, and only later was it incorporated into the Historia (Book 7). Indeed, the Libellus was circulating separately from the Historia, and plausibly even before the completion of the Historia itself. As the prologue to the prophecies states,

1 For the Latin quotations Wright’s 2001 edition of the Historia will be used throughout the article: Geoffrey of Monmouth, The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth I (Bern, Burgerbibliothek), MS. 568, ed. Neil Wright, Cambridge, 2001 [HRB]. For the English rendering Thorpe’s translation (1966) will be used throughout (Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of the Kings of Britain, trans. Lewis Thorpe, Harmondsworth, 1966 [HKB]).

Coegit me, Alexander Lincolinensis presul, nobilitatis tue dilecto prophetias Merlini de Britannico in Latinum transferre antequam historiam parassem quam de gestis regum Britannicorum inceperam.

(HRB, 73)

[Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, my admiration for your noble behaviour leaves me no other choice but to translate the “Prophecies of Merlin” from the British tongue into Latin, before I have finished the history which I had already begun of the deeds of the kings of the Britons.]

(HKB, 170)

Indeed, the translation of the Prophetiae by Gunnlaugr Leifsson (c. 1200) demonstrates that it was known in Scandinavia as a separate text; and, as Caroline Eckhardt remarks, “over seventy manuscript copies of the Prophetia Merlini as a separate article survive”.

In his dedication Geoffrey claims that he translated the Historia into Latin from a book given to him by Walter, archdeacon of Oxford.

Unlike the Historia, which is preserved in more than two-hundred manuscripts, Breta sgyggur is extant in only a handful of manuscripts, in both a shorter and longer redaction. The longer version is found in two manuscripts. The first of these is Copenhagen, Arnamagnæan Institute, AM 573 4to (c. 1330-1370), containing Trójumanna saga, Breta sgyggur, and a fragment of Valvers þátrr, a text typical of courtly literature. This version of Breta sgyggur is incomplete, as it ends with the death of King Arthur. The second manuscript containing the longer version is Stockholm, Papp. fol. no. 58, a seventeenth-century copy of the now lost fourteenth-century manuscript of the Ormsbók. This version contains only the first part of the saga and ends before the reign of King Arthur. The shorter

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3 Ibid.

4 For the Old Norse quotations Finnur Jónsson and Eiríkur Jónsson’s edition (1892-96) will be used throughout: Breta sgyggur, in Hauksbók, eds Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen, 1892-96, 231-302. The abbreviation BÍ will be used; English translations are my own.