

Introduction

“My thought and opinion is this, that the hidden folk exist and have been created by God in the beginning like everything else that exists in the kingdom of nature [...]. And in order that men should understand God’s unfathomable omnipotence as well as possible, he has allowed the hidden folk and their livestock to reveal themselves to some people [...].”

Ólafur Sveinsson, *Treatise on Elves*

If Ólafur Sveinsson had not lived in the comparatively safe and tolerant environment of Iceland in the decades around 1800, he might easily have ended at the stake. Like the Friulian miller Domenico Scandella, who was executed in 1599,¹ Ólafur was a “common man”, a farmer on the small island of Purkey, who had developed his own view of the world in proud opposition to the authority of the Church. Like Scandella, he had an irresistible urge to express it; yet while Scandella did so to an audience of inquisitorial judges and died, Ólafur was able to put his views down in books of his own devising and lived to a ripe old age. This volume presents the first translation of Ólafur’s most detailed surviving book of “folk belief”, which is preserved in the National Library of Iceland under the shelf number Lbs 541 4to. In this manuscript of 141 pages written in his own hand, Ólafur unfolds a panorama of a world saturated with supernatural presences that had little to do with the official cosmology of the national Icelandic Lutheran Protestant Church, and he explains to the reader with force and conviction why a rational human being and good Christian of necessity has to believe in elves.

Ólafur’s writing stands proudly as a testimony to popular beliefs and religious thought in a sparsely settled northern landscape. For much of his life, Ólafur farmed on Purkey, one of the labyrinthine multitude of little islands in the fjord of Breiðafjörður in western Iceland. Then as now, this world of rocks, sea, and wide open vistas provided much more empty space than human company, and here Ólafur developed a cosmology that appears to have counter-balanced the real-world emptiness of his surroundings by filling it with the lively presence of a whole parallel society. To his mind, this other society was hidden from human view but glimpses of it could constantly be caught, and under rare special circumstances even close and intimate interaction with its members was possible. What gives importance to Ólafur’s testimony is that the elements that he weaves together in his manuscripts are widely paralleled

1 Ginzburg 1979.

in other accounts of Icelandic folklore. While Ólafur was exceptional in the intensity of his convictions and the strength of his urge to communicate them, these convictions as such appear to have been essentially representative of Icelandic folk belief of his day.² Or to put it more carefully, since there always seems to have been a huge variability in how firmly folk belief was held by the “folk”, Ólafur’s convictions appear representative of traditional Icelandic folk belief at its most intense.

The survival of such testimonies for the beliefs and religious thinking of members of the “common people” in anything like the detail of Ólafur’s treatise is a rare and lucky coincidence. Throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, we time and again get glimpses of beliefs and practices of the less privileged parts of society, but more often than not these glimpses are refracted through the lens of the perspective enforced by power, especially ecclesiastical power. One may think, for instance, of Jeanne d’Arc, the “Maid of Orléans”, who in 1431 was burned as a heretic and whose trial transcripts contain tantalising information about the popular cult at *l’arbre charmine faée de Bourlemont* (“the enchanted fairy tree of Bourlemont”) near her French home village of Domrémy.³ Other examples are the Friulian miller Domenico Scandella, already mentioned above;⁴ the Friulian *benandanti* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries;⁵ the Livonian “werewolf” Old Thiess of Kaltenbrunn, sentenced to public flogging and banishment from his home district in 1692;⁶ or the many victims of the Scottish witch crazes of the seventeenth century, who, like Stein Maltman and Isobel Gowdie, in their “confessions” expounded not only on the pacts with the Devil expected by the Church hierarchy but also on their dealings with the fairies.⁷ In all these justly famous cases, fragments of the religious views and cosmology of the “folk” are preserved in the transcripts of trials that persecute its tradition-bearers for deviating from the views and practices approved by secular and ecclesiastical hierarchies. The case of Ólafur Sveinsson, however, is different, and all the richer for it. Ólafur speaks to us of his own free will, in his own words, written down not by a court clerk but by himself in his own hand. Thus, Ólafur’s treatise on elves deserves to be studied as both a product of and a monument to the complex cosmology of the rural

2 See below the section “The *Treatise on Elves* and the World of Icelandic Elf Belief and Elf Storytelling”.

3 Barrett 1932: 150–152, 243. This case will be discussed more fully below under “A Personal Prospect of Elfland and Wider Vistas”.

4 Ginzburg 1979.

5 Ginzburg 1980.

6 Ginzburg and Lincoln 2020.

7 Hall 2006; Pitcairn 1833: 602–616; Henderson and Cowan 2007; Wilby 2010.

subaltern classes. For this purpose, the present translation aims to make it accessible to a wider audience for the first time.

Ólafur Sveinsson and his World

The world of Ólafur Sveinsson (1761–1845), who was commonly known as *Ólafur í Purkey* (“Ólafur on Purkey Island”), was one where land and sea mingled, and where a widely dispersed rural population struggled to carve a living out of an unforgiving environment. Ólafur spent most of his life in and around the fjord of Breiðafjörður in Western Iceland. The name Breiðafjörður means “broad fjord”, and this is exactly what it is: a wide expanse of sea between the large peninsula of Snæfellsnes and the rocky fingers of the Icelandic West-fjords. More so than any other Icelandic fjord, Breiðafjörður is not just open water but filled with a labyrinth of skerries and small islands (Fig. 1). Many of these islands, if fresh water was available there, were home to little farmsteads, even though some were so small that only several islands taken together provided enough ground to make farming worthwhile. Thus, the lives of the



Fig. 1: The view from the coast of Skarðsströnd towards Snæfellsnes peninsula, looking across some of the (allegedly uncountable) islands, islets, and skerries of Breiðafjörður, the density of which is such and the peninsulas of which interweave in such complex patterns that sometimes it is hard to say where one begins and another ends. Hardly anywhere in Iceland do land and sea mingle as they do in Breiðafjörður. Purkey is one of the more distant islands that can be seen in this view. © M. Egeler, 2023.

Breiðafjörður farmers were intricately tied up with the sea even when they were practising otherwise land-bound types of farming like dairy farming with cattle and sheep.⁸ Ólafur's own farm at Purkey was one of just this type. Even though he was not a seaman as such, this semi-maritime environment of small-island farming accounts for the maritime elements in his treatise on elves, where we not only read about elf hills but also about elf boats and elven expeditions to collect whale meat.

The farming world of Breiðafjörður, much like that of other parts of Iceland, was a deeply rural environment that revolved around the individual farm as its central economic and social unit. Such farms typically were small, run by a single family plus a varying number of farmhands and labourers. They practised a mixed type of farming that made the best possible use of the scant resources that the short growing season of Iceland with its harsh northern climate could provide. Animal husbandry was focused on cattle and sheep, which were fed through the long winter with hay made during the short summer season. Fishing in open rowing boats, partly done from seasonal fishing stations, provided an invaluable supplement to the food supply in the form of fresh fish, dried fish for the winter, and fish oil. Fish oil and the eiderdown collected from the nests of wild eider ducks were important trade items of high monetary value, alongside the wool products and dried and salted fish that farmers traded in a limited number of trading centres. Such trading centres were the only source for a broad range of commodities that were necessary for daily life but that were not and often could not be produced in Iceland. Not only did luxuries like sugar, tobacco, or alcohol need to be imported, but even the cereals for grinding flour for baking could not be grown in Iceland and had to be acquired through trade, making the local population dependent on the functioning of trade networks. A failure of these networks could mean the difference between a hard life and death by starvation: when somewhat further to the north, in the northern part of the neighbouring district of Strandir, numerous people died in 1803 and 1804, this was later attributed to a combination of the harsh weather of these years and the failure of trade goods to arrive at the local trading post.⁹ Icelandic society in the decades around 1800 was one existing on the edge of economic viability, with the spectre of hunger constantly looming.

Under the difficult climatic and economic conditions of Iceland at the time, there was no surplus that could have supported a sizeable urban population, and life remained almost entirely rural. Outside Reykjavík (which was

8 Cf. Þórunn Kjartansdóttir 2009.

9 Jóhannes Jónsson 1968: 90.

small), there were no cities and few villages; the normal pattern of settlement consisted of scattered, largely independent farms. This dispersed settlement pattern did not, however, imply as much social isolation as one might think. Mutual help and cooperation between neighbouring farms on various projects were considerable, and people came together at trading posts to conduct their business. On Sundays and holidays, if weather and work allowed, people met at their local churches to attend divine service and enjoy the social life associated with these occasions. Since the churches were attached to parsonage farms that were just as scattered as all other farms, this could mean a journey of several hours. Church attendance was thus patchy, but when it was possible it was an important social event. The Church in Iceland at this time was uniformly Lutheran Protestant, since Iceland during the nineteenth century still was part of Denmark and in the course of the Protestant Reformation had been compelled to follow the choice of the Danish king to adopt Lutheranism. However, Icelandic Protestantism did not have the austerity of some other varieties. Quite the opposite; during the nineteenth century it became almost a cliché of Iceland travelogues to remark on the “Catholic” splendour of Icelandic divine services.¹⁰

Alongside gaudy ecclesiastical vestments and liturgical vessels inherited from the Catholic Middle Ages, some remarkable elements of medieval religion and folk belief still echoed in the 1800s. One of the most striking “survivals” in Protestant Iceland was the ongoing veneration of Guðmundur Arason (1161–1237), a well-attested historical figure and Catholic bishop of the northern Icelandic bishopric of Hólar, who never was officially canonised, but from the fourteenth century onwards at the latest became the *de facto* favourite saint of Iceland.¹¹ Often affectionately called “Guðmundur the Good”, stories about his miracles and the blessings left by him on various landscape features are part of living tradition to the present day, and Ólafur Sveinsson dedicates his whole 29th Story to traditions connected with this medieval holy man. Less ecclesiastically tinged are other parts of Icelandic folklore that were current in the decades around 1800: folk stories not only teemed with the elves that were so dear to Ólafur’s heart, but also with a wide range of other supernatural entities, many of which had already been important in medieval Icelandic literature: ghosts, trolls, dwarfs, and sea monsters of various kinds all peopled the

10 Egeler 2020: 7–8, 39, 46.

11 On Guðmundur the Good see, for instance, Kuldkepp 2018. For a translation of his medieval life, see Turville-Petre and Olszewska 1942 (with a biographical overview: pp. xxi–xxiv). More generally on the afterlife of Catholic saints in Lutheran Iceland see Cormack 2008.

landscape of this folklore.¹² While deeply transformed in many respects, this tradition of popular storytelling and “folk belief” had never made a complete break with the storytelling cosmos of pre-Reformation Iceland.¹³

This does not, however, mean that by the 1800s there was any resistance to the Reformation on any conscious level. All we know indicates that “the folk” did not view themselves in opposition to Protestantism, but rather simply treated the entities and concepts of traditional local beliefs as an intrinsic and inextricable part of their Protestantism. Where this was questioned by a theologically trained member of the Church hierarchy (which, as we shall see, was by no means a matter of course),¹⁴ this was as likely to discredit the critic in the eyes of his congregation as it was to make the congregation reconsider its traditional tales. The 32nd Story of Ólafur’s *Treatise on Elves* – the longest prose story in his book, and the only one that has not only a number but an actual title – can be read as an explicit and exemplary discussion of the relationship between folk belief and the rulings of the official Church hierarchy. It concludes with a clear verdict in favour of “folk belief”, yet not by questioning the Reformation, but by reclaiming the right to decide what a proper understanding of Protestant Christianity really means. When the human Protestant pastor in this story questions the legitimacy of including the elves within the community of Protestant Christians, his family is cruelly punished to teach him a lesson about what really constitutes correct, supernaturally sanctioned doctrine, the doctrine that is held by the “folk” and seconded by the clergy of the elves, who are better and more enlightened Christians than their counterparts in the hierarchy of the human Church. Ólafur’s folk belief, and probably that of many of his contemporaries, did not view itself as opposed to Protestantism nor as inferior to the opinions of the official representatives of the Church. Where Church doctrine did not conform with the cosmos of traditional folk belief, Ólafur simply dismissed it as a wrong understanding of Protestantism.

In the society in which Ólafur grew up and formed his view of the world, a major medium for the communication of ideas as well as simple entertainment was storytelling. Ólafur’s world lived and breathed stories in all their forms, be they written or oral, impromptu performances or readings from books. A particularly important venue for storytelling was the institution of the “evening wake” (*kvöldvaka*). During winter, after the sun had set and

12 For an introduction to Icelandic folklore, see Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003.

13 Cf. the case study Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1993.

14 Cf. the discussion of the *Noctes Setbergenses* by the Rev. Þorsteinn Björnsson below under “Writing about Elves”.

darkness had fallen, people sat up together in the main living room of the farmhouse, did the work of processing wool, and whiled away the hours by telling stories, reciting verses, or reading aloud. These hours of stories and quiet, low-key manual work formed a central platform for the performance and transmission of oral folklore and played a key role in the culture of the time, leaving a strong impression on the minds of the people.¹⁵

One of the sources that give us an impression of the living storytelling tradition in the years immediately preceding Ólafur's birth is the account given by Eggert Ólafsson and Bjarni Pálsson, who on the instigation of the Royal Academy of Sciences in Copenhagen between 1752 and 1759 undertook a series of research journeys around Iceland, the results of which they published in the monumental two-volume work *Reise igiennem Island* ("Journey through Iceland").¹⁶ During their travels, Eggert and Bjarni again and again encountered the living storytelling culture of the time. They judged the custom of reading old stories out aloud in the farmhouse as a "most reasonable and useful pastime" (*allerfornuftigste og nyttigste Tidsfordriv*), describing the event:¹⁷

men naar Lyset er tændt, beskikkes giærne en Dreng, som godt kan læse, eller en anden af Gæsterne, dertil; og hvis Huusbonden er en Elsker af Historier, laaner han hos Naboerne eller andre gode Venner, saa mange Sagar, som han kan være forsynet med for heele Vinteren [...].



after the light is lit, a youth who can read well or one of the guests is asked to read aloud. If the farmer is a lover of stories, he will borrow so many stories from neighbours and other good friends that they will last the whole winter.

Discussing common pastimes in the Westfjords, Eggert and Bjarni noted that "the farmers are so fond of stories, both old and new, that among them there are skilled copyists who make a living by copying these stories, even though such transcriptions are not always accurate" (*Bonderne her have ellers saadan en Lyst til alleslags gamle og nye Historier, at de selv have færdige Copiister iblandt dem, som leve af at udskrive samme; dog ere slige Udskrifter ei altid at lide paa*).¹⁸ And when they describe Snæfellsnes they speak about life in the

15 Júlíana Þ. Magnúsdóttir 2023: 66–67, 86–87, 148–149, 165, 246–247; Vésteinn Ólason 1989: 196–204; Magnús Gíslason 1977.

16 Original Danish edition: Eggert Olafsen 1772; first German translation: Eggert Olafsen 1774–1775; first Icelandic translation: Eggert Ólafsson 1943.

17 Eggert Olafsen 1772, vol. 1: 47 (§68); Eggert Ólafsson 1943, vol. 1: 31 (§68); Eggert Olafsen 1774–1775, vol. 1: 25 (§68).

18 Eggert Olafsen 1772, vol. 1: 461 (§607); Eggert Ólafsson 1943, vol. 1: 321 (§607); Eggert Olafsen 1774–1775, vol. 1: 244 (§606 [*sic*]).



Fig. 2: Heinaberg, where Ólafur was born in 1761. © M. Egeler, 2024.



Map 1: Selected places in Breiðafjörður, Western Iceland. 1: Purkey. 2: Hrapsey. 3: Heinaberg. 4: Fagurey. 5: Dagverðarnes. 6: Setberg. Base map created on Inkatlas.com. Copyright OpenStreetMap contributors (openstreetmap.org), Inkatlas. Map data 5 June 2023.

fishing stations and shelters by the sea, with which Ólafur after his time as the mayor of the Snæfellsnes fishing village of Arnarstapi would have been intimately familiar.¹⁹

Historiers Læsning og historiske Viiser, som kaldes Riimur [...], bruges meget om Vinteren i alle Fiskeleier; derfor ere de velkomne, som kunne læse godt den gamle Skrivt, og syngede de paa Riim oversatte Historier: Nogle have endog fortient sig Brød dermed. Her findes gjerne Skallde, der gjøre Haandværk af at oversætte ligesaa gjerne opdigtede og forargelige Historier, som de sande og ægte, hvilke ikkun faa viide at adskille.



Reading old stories and historical poems, which are called *rímur* [...], is a common practice in the fishing stations during the winters. Therefore those who are well able to read the old script and to sing the stories that have been turned into *rímur* are welcome. Some people have even earned their bread with this. Poets are often found here, whose job it is to make rhymes out of stories. It is only a pity that these people take and translate made-up and spoilt stories with as much pleasure as the true and genuine ones, which only few know how to distinguish.

In this culture, prose literature and poetry, written texts and oral performances were both omnipresent and inseparable from each other, creating an environment in which the oral and the written could hardly be distinguished, and in which the world of everyday work – be it the farmhouse or the fishing station – was saturated with stories.

It was into this rural world of hard labour and traditional storytelling that Ólafur was born in the year 1761. He was the son of the farmer Sveinn Magnússon (1730–1823), and what we know about the chronology of the lives of the two men suggests that at the time of Ólafur's birth, Sveinn farmed in Heinaberg, a farm in the western Icelandic district of Dalasýsla that is located on the shore of Breiðafjörður (Fig. 2).²⁰ Yet already when Ólafur was about two years old the family moved to the Breiðafjörður island of Fagurey. Ólafur thus grew up, and in fact also spent his later years, moving around in the world of the innumerable tiny islands and coastal farms in and around Breiðafjörður.

By 1801, when a census was held, Sveinn had moved to the island of Purkey (Map 1). At this point, and up to 1805, his son, Ólafur, was farming

19 Eggert Olafsen 1772, vol. 1: 351 (§519); Eggert Ólafsson 1943, vol. 1: 242 (§519); Eggert Olafsen 1774–1775, vol. 1: 187 (§518 [*sic*]).

20 The folktale collector Jón Árnason was told by his contemporary Þorvaldur Sívertsen that Ólafur was born on Fagurey Island. For a full translation of Þorvaldur Sívertsen's biography of Ólafur Sveinsson, see Appendix I: "Þorvaldur Sívertsen's biography of Ólafur Sveinsson".

and working as a weaver on the nearby island of Hrappsey,²¹ which from 1773 to 1795 had been the location of one of Iceland's first printing presses²² and thus may have made some contribution to Ólafur's love of books. A direct influence is particularly likely because a brother of Ólafur's wife had worked at the printing press, as Ólafur himself mentions in his 12th Story. More moves followed in subsequent years, including one to Stapi in Snæfellsnes, today's Arnarstapi (Fig. 3), where Ólafur worked as a fisherman-farmer and for a while held the office of local mayor (*hreppstjóri*).²³ This detail closely recalls the career of Domenico Scandella, who had held a comparable office, suggesting that spirituality and administration go well together as fields in which rather outspoken individuals can find their place. Local church records show that by 1819 Ólafur had moved to join his parents on the island of Purkey that was to become so closely associated with his name (Fig. 4). He was a family man who was married to Hólmfríður Ólafsdóttir (c. 1763–1851), with whom he had five children who reached adulthood.²⁴ Hólmfríður stemmed from the same region as Ólafur himself, having grown up on the Breiðafjörður island of Arney; she and her family were the source of several of Ólafur's stories, three of which are set on Arney. After the family moved to Purkey, Ólafur continued living there until his death on 26 July 1845. He was buried in the churchyard of the church of Dagverðarnes (Fig. 5).²⁵

Ólafur's treatise on elves was far from his only literary production, though contemporaries looked upon his abilities as a writer with disdain, and viewed him as a mere collector and copyist.²⁶ Long after Ólafur's death, in a letter dated to 1860, a local man – Þorvaldur Sívertsen in Hrappsey – composed an outline of the life of Ólafur Sveinsson for Jón Árnason in Reykjavík,²⁷ who

21 Jón Guðnason 1961, vol. 2: 222.

22 See Jón Helgason 1928; Svanur Jóhannesson 2020: 51–52.

23 See Þorvaldur Sívertsen's biography of Ólafur Sveinsson translated in Appendix I.

24 Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands (National Archive of Iceland), unpaginated church records for Skarðsþing á Skarðsströnd: *Skarðsþing á Skarðsströnd. Sóknarmannatal 1802; Skarðsþing á Skarðsströnd. Sóknarmannatal 1804–1840.*

25 For a biographical overview, see Jón Guðnason 1961, vol. 2: 222. For the entry on his death and burial in the church book of Dagverðarnes, see Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands (National Archive of Iceland), *Skarðsþing á Skarðsströnd: Prestþjónustubók Dagverðarnes 1818–1868*: 112.

26 See Þorvaldur Sívertsen's biography of Ólafur Sveinsson in Appendix I.

27 Letter from Þorvaldur Sívertsen at Hrappsey to Jón Árnason, dated 21 January 1860, Bréfasafn Jóns Árnasonar (Collection of the Letters of Jón Árnason) at Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum in Reykjavík, inventory number NKS 3010 4to. The biography of Ólafur Sveinsson that Jón Árnason based on this letter is edited in Jón Árnason 1954–1961, vol. 6: 39, after the manuscript Lbs 531 4to: 465–468. For a translation, see Appendix I: "Þorvaldur Sívertsen's biography of Ólafur Sveinsson." Other



Fig. 3. Arnarstapi, where Ólafur held the office of local mayor (*hreppstjóri*), has one of the best natural harbours on the Snæfellsnes peninsula and has therefore long been a centre of both fishing and administration. © M. Egeler, 2023.



Fig. 4. The present-day farm on the island of Purkey, where Ólafur spent most of his life and wrote his treatise on elves. © M. Egeler, 2023.

was then working on bringing together the single largest collection of Icelandic folk storytelling that has been created to this day.²⁸ Jón Árnason was in the lucky position to have virtually direct access to first-hand local information, as Þorvaldur was Jón's father-in-law.²⁹ In his letter to Jón, Þorvaldur claimed that Ólafur had inherited most of his books from his father-in-law Ólafur Jónsson, yet not directly, but only after Ólafur Sveinsson's brother-in-law Guðmundur, who was not interested in them, had let most of the books spoil. Þorvaldur claimed this collection of half-rotten books to be the basis of Ólafur Sveinsson's own book production, as the only thing he was able to write in any original manner was stories about elves – which Þorvaldur makes a point to distance himself from:³⁰

Mjög fór illa um allar fræðibækur Ólafs þessa Jónssonar og mun Guðmundur sonur hans hafa komist yfir þær flestar er lítið var fyrir bóknám og hirti því ei um þær, en feygði niður og hjá honum komst Ólafur Sveinsson síðan yfir fúaleifarnar, skrifaði upp og endurbætti þar sem vantaði og mun svo hafa talið sig höfund sem hann var þó ei maður til nema að semja hégiljusögur um álfa og þvíumlíkt er hann þóttist hafa mök við; því hann var fremur gáfultill, en hégilju- og tilgerðarmaður í orðum svo oft var hent gaman að honum. Þó var hann annars vænn maður, siðgóður og guðhræddur, en fljótlyndur og hégiljusamur og siðavandur í þess háttar, og eru af því margar smásögur.



It went very badly for all the learned books of this Ólafur Jónsson, and his son Guðmundur will have gotten most of them into his possession, who had very little interest in book learning and therefore did not look after them and let them all spoil, and at his place Ólafur Sveinsson then came across what the rot had left behind, copied and corrected what was missing, and thus will have called himself an author, even though he was not a man up to anything but to compose superstitious tales about elves and the like, that he thought he had intercourse with; for he had rather little talent, and was a man of superstition

letters in the collection of Jón Árnason's letters that mention Ólafur and his treatise on elves, but do not throw new light on the contents of Ólafur's book, are a letter from Brynjólfur Oddsson dated 1 September 1859 (Bréfasafn Jóns Árnasonar NKS 3010 4to) and a letter from Jón Árnason to Guðbrandur Vigfússon dated 2 May 1862 (Bréfasafn Jóns Árnasonar Bodl. GV Icel. d.1).

- 28 Part of Jón Árnason's collection was published in 1862–1864. This selection included stories from one of Ólafur's manuscripts (Jón Árnason 1862). Jón Árnason's complete collection, including the remaining parts of Ólafur's treatise on elves, was not published until a century later (Jón Árnason 1954–1961). See below under "On this Translation", and for detailed references to the places of publication of Ólafur's stories within Jón Árnason's collection see Appendix II: Textual Endnotes.
- 29 See Páll Eggert Ólason 1948–1952, vol. 3: 49; vol. 5: 246.
- 30 Jón Árnason 1954–1961, vol. 6: 39 (Þorvaldur Sívertsen's biography of Ólafur Sveinsson; the full biography is translated in Appendix I).



Fig. 5. The church at Dagverðarnes, where Ólafur was buried after his death in 1845. In the background behind the church, parts of the island of Hrisey, where Ólafur's 2nd Story is set, are visible. © M. Egeler, 2023.

and mannerisms in his speech, so he was often made fun of. Yet he was otherwise a good man, pious and God-fearing, but irascible and superstitious and moralising in this manner, and there are many little stories about that.

This testimony thus paints Ólafur as a man who loved books but was utterly unoriginal in writing them, someone who was made fun of for his outspoken belief in elves, and who was a “good man” but difficult to such an extent that he was the topic of many local stories. In short, Ólafur was a “character”, and the letter creates the impression that his neighbours viewed him with a mixture of respect, bafflement, amusement, and irritated disdain. Yet at the same time it should be borne in mind as a note of caution that our source for this is a letter that was written fifteen years after Ólafur's death and addressed to an authority figure in the capital in Reykjavík. It is a recurrent feature of nineteenth-century testimonies of elf beliefs that authors try to claim that “today”, in the modern age of the 1800s, the belief in elves belongs to the past; hence the writer's efforts to distance himself from Ólafur's outspoken belief in elves may in part reflect an attempt to fulfil the assumed expectations of his learned addressee. When Jón Árnason published a two-volume selection from his collection of Icelandic folk storytelling two years later, he indeed claimed that in his modern times, Icelanders by and large had declared the belief in elves to

be dead;³¹ so if Þorvaldur Sívertsen in his letter had been trying to write what Jón Árnason wanted to hear, he may be deemed to have succeeded. This being said, however, Ólafur Sveinsson in his treatise on elves also himself complained about the mockery and laughter of some of his contemporaries, underlining that ridicule was at least part of the spectrum of how people reacted to Ólafur's ideas.

Ólafur's work as a scribe was evidently extensive, which for a farmer of the time was unusual, but not actually unique: history has preserved the names of many other farmers-cum-scribes from nineteenth-century Iceland, who collected stories and texts and copied various materials, and in some cases were even paid for their manuscripts.³² The Icelandic National Library in Reykjavík holds at least 14 manuscripts that are wholly or partly in Ólafur's hand,³³ and another is preserved in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.³⁴ The topics of these manuscripts include astrology, medicine, palmistry, genealogy, sagas of various sub-genres (including sagas of Icelanders, sagas of kings, sagas of ancient times, and sagas of chivalry), poetry both religious and secular, and prayers. By and large, this material bears out Þorvaldur Sívertsen's claim that Ólafur was more of a compiler rather than an author, as the vast majority of his surviving output consists of manuscripts that he did not compose, but merely copied, compiled, or even just restored. Thus almost all of his surviving manuscripts bring together pre-existing texts by other authors, ranging from medieval works to essentially contemporary ones and including texts that had already been published in print and that in Ólafur's hand re-entered a manuscript tradition almost of the medieval variety.³⁵ His treatise on elves seems to be his only extensive work of his own devising.

31 Jón Árnason 1954–1961, vol. 1: 3 (first published 1862).

32 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson 2002: 195–202; cf. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and Davíð Ólafsson 2019.

33 ÍB 112 4to (a work of genealogy); ÍB 184 4to (various sagas of different genres, including *fornaldarsögur*, *íslendingasögur*, and *riddarasögur*); ÍB 424 4to (medical texts); JS 606 4to (magic); JS 633 4to (esp. *fornaldarsögur*, *konungasögur*, and *riddarasögur*); JS 396 8vo [part I] (a very mixed manuscript with texts on topics including hagiography, learning, poetry, annals, and an Icelandic translation of the “Prophecies of Merlin” by Geoffrey of Monmouth); Lbs 470 4to [part III] (*rímur* poetry); Lbs 998 4to (primarily *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*); Lbs 1586 4to (stories); Lbs 830 8vo (psalms and prayers); Lbs 1176 8vo (*rímur* poetry); Lbs 2057 8vo (psalms); Lbs 3746 8vo (*ævintýri* / stories). Lbs 541 4to and JS 320 4to are versions of his treatise on elves. See the online catalogue of the National Library of Iceland.

34 MS Icelandic 15, Houghton Library, Harvard University (texts on astronomy, astrology, folk medicine, palmistry); Einar G. Pétursson 2024, vol 1: 66–68.

35 MS Icelandic 15, Houghton Library, Harvard University names a work printed in Marburg in 1621 as one of its sources, which is far from the only instance of German printed