

## Sanctity and the Sea

In medieval Iceland, the sea, fishing and whale and seal hunting was an important aspect of daily life, although farming could sustain the majority of the population. Saga literature indicates that fish had been caught from the very beginning. Fish became of vital importance once the population had been taught to observe fast. In addition to fishing, seals were hunted on shores and whales drifted to beaches where they were divided among the people who lived nearby. Wood was imported from Norway but the sea also provided valuable driftwood.<sup>1</sup> The sea and sea-faring was part of the Viking roots, as emphasized in sagas and poetry. The settlers had travelled to the country by sea. The proximity of the sea is also felt in the miracles of Icelandic saints. In this article I intend to examine miracles of Icelandic saints that involve fishing, sea-mammal or sea-bird hunting and travels by sea. In addition, I examine miracles attributed to potential or temporarily venerated Icelandic saints and sea-related miracles of St Magnus, earl of Orkney.

Ships, water, fish and fishing are well known Christian symbols. Ships are symbols of the Church in which the faithful find salvation from the storm of life. Part of the imagery comes from the ark saving Noah and his family during the Flood. Calming the storm is one of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels.<sup>2</sup> Miraculous catch of fish is also a reminiscence of the stories of the disciples fishing unsuccessfully in the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus told them to cast their nets again they were rewarded with a great catch.<sup>3</sup> Fish is the symbol of Christ. The initial letters of the Greek word for fish, ἰχθῦς, formed an acrostic which

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<sup>1</sup> Gunnar Karlsson 2000, 46–48.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 4:35–41.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 5:1–11; John 21:1–14.

could be read as “Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Saviour”. Five fish also had a eucharistic significance, a reference to the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. St Peter the apostle has a fish as one of his attributes. In Christian art, ships are depicted with several saints, including St Brendan and St Nicholas of Myra. The latter’s cult is believed to have originated by the shores of Lycia, where the inhabitants depended greatly on fishing. It has even been suggested that he was a Christian version of Poseidon. He was the patron saint of seafarers and merchants. Medieval Icelandic sources show that St Nicholas was known in Iceland since the twelfth century and a popular saint. He seems to have been especially popular among Icelandic aristocratic families who were ship-owners and merchants.<sup>4</sup>

Three Icelandic saints were venerated from 1200 until the Reformation in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Þorlákr Þórhallsson (1133–1193), Jón Ögmundsson (1052–1121) and Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237).<sup>5</sup> The Icelandic saints were bishops and confessors. They were local saints, not recognized by the pope, although papal right to canonize was gradually becoming generally acknowledged. It was, however, a long process, and a sole right to canonize was not given to the pope until 1234. Even then, the pope could delegate his authority and give the right to canonize to other clerical authorities.<sup>6</sup>

Þorlákr Þórhallsson, bishop of Skálholt, was for several years abbot of the first Icelandic Augustinian monastery until he was consecrated bishop in 1178. He died on December 23rd 1193. His relics were translated on July 20th 1198 and in the same year he was declared a saint at the Alþingi by his successor, 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 consecrated as the first bishop of Hólar in 1106. His bones were disinterred and washed in 1198. In 1200 they were enshrined at Hólar and his cult was officially recognized. Guðmundr Arason, the fifth bishop of Hólar, was the third Icelandic saint. His

<sup>4</sup> Sverrir Tómasson 1982, 22–23.

<sup>5</sup> *Biskupa sögur* I 2003; *Biskupa sögur* II 2002; Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Finucane 1995, 36.

cult is mainly a product of the fourteenth century. His relics were exhumed in 1315.

The lives of St Þorlákr (*Þorláks saga*) and St Jón (*Jóns saga*) were originally composed in Latin. Remnants of Latin Þorláks saga texts are related to the vernacular version but do also show some discrepancies.<sup>7</sup> Sources indicate that a Latin life of St Jón did exist but it is now lost.<sup>8</sup> No Latin life of Guðmundr Arason has been preserved. The oldest vernacular version of *Þorláks saga* was written shortly after 1200 and rewritten in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. *Jóns saga* exists in three versions, one early thirteenth century version and two from the fourteenth century. Four surviving biographies (versions A–D) of Guðmundr Arason were written in the fourteenth century. The youngest of the four (version D), by Abbot Arngrímr Brandsson, is dated to around 1340–1350. It has been suggested that version D, apparently written with a foreign audience in mind, was an attempt to acquire a papal canonization of Bishop Guðmundr, but no Latin version has been preserved.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the Middle Ages miracles formed an integral part of daily, ordinary life. In common with all canonized or recognized, local saints, the Icelandic saints' lives contain miracles. *In vita* miracles are placed within the epic discourse of the narrative. Post mortem miracles which apparently occurred as the result of prayers and with the help of relics, are related as an epilogue. *Þorláks saga* mentions several *in vita* miracles, but the audience is reminded that their true value was not understood until after the bishop's death. *Guðmundar saga* is different in this respect with a relatively high number of *in vita* miracles. While there are no more than about fifteen in *Þorláks saga* and *Jóns saga*, the youngest version of *Guðmundar saga* (version D) contains eighty-three.<sup>10</sup> The local, mundane features of the narrative are more prominent in the miracles than in the biography, where the pious saint and his exemplary life is usually the central figure. In mir-

<sup>7</sup> *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 341–364.

<sup>8</sup> Foote 2003, ccxv.

<sup>9</sup> Stefán Karlsson 2000, 168–169.

<sup>10</sup> Hunt 1985, 213–214.

acles, common people with everyday problems come forward as central characters. The saint acts as a model of behavior in the biographies, the miracles make him a benefactor and protector.

Icelandic miracles were written both in separate miracle-books and at the end of each saga. The largest collection of Icelandic miracles is attributed to St Þorlákr. The oldest preserved document is a miracle-book that was read aloud at the Alþingi in 1199.<sup>11</sup> The manuscript is dated to 1220. No parallel collection of St Jón's first miracles has been preserved but a collection of St Jón's miracles is referred to in version C of *Guðmundar saga*, manuscripts, Stockh. Papp. 4to nnr. 4 and AM 395 4to. It may have been in an existence around 1200.<sup>12</sup> *Guðmundar saga*, version B, was probably written shortly after 1320, or after the relics had been exhumed. A miracle-book is included in this version. Most miracle-stories are preserved in more than one version and new miracles were added in younger versions of the sagas. In this article, the oldest and the youngest collection of Icelandic miracles, the oldest the miracle book of St Þorlákr and the miracles in the youngest *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, will be discussed.<sup>13</sup>

All Icelandic miracle collections contain sea or water-related miracles. The beginning of the *Miracle-book* of St Þorlákr is lost, but forty-four miracles have been preserved. Characteristically, the majority of the miracles tell of healings, several of lost tools miraculously found, and harsh and stormy weather improved by the intervention of the saint. Sea or water appears in seven of the forty-four miracles. In most of the sea-related miracles in the *Miracle-Book*, the sea is shown as a food-supply. A woman is walking alone on the shore and finds a seal lying there and tries to strike it, but then it raises itself, taller than the woman. She prays to the saint and manages to kill the seal and has plenty of food for her family. A similar story tells of a poor man who strikes a seal to death and understands that he would not have been able to strike such a heavy blow without the saint's intervention. He returns home to a grateful family that did not forget

<sup>11</sup> *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 103–140.

<sup>12</sup> Foote 2003, cclxxi.

<sup>13</sup> *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 103–140; *Biskupa sögur* II 1858–78, 1–220.

to thank God and St Þorlákr. Another young man was so poor that he had to live on food given to him by kind people, and what he was able to fish in fresh water. He sat for a whole day in the dark and cold winter, trying to fish through a hole in the ice. It wasn't until he had prayed to St Þorlákr and promised to sing five *Pater Nosters* that his luck changed. He caught fifty fat fish when nobody else around him caught anything at all.

Two stories tell of ships blown away in stormy weather but found again, unharmed, with the help of the saint. Ferry accidents when crossing the river Hvítá, near Skálholt, are described in two stories. In both narratives, poor people wanted to travel with the ferry to Skálholt, probably hoping for alms. The ferry sinks but most of the passengers are saved. The ferryman, described as pious and generous towards the poor, saves the passengers by invoking St Þorlákr. He almost drowns but then a miraculous hand appears and clears the water away from his face.<sup>14</sup>

The Bishop Guðmundr Arason, the third Icelandic saint, had already gained the nickname *inn góði* (the good) while still a priest, thanks to his concern for the poor. He was renowned for his consecration of wells and springs at which people were healed. In chapter 87 of *Guðmundar saga D*, the narrator turns to his audience saying that they have heard for a while about Guðmundr's miracle-working through springs and waters.<sup>15</sup> Thereafter, he continues, it is fit to learn about the wonders he has worked with the sea. The voice of the narrator refers to a chapter in the text describing how people in Iceland sustain themselves with livestock and by fishing. Although no Latin version has been preserved, the text, with its detailed information on fishing around Iceland, seems to have been written with a foreign audience in mind.<sup>16</sup> It is emphasized how Bishop Guðmundr's miraculous power helped people fishing or hunting sea-birds and collecting eggs on dangerous cliffs. One story, preserved in several versions tells of a man who asks Guðmundr to bless one strand of the

<sup>14</sup> *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 139.

<sup>15</sup> *Biskupa sögur* II 1858–1878, 179.

<sup>16</sup> *Biskupa sögur* II 1858–1878, 179–180.

rope he used for descending cliffs. During his descent, a gigantic hand appeared and made an attempt to cut the rope. The man was saved because the strand the bishop had blessed remained intact.

A picturesque story tells about the appearance of *Selkolla* (Seal-head), an infamous she-troll who alternatively appeared as a beautiful woman or a female with the head of a seal.<sup>17</sup> In folklore, seals appear as spellbound women or the devil incarnate. The Selkolla comes into being when a couple is bringing a child to a church to be christened. On their way to the church, walking by the sea, the couple was overcome with lust. They placed the baby by a rock and enjoyed sex. When they returned, the infant looked blue and monstrous. The couple became terrified and abandoned it. The baby was never found but the Selkolla appeared where it had been placed. Her dangerous nature was sexual. She seduced a farmer in his boatshed near the sea by changing shape and taking on the guise of his wife. Marlene Ciklamini has pointed out that the Selkolla shares some features with the shape-changing *skogsrå* in Swedish legends.<sup>18</sup> But, in the *skogsrå* tales the forest is a place of magic and danger, whereas the Icelandic Selkolla dwells near the sea and she is partly a seal. The sea and the sea-shore, the place where land and sea meet become the equivalent of the forest. *Guðmundar saga* tells of numerous disasters caused by Selkolla. The bishop manages to overcome her and submerge her with his powerful words. Still, she appears again to fishermen but she is finally driven away by crosses put in the landscape by the bishop.<sup>19</sup>

During the ages when saints played a major role in people's lives, there were more "candidates" for sanctity than those who became recognized. Medieval Icelandic sources tell stories of individuals who are described with hagiographic traits.<sup>20</sup> They may have been venerated for a short while but they were never officially recognized as saints. Two of the potential saints are the hermit Ásólfur and the chieftain Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson.

<sup>17</sup> *Biskupa sögur* II. 1858–78, 77–82.

<sup>18</sup> Ciklamini 2008, 1–18.

<sup>19</sup> *Biskupa sögur* II. 1858–78, 82

<sup>20</sup> Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2011, 47–52.

The tale of the Christian, pre-conversion settler Ásólfur, is preserved in two redactions of *Landnámabók*, *Sturlubók*, from the latter half of the thirteenth century, and the slightly younger *Hauksbók*, dated to 1302–1310.<sup>21</sup> Besides, a shorter version of the Ásólfur narrative is included in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, probably composed in the early fourteenth century. Ásólfur is introduced as a good Christian who did not want to communicate with pagans or accept any food from them. When his neighbours wanted to know how he nourished himself they discovered that a stream near his dwelling place was wondrously filled with fish. In their envy, they drove him away. All the fish disappeared from the stream when they wanted to enjoy Ásólfur's former food supply. The story repeats itself three times. In the *Hauksbók* version, Ásólfur is said to be Irish. It has been pointed out that the writer of this version may have recognized the fish-miracles as Irish. Fish miracles are certainly characteristic of Irish saints, such as St Patrick and St Columcille who could alternatively curse or bless rivers and waters with fish. Hermann Pálsson has shown similarities with the Latin life of St Brendan, where fifty rivers were miraculously filled with fish. Other saints cursed the rivers and all the fish disappeared. Miraculous catching of fish also occurs in non-Celtic saints' lives, such as the lives of St Martin, and could be a copy from the gospel narratives. There may be other general Irish/Celtic characteristics to be considered. Ásólfur makes an overseas journey to become a hermit in a foreign country, which may connect him with early Irish saints.<sup>22</sup>

Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson was a chieftain from North-West Iceland. Besides being a chieftain he was a renowned physician and a widely travelled pilgrim. His saga describes the feud between the protagonist Hrafn and his adversary. Hrafn is described as a good Christian; he is peaceful, righteous, generous, shows mercy and rejects worldly wealth and glory. His adversary is depicted as the opposite, ambitious and avaricious. There are numerous biblical and hagiographic motives

<sup>21</sup> *Landnámabók* 1968, 61–65.

<sup>22</sup> Jesch 1985, 516; Clunies Ross 2002, 46–47; Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2013, 28; Hermann Pálsson 1996.

in *Hrafns saga*.<sup>23</sup> The saga was probably written about two decades after Hrafn's execution in 1013. *Hrafns saga* is a contemporary saga of thirteenth century feuds, which was incorporated in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation from around the year 1300. The *Sturlunga saga* comprises a series of texts by different writers and forms a chronicle of Icelandic history during the period 1117–1264.

Besides the *Sturlunga saga* version, a separate version of the saga has been preserved. The separate version contains hagiographic elements eliminated almost entirely when the saga was included in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation.<sup>24</sup> In one of the first chapters of the saga, an attempt was made to kill a walrus that had swum to the shore. The walrus escaped but sank because it had been injured. Fishermen tried to catch it and bring on land but without result. Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson invoked St Thomas of Canterbury and promised to offer the tusk to his shrine if the walrus could be brought to land.<sup>25</sup> Hrafn kept his promise and travelled to Canterbury with the walrus tusk.

The saga emphasizes Hrafn's ability to travel on sea and his skills as a navigator. When he accompanied bishop-elect Guðmundr on his journey to be consecrated, they were storm-driven to Suðreyjar (the Hebrides). The narrative puts emphasis on Hrafn's skills as a navigator when the bishop-elect insists that he take charge. The bishop-elect asked him to pilot, and at first Hrafn humbly refused. When he reluctantly agreed, the weather calmed down and they reached harbour in Suðreyjar.<sup>26</sup> This passage appears also in all versions of *Guðmundar saga*. The *Guðmundar saga narratives* are obviously based on the *Hrafns saga* text, but they put more emphasis on the bishop-elect. The focus is on the holiness of Guðmundr and his abilities to conquer stormy weather and how wisely he put the virtuous Hrafn in charge of their ship.

The otherwise unknown poet, Guðmundr Svertingsson, composed a poem on Hrafn's saintly life and character. Eleven verses from it are included in the saga. Scaldic poets admittedly enjoyed describing

<sup>23</sup> Guðrún P. Helgadóttir 1987, xxi–xxxii; Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2004, 33–39.

<sup>24</sup> Guðrún P. Helgadóttir 1993, 55–80.

<sup>25</sup> *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* 1987, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* 1987, 20–21.



ships and travels on sea. It is interesting to note, however, how many stanzas from the poem tell of Hrafn's perilous journeys on sea, where the waves were rushing on, blackness was to be seen over the side, but Hrafn took on piloting on the ship at night in the face of fear, as the poet puts it, and succeeded in saving both, ship and men.<sup>27</sup>

Hrafn's pilgrimages strengthen his pious image. The saga tells of three journeys abroad and visits to four important pilgrim sites, made shortly before 1200. In addition to the previously mentioned journey to Canterbury, he travelled to St Giles, Rome and Santiago de Compostela. He is portrayed as a model of generosity, charity and hospitality, providing free meals for guests at his home and a free ferry service over the fjord near his farm: He kept a boat by Barðaströnd (a coast line in the south Westfjords region). All those who needed to cross Breiðafjörður could use it: "Because of Hrafn's generosity it was as if there was a bridge over both fjords for everyone who needed to travel." ("Hann átti ok skip á Barðaströnd. Þat höfðu allir þeir, er þurftu yfir Breiðafjörð. Ok af slíkri rausn Hrafns var sem brú væri á hvárum tveggjum firðinum fyrir hverjum er fara vildi.")<sup>28</sup> Bridge building was considered a good Christian deed, equal to making donations to the church. It has been compared to the Requiem Mass, whose aim is to help the souls of the dead to find the right way to God.<sup>29</sup> Hrafn's ferry may carry the same symbolic meaning.

Guðrún P. Helgadóttir has drawn attention to similarities between *Hrafns saga*, *Magnúss saga* and *Thómas saga*. The death of Hrafn seems to be modelled on that of the archbishop of Canterbury; the latter meets his death on his knees, Hrafn on his knees and elbows. Both are in a position of devotion and both bodies lie as if in prayer.<sup>30</sup> The rough and barren field where Hrafn is slain becomes green and fertile the following summer. The place where St Magnús of Orkney was executed was stony and mossy, but after the martyr's death it became green, fair and smooth.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* 1987, 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* 1987, 5

<sup>29</sup> Lund 2005, 109–135.

<sup>30</sup> Guðrún P. Helgadóttir 1987, lxiv; Cormack 1993, 191.

<sup>31</sup> *Orkneyinga saga* 1965, 364–369, 319–322, 106–111.

The Saga of St Magnus, earl of Orkney (*Magnúss saga eyjarls*) survives in three Old Norse versions.<sup>32</sup> A version was incorporated into *Orkneyinga saga*, probably composed at the end of the twelfth century and revised in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. A longer and a shorter version of a separate *Magnúss saga* have been preserved. The Old Norse versions were preserved and presumably composed in Iceland. A short Latin *Legenda de s. Magno* also survives. The sources tell how the young Magnus was conscripted by King Magnus berfættr of Norway on an expedition into the Irish Sea. Magnús refused to fight and devoted himself to reading the psalter instead and later fled from the king's army. Most miracles of St Magnus of Orkney are cures. They all, or almost all, occur at the saint's shrine. There is one interesting exception found in *Orkneyinga saga* and *Magnúss saga skemmri*, where St Magnús calms the weather to enable bishop Vilhjálmr to travel from Shetland to Orkney.<sup>33</sup> The relevant chapter is missing in *Magnúss saga lengri* and the *legenda de sancto Magno* does not tell of the translation.

The first miraculous cure is that of a blind farmer from Shetland, Bergfinnr Skaftason, who has his sight restored at St Magnús' resting place. Two cripples in his company were also cured. The miracles reflect 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 indicate that Magnús is a true follower of Christ. When commemorating the day of his death, twenty four persons are cured. Bishop Vilhjálmr is asked to exhume Magnús' relics but the request is met with reluctance.

One summer, the narrative continues, the bishop makes a journey to Norway. He returns in the autumn and makes a stop in Shetland. The weather turns stormy, the bishop dislikes being in Shetland and longs for home. The steersman asks the bishop to promise to translate the relics, if the weather improves, so that he can sing mass on the following Sunday. The weather immediately changes for the better. Unfortunately, the bishop does not change his mind until he is struck blind and has to invoke St Magnus, in tears. Then, finally, he ac-

<sup>32</sup> Antonsson 2007.

<sup>33</sup> *Orkneyinga saga* 1965, 324.

knowledges St Magnús' sanctity and agrees to exhume the relics. The weather-miracle, together with the miraculous cures, marks the beginning of the cult of St Magnús.<sup>34</sup> It is remarkable that a great number of the saint's beneficiaries are from Shetland.

The miracles of the Icelandic saints give a unique insight into daily life. As such, they are an invaluable addition to the picture that contemporary secular sagas, for example the thirteenth century *Sturlunga saga*, give of the life and mentality of the people in Iceland in the Middle Ages. The common theme of most Icelandic miracles is survival, a desire for health, enough food and security. Ships and boats had to be unbroken and in their place. Weather had to be favorable for fishing and travelling by water. The first known collection of Icelandic miracles was read aloud at the Alþingi in 1199. These were the miracles attributed to St Þorlákr Þórhallsson. It is likely that other Icelandic miracle collections were read aloud to the public and it can also be expected that miracles stories were also orally transmitted. Originally, most miracle stories are oral stories that the beneficiaries told to priests or bishops. They were then written down and collected by clerical authorities, who shaped them according to the traditional language of hagiography. Miracles are therefore a dialogue between the clergy and the common people. While they express fear of sickness, hunger and danger, miracles also tell that problems could be solved by a saint's intervention.

Although most maritime miracles paint a positive picture of the sea as a food supply, its dangerous sides are also apparent. Saints are invoked on perilous journeys at sea and even banish demons that emerge from the sea or lurk by the sea and threaten the Christian community. The audience could easily identify with stories of people who had been saved from hunger by miraculously catching fish or sea mammals and rescued from perils at sea with the help and intervention of the saint. They or at least those who wrote them down would also have known that they reflected biblical narratives of Jesus calming storm and his disciples fishing. For people living in harsh, Nordic surroundings, miracles of this kind must have been especially welcome.

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<sup>34</sup> *Orkneyinga saga* 1965, 324.

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