

Book Review

Mortensen, Andras. 2023. *KONGSBÓKIN OG LÓGIR FØROYINGA Í HÁMIÐØLD*. Tórshavn: Fróðskapur / Faroe University Press.

Reviewed by **Stefan Drechsler**, Institutt for lingvistiske, litterære og estetiske studier, Universitetet i Bergen, Bergen, Norway, E-mail: stefan.drechsler@uib.no

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The law manuscript Isl. Perg. 4 to 33, also known as *Kongsbókin*, is a fascinating example of old Norwegian and Faroese legal writing, script, and language. Fittingly timed with the 725-jubilee of the famous *sheep letter* (*Seyðabrævið*) that is part of *Kongsbókin* today, the manuscript was in 2023 honoured with a beautifully designed facsimile edition with translations of all the featured texts into Faroese. In addition, related legal texts and introductions to the legal culture of the Faroese Middle Ages are included in the book. Although the language, content and not least provenance of *Kongsbókin* have been researched in the past – most prominently in Jón Helgason's study of the manuscript as a whole, as well as various other contributions by other researchers on the content and orthography of the *sheep letter* – the manuscript has nevertheless remained largely ignored in recent decades. It is hoped that the present book will change this, and indeed its editor and translator, Andras Mortensen, is to be congratulated on this almost wholly successful enterprise. The choice to make a facsimile edition of *Kongsbókin* is welcome, especially in relation to current research conducted on the 750-jubilee of the Norwegian *Laws of the Land* of 1274.

Kongsbókin combines like no other manuscript from the medieval north the research areas of history, linguistics, philology and not least legal history. The manuscript consists today of two originally independent volumes. Ff. 1–71 features a Gulathing redaction of the *Laws of the Land*, dated to the first quarter of the fourteenth century and likely written in the west of Norway, perhaps Bergen. Apart from a couple of Faroe Islands-specific minor texts added to the margins and two extra leaves during the fourteenth century and later part I is primarily a Norwegian product. Part II consists of the oldest version of the *sheep letter*, a royal law amendment for the Faroe Islands instructed by Duke (later King) Hákon Magnússon in 1298. The *sheep letter* in *Kongsbókin* is unique in many ways, among others, since it represents the original form of the text and includes a further letter of support from Duke Hákon to the *sheep letter* signed by chancellor Áki, as well as Duke Hákon himself. It is with the *sheep letter* in *Kongsbókin* that we are offered a unique glimpse into the working practice of the royal Norwegian chancellery in the late thirteenth century. As Mortensen points out, the *sheep letter* as featured in *Kongsbókin*, contains

an early redaction of the royal letter, which finds its final form in the manuscript *Lundarbók / Codex Reenhielmianus* in 1305–1320 (Lund, Universitetsbiblioteket, Mh 15).

Mortensen offers the reader a number of explanatory texts on the content and provenance of the primary texts of *Kongsbókin*, as well as, more generally, on the medieval secular and ecclesiastical legal culture of the Faroe Islands and its strong dependence on Norwegian legislation during the late thirteenth century and beyond. In relation to this, Mortensen also includes the renewed Church law for Gulathing from ca. 1250 by King Hákon Hákonarson and Archbishop Sigurðr Eindriðarson. The text itself is not found in *Kongsbókin*, but, among others, in the aforementioned *Lundarbók*, from which the text is taken. The choice to have this particular text included in his book is obvious, since not only is *Lundarbók* related to the Faroe Islands due to its Faroese scribe, but the Church law text was likely in force in the Faroe Islands, rather than, for example, the 1273 Church law of Archbishop Jón, the official status of which as an interregional law code remains a topic of discussion in current research.

Undoubtedly the most important featured text for the legal history of the Faroe Islands is a royal letter from King Magnús Hákonarson to the Faroe Islands from 1271. Although it only survives in an early modern paper manuscript (Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 316 fol., 1575–1600, s. 307–308), the letter is particularly important due to its reference to an earlier (but otherwise unknown) law code of the Faroe Islands. Together with the *Laws of the Land*, the *sheep letter* and the 1250 provincial Church laws for the Gulathing, the present book thus features a basic overview of laws decreed for the Faroe Islands in relation to the western Norwegian Gulathing in the late 1200s. Apart from the *sheep letter*, it is the younger additions made in the following century that are particular for *Kongsbókin* and that are well presented in the present volume. This is exemplified by the somewhat famous *dog letter* (*Hundabrævið*) from the second half of the fourteenth century, which contains the oldest reference to a local legal assembly, and a number of individual minor texts from 1400 and later, including a legal provision on taxes for people attending the law assembly in the Faroe Islands, as well as several verdicts.

In the present book, primary texts from *Kongsbókin* and the additional texts and documents are transcribed in facsimile and printed together with high quality photos and the named Faroese translations (in relation to the *dog letter* we also find images made at the Royal Danish Library by multispectral imaging). The *Laws of the Land* text is, as mentioned in the introduction, based on diplomatic transcriptions made by Anna Catharina Horn and Robert Paulsen from a slightly older manuscript (Isl. perg. 4to 34, Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, 1275–1300) and published in the Menota database. This is not a bad choice. The text of *Kongsbókin* text is well transcribed and follows standard conventions of diplomatic transcriptions. For example,

it does not feature the special character ‘œ’, which in the present transcription are replaced by the modernised (Faroese) ‘ø’ letter. Details such as this may be less relevant for the Faroese public, which was undoubtedly the target audience of the present book. Yet, the lack of any palaeographic or codicological information in *Kongsbókin* is unfortunate and prohibits the reader from understanding a couple of key facts about the manuscript. One example of these shortcomings is the absence of information about gathering structures, which are in fact largely provided by gathering numbers in the manuscript itself. Although this information has previously been published in an excellent article by Jón Helgason, it would have been helpful for the reader if this would have been added to the present book, among other things to provide a better understanding of the initial stages of the production of part I of *Kongsbókin* featuring the *Laws of the Land*. For example, a codicological division is indicated after the section about going to assemblies, the Christian section, and all following sections. In addition, a textual peculiarity is found at the end of the same text where, of the concluding law amendments, only the one by King Magnús Hákonarson and the epilogue is found. Albeit important for the content and structure of the featured *Laws of the Land*, such discussions are left out of the book entirely. Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, the present book is undoubtedly an important contribution to current research. Especially the sections on *Kongsbókin* itself are particularly interesting and offer unique insights into the medieval western legal culture and life.