

Constructing Space, Cult, and Identity

Saintly Bishops in Medieval Iceland

Medieval Iceland was a country without cities. The population during the high Middle Ages has been estimated to be between forty and sixty thousand. The people's sustenance, farming and fishing, shaped the structure of the country and did not provide the necessary conditions for towns or villages. Practically the whole population lived on scattered farms, and fishing could not be practiced all year round.¹ The *alþingi* (general assembly) was the national and legislative assembly of medieval Iceland. It brought together all regions of the country under a common legal and judicial system, without the executive power of a monarch or regional rulers. The *alþingi* met at Þingvellir in southwestern Iceland for two weeks in June, until Iceland succumbed to Norwegian power in the late thirteenth century. The Þingvellir site is a natural amphitheatre and easily accessible from most of the country. During the *alþingi* meetings, Þingvellir became the equivalent of a city. It was the place where craftsmen, ale brewers and vendors gathered, a lively scene with storytelling and gossip, sports and courtship.

Christianity was adopted at an *alþingi* meeting in 999 or 1000. The sanctity of the Icelandic saints was declared and accepted at the *alþingi*. The first bishopric was founded in 1056 at Skálholt, where the first bishop of the country, Ísleifr Gizurarson, resided. Ísleifr, however, was hardly more than a missionary bishop. He was succeeded by his son, Gizur. During his years as bishop, 1082–1118, Skálholt was established as an episcopal see. The second episcopal see was founded at Hólar, North-Iceland, in 1106. Until then, Skálholt was

¹ Gunnar Karlsson 2000, 41–45.

the only episcopal see in the country. The bishopric at Hólar included the northern quarter of the country, the other three quarters belonged to Skálholt. Hólar was also a former farmstead with a church. A priest, Illugi Bjarnason, donated his patrimony to establish the new bishopric.

The two bishoprics did not comprise of any cities, or even villages, but they consisted of large households and cathedral schools. It has been estimated that up to 120 people were living at Skálholt at around 1200.² No medieval cathedral or any other edifice survives from these medieval bishoprics. The cathedrals, situated in the aforementioned farmlands, were made of wood, and owing to various natural disasters and accidents, they had to be rebuilt several times during the Middle Ages. In sum, no magnificent buildings representing the medieval past are visible in the Icelandic landscape today.

During the Catholic era, until 1550, three native saints were venerated in Iceland. All three were confessors and bishops. Þorlákr Þórhallsson, the fifth bishop of Skálholt and the first Icelandic saint, was born in 1133. He was for several years abbot of the first Icelandic Augustinian monastery until he was consecrated bishop in 1178. He died on 23 December 1193. His relics were translated on 20 July 1198 and in the same year he was declared a saint at the *alþingi* by his successor, Bishop Páll Jónsson, the illegitimate son of Þorlákr's sister and one of the country's most powerful chieftains. The second Icelandic saint, Bishop Jón Ögmundsson of Hólar was born in 1052. He became the first bishop of Hólar in 1106 and died in 1121. After his remains were exhumed, they were enshrined at Hólar in 1200 and his cult was officially recognized. Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237), the fifth bishop of Hólar, was also regarded as a saint. His cult is mainly a product of the fourteenth century. One chronicle of bishops and several Icelandic saints' lives and biographies have been preserved. The lives and biographies of the bishops were composed and re-written from the late twelfth until the fourteenth century.³ In this article

² Gunnar F. Guðmundsson 2000, 140–147.

³ *Biskupa sögur* I 2003; *Biskupa sögur* II 2002. For an introduction on the *Biskupa sögur* in English, see Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1993.

I will focus on the lives of the first two saintly bishops, with special emphasis on the accounts of the translations on their relics.

The oldest texts preserved in Icelandic manuscripts are religious writings. One of the oldest extant texts is a collection of Saint Þorlákr's miracles that were read aloud at *alþingi* in 1199. The manuscript, dated to 1220, is in Icelandic, although a Latin version may also have existed.⁴ Translated saints' lives were put to parchment decades before the more known Icelandic family sagas were written down. Religious literature therefore occupied an important place in the textual landscape. Composing, translating, copying and re-writing saints' lives, was a process that continued from the dawn of writing in twelfth century Iceland until the Reformation. Saints' lives, passions of martyrs and lives of confessor bishops were known to medieval Icelandic audiences in translation and the learned clergy knew and made use of Latin texts.⁵ The well-established universal saints had a certain priority in principle but local saints were highly valued because of their proximity. The life of Saint Þorlákr describes how people longed for their own, local saint: "Töluðu þat margir vitrir menn at annat hvárt myndi helgi Þorláks byskups upp koma ella myndi þess eigi auðit verða á Íslandi" (Many learned men said that either Þorlákr would be made a saint or else this would never happen in Iceland).⁶

However, a local saint was not exclusively a native saint. A foreign, "imported" saint could also be perceived as locally present in his relics. Saint Martin was one of the most popular saints in medieval Iceland. His cult belongs to the oldest strata of Icelandic dedications. He was patron of two significant churches in each of the dioceses discussed above. A relic of Saint Martin was kept in the cathedral of Hólar. A miracle story tells that a priest visited Bishop Jón and kindly asked him to give him a part of the relic. Bishop Jón reportedly did not like to deny the priest his request but was hesitant to cut a holy bone in two. He put the bone on the altar and kept it under the altar cloth during the *secretæ*. When the mass was over he discovered that

⁴ Its shelfmark is AM 645 4to.

⁵ Widding, Bekker-Nielsen and Shook 1963. Cormack 1994.

⁶ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 85.

the bone had miraculously split into two parts. Thanking Saint Martin, he then happily gave the other part to the priest who brought it to his church, dedicated to Saint Martin.⁷

The oldest lives of Saints Þorlákr and Jón look familiar to the student of hagiography. The hagiographers knew and used the structure, common *topoi* and the ideology of saints' lives. The likeness to universal saints and Christ is a recurring theme in the descriptions of the local saints. Biblical quotations and re-tellings thereof, imply that the texts constitute a reiteration of a master-story and the lives of new saints are a re-enactment of previous hagiographic and sacred events. In one of the earliest miracles of Saint Þorlákr, sight is restored to a blind man and a deaf man, who felt sad because he would be unable to hear the miracles, was cured when he arrived at the *alþingi* hearing them just as clearly as any other person present. In the ceremony that followed the translation, a crippled man was cured. The miracles reflect the words of Isaiah 35:5–6: “Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.”

These fundamental miracles mark the beginning of Þorlákr's cult and indicate that he is a true follower of Christ. As a child, the bishop is the typical *puer senex* who rejects playing and spends his time on study and devotion. He is characterized by humility, and a great emphasis is placed on his episcopal stewardship, and on his fasting and constant praying. Saint Martin of Tours, being the prototype of the confessor-bishop, has obviously influenced the hagiographers.⁸ In *Þorláks saga*, it is told that shortly before his death, Saint Þorlákr dreamt that he carried the head of Saint Martin in his arms. The bishop was then staying at the *alþingi*. A wise priest interpreted the

⁷ *Biskupa sögur* I 2003, 222–223.

⁸ Saint Martin was a popular saint in Iceland. He is referred to in the lives of all three Icelandic saints. The translation of the *vita* of Saint Martin is preserved in three versions. The oldest manuscript is dated to the second half of the thirteenth century. All three can be traced to an original translation of Sulpicius Severus. A thirteenth-century embroidered Icelandic altarcloth (*antependium*), depicting the life and miracles of Saint Martin, is kept in Musée de Cluny. Widding, Bekker-Nielsen and Shook 1963, 321.

dream saying that Þorlákr would follow in Saint Martin's footsteps as a saintly bishop.⁹

Iceland is rich in medieval vernacular literature, and perhaps for this reason, the Latin heritage has not received much scholarly attention until recently. Learned hagiographers were able to compose in Latin, translate and write in the vernacular.¹⁰ The first texts written for the veneration of the Icelandic saints were in Latin. All Latin *Þorláks saga* texts are now lost, except for several fragments of two different lives of Saint Þorlákr and *lectiones* for his two feast-days. A Latin life of Saint Jón, mentioned in a church inventory and referred to in the Icelandic versions, is now lost.¹¹ The oldest extant Latin fragment, dated to *c.* 1200, contains a remnant of a *vita* and four miracles. It begins by describing the ascetic life of Þorlákr's predecessor, his illness and subsequent death. The narrative then proceeds to refer to the election of Þorlákr and continues to describe how the church at Skálholt flourished under his distinguished predecessors:

Sed qualiter beatus Thorlacus ad summi sacerdotii gradum promotus sit, sufficienter in superiore huius operis libro expressimus. His igitur presulibus et eximiis plebis sibi commisse rectoribus Scalotensis ecclesia uiguit, et usque ad sancti Thorlaci tempora sicut modo comprobatur magis ac magis in suo statu amplificata et dignanter confirmata conualuit. Isti sunt precipui gregis dominici pastores et uerissimi patres patrie qui sue et suorum subditorum utilitati bene providentes, suos sequaces crebris ammonitionibus et bonorum operum ex[emplis exhortantes?]

(Thus the Church of Skálholt flourished under these bishops and excellent leaders of the people committed to their charge, and up to Saint Þorlákr's time, as is now shown, it grew more and more strong, extended in its state and worthily reinforced. These are the distinguished shepherds of the Lord's flock and wholly true fathers of their native land, who, well providing for their own and their peoples need [exhorted] their followers with repeated admonitions and the example of good works.)¹²

⁹ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 79.

¹⁰ Gottskálk P. Jensson 2003, 257–267; Mortensen 2006, 247–273.

¹¹ Foote 2003, ccxv.

¹² *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 342, English translation by Wolf 1989, 261–276.

The text puts emphasis on the bishopric of Skálholt and could therefore have originated as a *gesta episcoporum*, written when the first Icelandic saint and former bishop of Skálholt brought glory to the bishopric.¹³ A similar work in Icelandic, a chronicle called *Hungrvaka*, which tells of the lives of the five bishops who preceded Saint Þorlákr, was written shortly after 1200.¹⁴

Hungrvaka recounts the origin of each bishop and a detailed and dated account of his consecration. His personal qualities are described and any specific ways he enriched or enlarged the bishopric at Skálholt are emphasized. Each chapter ends with a detailed account of the bishop's death and a list of historical events that took place abroad and in Iceland during his episcopacy. The chapters are relatively short but not devoid of hagiographic motifs. The first bishop, Ísleifr, is especially depicted as a saintly character. He works miracles that reflect the first miracles of Christ, as told in the Gospels according to John and Mark, thus accentuating a sacred origin of the See of Skálholt. Bishop Ísleifr cures the insane and although he does not change water into wine he blesses and restores damaged ale. A short biography of Saint Þorlákr's successor was also written soon after his death.

The diocese of Skálholt therefore has a continuous written history covering the period 1056 to 1211, and, as previously mentioned, possibly also a corresponding chronicle in Latin. There seems to have been no attempt to write a continuous history at Hólar. Several biographies of the third Icelandic saint, the thirteenth-century Bishop Guðmundr Arason were written in the thirteenth and the fourteenth century. No biographies were written of the three bishops who ruled between Jón and Guðmundr, and no chronicle equivalent to the *Hungrvaka* was written of the diocese of Hólar.

The oldest Icelandic version of the life of Saint Þorlákr, *Þorláks saga*, was written shortly after the translation of his relics, and rewritten in the second half of the thirteenth century. In the oldest version, only brief mention is made of his antagonism to secular power. Later

¹³ On *gesta episcoporum* as a genre, see Sot 1981, 17–21, 47.

¹⁴ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 1–43.

versions contain long passages where these arguments are minutely detailed. Based on the evidence of the younger versions, Þorlákr had become best known in the Icelandic church history for his disputes with the chieftains over administration of churches and their properties, and over the moral standards of both clergy and laymen. One of the bishop's most difficult adversaries in church property and moral matters alike kept the bishop's sister as a concubine. It is therefore not surprising that the sanctity of the bishop was not recognized until a few years after the chieftain's death in 1197. The Life of Saint Jón, *Jóns saga*, is preserved in three Icelandic recensions, an early thirteenth-century version and two fourteenth-century ones. The difference between the versions is mainly stylistic. As can be expected, *Jóns saga* contains less factual information than the near-contemporaneous *Þorláks saga*. The hagiographer supplemented his scarce information with matter drawn from hagiographic motifs as well as learned and local, oral storytelling.

Hagiography can easily be interpreted as a series of *topoi* and ideal genres, a ready-made model of which hagiographers made a locally tinged version. This is true to a certain extent but the adaptation of hagiography as a literary mode was a dynamic and creative process. The likeness is not a mere copy or imitation. It is a semiotic relation that shows the saint's participation in a universal sacred world. Saints are described in a language of long tradition. As saints inevitably share the same personal features and deeds, their lives strongly resemble each other. However, there is always some diversity within the uniformity. The hagiographer has considerable scope in his writing to express his own attitudes and to reflect those of his audience. When presenting his saint according to tradition he was still at liberty to emphasize different aspects of the type.¹⁵

The oldest lives of Saints Þorlákr and Jón were written at almost the same time. Being lives of confessor bishops they are similar in structure, and ideology, but they show different concepts of sanctity. *Þorláks saga* depicts Saint Þorlákr as a model bishop and the setting of a good example is evident from the beginning. By his stern way of

¹⁵ Heffernan 1988, 20–25, 136.

setting an example and correcting other people's way of living, he alone is central and other people are at a distance. In this way, the life of Saint Þorlákr is notably different from the life of Saint Jón Ögmundsson of Hólar, whose story is full of people. Saint Jón is no less a model bishop than Saint Þorlákr and he is said to have strengthened his flock with good example. But there is a fundamental difference in the description of the two bishops within their community. In *Þorláks saga*, Þorlákr is distanced from his fellow men. *Jóns saga* illustrates with anecdotes a balance and an interaction between Bishop Jón and the community in the See of Hólar, culminating in the description of the school at Hólar, which is shown as a model monastery. Here the older teach the younger, there is no envy, the younger spend their time between lessons in writing and everybody performs their canonical Hours with great attention.¹⁶ The two saintly Icelandic bishops are ideal figures but in a different way. Although Saint Þorlákr's biographer writes about his gentleness, his strictness and discipline remain his main characteristics. In the life of Saint Jón, the Bishop is described as being gentle, loving and full of compassion.

The translation narratives illustrate clearly the difference between *Þorláks saga* and *Jóns saga*. Following hagiographical tradition, the translation of both saints was preceded by dreams and visions. For special local colour, it is told that the winter before had been very hard and people feared famine. Shortly after Bishop Þorlákr's death a farmer in northern Iceland dreamt that he had a visitor from the See of Skálholt who told him about the bishop's death and that he had been given a new name which indicated his new saintly role. One of the most prominent men in Skálholt dreamt that he saw the bishop sitting atop the church at Skálholt in his episcopal robes, blessing the people. This vision is thus interpreted in the narrative that he will tend his flock after his death. Finally, four winters after the bishop's death, when the winter had been extremely long and harsh, a priest dreamt that an unknown man visited him and told him that the weather would improve if Þorlákr's earthly remains were disinterred and treated as holy relics. The priest hurried to tell his bishop about

¹⁶ *Biskupa sögur* I 2003, 217–218.

the dream. The narrative describes how more and more miracles occurred and a mysterious light was seen over the bishop's grave to indicate his holiness.¹⁷

Seventy-seven years after Bishop Jón's death, the then incumbent Bishop of Hólar had his bones washed and placed into a new coffin. For two years, miracles telling of Bishop Jón's intervention occurred. After a harsh winter, the bishop appears in a dream and tells that the situation will improve if the bishop's earthly remains are treated as holy relics. But, in *Jóns saga*, the dreamer is neither a priest nor any other prominent male person. Bishop Jón gives his important message to a powerless individual, a devout but very poor woman. There are similar conditions and dreams, but very different recipients.¹⁸

Porláks saga is an institutionalized text that emphasizes male and clerical authority. A farmer, a priest and, a learned, highly esteemed chieftain are therefore naturally chosen as the dreamers and visionaries who promote the bishop's translation. The most important oral source mentioned in the text is a eulogy by one of the most prominent figures of the diocese. Among the informants quoted in *Jóns saga* we find common men and women as well as a poor woman whose dream leads to the translation of the bishop's relics. Sick and crippled young girls were among the first to be cured by Saint Jón's intervention. The hagiographer unites the saint with his people at Hólar, in accordance with the gentle images he wants to create of the bishop within his community. The translation narratives represent well the difference between the two legends and their different ways of constructing the atmosphere of the episcopal space, the bishop's cult and saintly identity. Miracles occurred all over the medieval Iceland, but they were told to the priests who brought them to the bishops where they were written down and kept in the cathedrals. Numerous miracles also took place by the shrines of the local saints and pilgrims travelled to the cathedrals either in hope of a cure or to bring offerings after being helped by the saints' intervention. Although not situated in a city or a town, the cathedrals of Skálholt and Hólar were the centres for the

¹⁷ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 84–86, 97–98, 204–205, 253–256.

¹⁸ *Biskupa sögur* I 2003, 268–270.

cult of the local saints, and the *alþingi*, as a substitute for a city, also played a significant role.

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