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Maltreated manuscripts from the Arnamagnæan Collection

Sturlunga saga includes a famous episode in which the priest Ingimundr Þorgeirsson and his nephew Guðmundr Arason, who later became a bishop at Hólar (Guðmundr góði, “the good”), are shipwrecked. Both of them survived, and Ingimundr’s book chest was washed ashore. The story tells us that he then dried the wet manuscripts. But even if Ingimundr had luck in finding and saving his precious books, not everyone was as lucky as he was.

In this paper I will consider the destiny of some Icelandic manuscripts from medieval times. I will discuss the treatment of some of the maltreated manuscripts in the Arnamagnæan Collection in Copenhagen and Reykjavík, but also mention some medieval sources, such as deeds, which mention the treatment, state and appearance of some now lost manuscripts. Though the people of the 17th century had damaged and reused medieval vellum manuscripts for other purposes than as a writing material, people of all time have ill-treated books.