

The Beginnings of Local Hagiography in Iceland

The Lives of Bishops Þorlákr and Jón

I

In the Middle Ages there were two episcopal dioceses in Iceland. The first episcopal see was established in Skálholt, South Iceland in 1056, and the second in Hólar, North Iceland, in 1106. The medieval churches and other remains from the Middle Ages have not survived to remind the visitor of the past. Instead, manuscripts have survived to enable scholars to construct or reconstruct the past. One chronicle and several biographies are extant, which can be used for the purpose, and, besides that, they represent their authors' own construction of the past. The chronicle *Hungrvaka*, which tells of the first five bishops of Skálholt, the lives of the first two Icelandic saints, *Þorláks saga* and *Jóns saga* are now easily accessible in new editions.¹

The cult of the first two Icelandic saints began at approximately the same time, around 1200. Both belonged to the same category of saints, they were confessor bishops. Þorlákr Þórhallsson, bishop of Skálholt, 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 ruling aristocratic assembly, the Althing, by his successor, Páll Jónsson, the illegitimate son of Þorlákr's sister, and Jón Loftsson, who was one of the country's most powerful chieftains. The second Icelandic saint, Bishop Jón Ögmundsson of Hólar, was born in 1052. He was consecrated as the first bishop of Hólar in 1106 and died on 23 April 1121. His bones were disinterred and washed in 1198. In

¹ The relevant texts appear in *Biskupa sögur* I–II, see bibliography below.

1200 they were enshrined at Hólar and his cult was officially recognised.

Among the first-known texts to have been written in the vernacular were the reports of the saintly bishops' miracles. One year after the translation of the relics, Bishop Páll Jónsson, who had a magnificent shrine made to house the relics of the saint, read aloud a collection of miracles at the Althing. This was the first collection of Icelandic miracles, a total of forty-six stories, almost completely preserved in a manuscript dated to the first half of the thirteenth century.² A similar collection of Jón's miracles presumably existed but is now lost.³

Translated saints' lives, drawn primarily from Latin sources, are among the oldest manuscripts of vernacular literature in Iceland. Several fragments can be dated to the middle of the twelfth century.⁴ The apocryphal *Acts of the Apostles* were among the first prose foreign literature to become popular in Iceland in the Middle Ages and the lives of Blasius, Nicholas, Placidus, and Stephanus were also translated before 1200.

The oldest Icelandic saga of St Ólafr Haraldsson was probably written at the end of the twelfth century. It is a mixture of hagiography and native oral tradition and poetry. Only six fragments remain of this saga. Oddr Snorrason, a monk at the monastery of Þingeyrar (northern Iceland), wrote a saga about Ólafr Tryggvason in Latin. Oddr's original version, written about 1190, is now lost but two complete texts of the vernacular translation are preserved. Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218/19), another monk at Þingeyrar, also composed an *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, expanding Oddr's text with material concerning the king's missionary activity. Gunnlaugr's *Ólafs saga* was written in Latin and subsequently translated into Icelandic. The original is lost but passages of the translation survived and were incorporated into the fourteenth-century manuscript *Flateyjarbók*.

² *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 101–140.

³ Foote 2003, cclxxiii–cclv.

⁴ Widding *et al.* 1963.

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Although Icelanders may at first have been less enthusiastic about Ólafr Haraldsson than the Norwegians, he became one of the four saints most frequently mentioned in Icelandic church inventories. Ólafr Tryggvason, whom Oddr calls the Apostle of Iceland, seems to have been highly regarded in the country. It has even been suggested that he was already being viewed as a saint in Iceland in the twelfth century.⁵ There is, however, no evidence for his cult. The most obvious reason why St Þorlákr became the first saint chosen by Icelanders instead of the missionary king is that Iceland had no local or native saint. The wish for a native saint is expressed in a passage in the bishop's life:

Töluðu þat margir vitrir menn at annat hvárt myndi helgi Þorláks byskups upp koma eða myndi þess eigi auðit verða á Íslandi.⁶

(Many learned men said that either Þorlákr would be made a saint or else this would never happen in Iceland.)

Most miracles of St Þorlákr occur in Icelandic landscapes and conditions where he solves Icelandic everyday problems, such as curing sheep and cattle, intervening against cold, harsh weather and finding lost tools.

II

The oldest versions of the life of St Þorlákr were written in Latin and in the vernacular shortly after his translation. *Þorláks saga* was rewritten in the second half of the thirteenth century and again in the fourteenth century. In the oldest version of his life, only brief mention is made of his conflict with secular power and the names of those participating are not mentioned. Later versions contain long passages where these disagreements are minutely detailed. Bishop Þorlákr did not gain a complete victory, but his opponents are said to have been rightly punished. Based on the evidence of the later versions, Þorlákr had become best known in Icelandic Church history for his disputes

⁵ Cormack 1994, 10, 143.

⁶ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 85, 194.

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 regarding Church property and moral matters alike was the aforementioned Jón Loftsson, who kept the bishop's sister as a concubine.⁷ It is therefore not surprising that the sanctity of the bishop was not recognized until after Jón Loftsson's death (1197).

Jóns saga (*The Life of St Jón*) now exists in three recensions, one early-thirteenth-century version and two from the fourteenth century.⁸ A Latin life, mentioned in a church inventory and referred to in the Icelandic versions, is now lost.⁹ *Jóns saga* was written almost eighty years after the bishop's death. As can be expected, *Jóns saga* contains less factual information than the almost contemporary *Þorláks saga*. The narrative is supplemented with material drawn from hagiographic motifs as well as local, oral information.

Þorláks saga (*The Life of St Þorlákr*) states that the translation of St Þorlákr was preceded by dreams and visions. Shortly after the bishop's death a farmer in northern Iceland dreamt that a man from the south visited him, told him about the bishop's death and said that he had been given a new name which indicated his new saintly role.

Sá atburður varð í Vatnsdal at bónda einn réttorðan dreymði at hann þóttisk úti kominn ok sá mann kominn sunnan yfir heiði ok spurði hann hversu Þorlákr byskup mátti, en hann svarar: “Eigi heitir hann nú Þorlákr heldr Ráðvaldr með Guði.“ Bóndinn sagði Karli ábóta drauminn, en hann réð svá at byskup myndi andaðr ok hafa dýrð með Guði.¹⁰

It so happened in Vatnsdalur that a farmer, whose word can be trusted, dreamt that he was outside and saw a man approaching from the south, and he asked him concerning Bishop Þorlákr. The stranger answered that his name was now not Þorlákr but Ráðvaldr (Righteous) with God. The farmer related his dream to Abbot Karl, who interpreted it thus that the bishop had died and now had glory with God.

⁷ Jón Böðvarsson 1968, Orri Vésteinsson 1996, Ármann Jakobsson and Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1999, Magnús Stefánsson 2000.

⁸ For these versions see Ármann Jakobsson 2006.

⁹ *Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn* IV 1897, 374.

¹⁰ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 84, 192–193, 255–257, 289–291, 354–360.

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One of the most eminent 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. The dream was interpreted by a well-known abbot: Þorlákr possesses the glory of God. Finally, four winters after the bishop's death, when the winter had been extremely long and harsh, a priest dreamt that a 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 the dream. The bishop was Brandr Sæmundarson, the fourth bishop of Hólar. Word spread rapidly, more and more miracles occurred and a mysterious light was seen over the bishop's grave.¹¹

Seventy-seven years after Bishop Jón's death, the same Bishop Brandr had Jón's bones washed and placed in a new coffin. Bishop Brandr also treated the earthly remains of his predecessor in the same way. Both coffins were then put in the same place, as if the bishop wanted to test who was the better candidate for sainthood. For two years miracles telling of Bishop Jón's intervention occurred and finally a dream was dreamt after a harsh and frosty winter and fear of famine. As in *Þorláks saga*, the bishop appears and announces that the situation will improve if the bishop's earthly remains are treated as holy relics. This time the dreamer is not a priest; Bishop Jón gives his important message to a devout but very poor woman.¹²

III

All Latin texts concerning St Jón are now lost.¹³ But for Þorlákr several Latin fragments are extant, *i.e.* remnants of two different lives of St Þorlákr and *lectiones* for both feast days.¹⁴ The oldest Latin fragment (*Lat I*) consists of three separate leaves and has been dated to *c.* 1200. This text contains a remnant of a *vita* and four miracles. Ac-

¹¹ *Biskupasögur* II 2002, 85, 194–195.

¹² *Biskupa sögur* I 2003, 2, 255, 268–269.

¹³ Foote 2003, cclxxiii–cclxxv.

¹⁴ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 339–364.

According to the text, the work appears to have been originally divided into two books. The preserved text starts by describing the ascetic life of Þorlákr's predecessor, Klængr Þorsteinsson, his illness and subsequent death. Then the narrative proceeds to refer to the election of Þorlákr, as told in the previous book, now lost, and continues to describe how the church at Skálholt flourished under his distinguished predecessors. The four miracles still preserved in this text all took place before the saint's translation.

The biographical part of this text is different from the other Latin and Icelandic texts since Þorlákr's predecessors were also covered in the narrative, although it is difficult to say how extensively they and their lives were described. It is, however, interesting to note the emphasis on the church of Skálholt and how it flourished under the bishops:

de sancto Thorlaco episcopo et aliis episcopis nostris.
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?]¹⁵

(About Bishop St Þorlákr and our other bishops.

We told enough in the previous book of this work of how St Þorlákr was promoted to the highest ecclesiastical rank. Thus the church of Skálholt flourished under these bishops and excellent leaders of the people committed to their charge, and up to St 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 people's need [exhorted] their followers with repeated admonitions and the example of good works.)¹⁶

¹⁵ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 342.

¹⁶ Translation by Wolf 1989.

This text puts emphasis on the bishopric of Skálholt and could therefore have originated as a *gesta episcoporum*,¹⁷ written about the time when the first Icelandic saint and former bishop of Skálholt had brought glory to the bishopric.

The second and most extensive fragment, a short survey of the bishop's life and miracles (*Lat II*), is preserved in six leaves dated to the first half of the thirteenth century. The main part of this text is a description of Bishop Þorlákr's election and consecration, emphasizing his virtues. It goes on to tell of Þorlákr's life before he became bishop and miracles that occurred while he was still in his monastery. Although the preserved text is short, it is obvious that it makes use of hagiographic motifs. *Lectio* numbers have been added in the margin of the manuscript by a later hand, which indicates the liturgical uses of this text, apparently for the winter feast day. The fragments *Lat I* and *Lat II* contain remnants of two different lives of St Þorlákr. Three fragments (*Lat III*) contain *lectiones* for recitation on the saint's summer feast day, *i.e.* the day of his translation on 20th July. The overlapping fragments that form *Lat III* describe the translation and miracles which occurred shortly before. These texts could possibly be remnants of a lost **Translatio S. Thorlaci* in Latin. They have been used as liturgical texts for the summer feast day, to commemorate the translation. The day of the saint's translation was made an obligatory feast day in 1237. There are similarities between the Latin text and the Icelandic legends that describe the translation and they could therefore all be derived from the same source. *Lat IV* is an extract from *Lat II*, concentrating mainly on the saint's final illness and death. It has been divided into six *lectiones* for recitation on St Þorlákr's winter feast day.

Where comparison is possible, all Latin texts except the short biographical part of *Lat I* have parallels in the Icelandic texts but the saint's disputes with the chieftains are not mentioned. There are also similarities between the account of the translation and miracles in the Latin fragments and the Icelandic versions, especially the later versions. In some cases the Latin fragments have a fuller and, probably,

¹⁷ On *gesta episcoporum* as a genre, see esp. Sot 1981.

more original text, which indicates that the oldest version in Icelandic is abridged. The translation narrative is more vivid and detailed than its Icelandic counterparts. The Icelandic versions tell how a crippled man, who walked with the help of a wooden leg, was cured. The Latin text adds that after the miracle the wooden leg was hung up in front of the shrine. Moreover, it says that the church was so crowded that many of the lay people were unable to enter and more than forty priests were present. Only the Latin text describes the exact location of Þorlákr's grave, close by the church door, and tells how the coffin was put on a bier and placed conveniently by the north choir so that people could touch it by raising their arms.

The aforementioned *Hungrvaka* was written soon after *Þorláks saga* and before Bishop Páll Jónsson's death in 1211.¹⁸ A short biography of Bishop Páll was also written soon after his death.¹⁹ The diocese of Skálholt therefore has a continuous written history covering the period 1056 to 1211, and, as previously mentioned, possibly also a chronicle in Latin. In Hólar the picture is different. There was no attempt to write a continuous history. After the life of St Jón there is a gap until several biographies of Guðmundur Arason were written in the second half of the thirteenth century and the fourteenth century. No chronicle equivalent to the *Hungrvaka* was written of Hólar.

Hungrvaka gives an account of the first five bishops in the diocese of Skálholt. Its final paragraph seems intended to link it to a following life of Þorlákr because of references to his sanctity where he is called the Apostle of Iceland. The text gives the origin of each bishop and a detailed and dated account of his consecration. His personal qualities are described and his effort in adding to the growth of the bishopric of Skálholt is emphasised. Each chapter ends with a detailed account of the bishop's death and a list of historical memoranda of events abroad and in Iceland during his episcopacy. The chapters on each bishop in *Hungrvaka* are relatively short but not devoid of hagiographic motifs. The first bishop, Ísleifr, is especially depicted as a saintly character. He is said to have been of the same age as Christi-

¹⁸ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 1–43.

¹⁹ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 295–332.

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anity in the country and he performs miracles which reflect the first miracles of Christ, as told in the Gospels according to John and Mark, thus bringing forward a sacred origin of the see of Skálholt. Ísleifr cures the insane and although he does not change water into wine he blesses and restores deteriorated ale.²⁰ The biography of Bishop Páll is similar to *Hungrvaka* and one of the most important sources on the beginning of the cult of St Þorlákr.

IV

The first Icelandic saints' lives show that the hagiographers knew how to do their job. They were familiar with and could copy both the structure and the ideology of hagiography. Already the oldest lives of St Þorlákr and St Jón look familiar to the student of hagiography. The structure is similar and here are found all the common *topoi*.²¹ When writing within the hagiographic tradition, the biographers show their audience that the Icelandic saints have their place among other confessor bishops. As children, each is the typical *puer senex*. Humility characterises their personality, great emphasis is placed on their episcopal stewardship, and on their regular fasting and constant praying.

Þorláks saga depicts St Þorlákr as a model bishop and his setting a good example is evident from the beginning. By his stern way of 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 St Þorlákr is very different from the life of the other saintly bishop of Iceland, St Jón Ögmundsson of Hólar, whose story is full of people. St Jón is no less a model bishop than St 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 his life Þorlákr is distanced from his fellow-men, but there is an interesting balance and 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, where the

²⁰ *Biskupa sögur* II 2002, 10.

²¹ Koppenberg 1980; Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2002, lii–lxxx, og 2003, viii–xxx.

older teach the younger; there is no envy, the younger spend their time between lessons in writing and everybody performs his hours with great attention. The two saintly Icelandic bishops are ideal but in different ways. Although St Þorlákr's biographer writes about his gentleness, his strictness and discipline remain his main characteristics. In the life of Jón, the bishop is described as being gentle, loving and full of compassion.

The oldest lives of St Þorlákr and Jón were written at the same time. Being lives of confessor-bishops they are similar in structure and ideology, but they show different concepts of sanctity. St Þorlákr is the stern disciplined bishop, Jón is gentle and compassionate. St Þorlákr was an Augustinian canon — so probably were his hagiographers. St Jón's hagiographers were Benedictines, who seem to have been influenced by the same maternal imagery we find in St Anselm's writings and those of the twelfth century Cistercians.²²

Saints are described in a language of long tradition. As saints inevitably share the same personal features and deeds, their written 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 emphasise different aspects of the type. The Icelandic hagiographers had an almost ready-made model from outside and above to fit their saints into, but each hagiographer tells his story in his own mode. From within and below they made use of local tradition and the memory of their informants. There is also some difference in their presentation of local sources. *Þorláks saga* quotes farmers and learned men of the Church. The most important oral source is a funeral speech by one of the most prominent figures of the diocese. *Jóns saga* also quotes learned men, but besides them we find more people from other strata of society as well as women among the informants.

St Þorlákr was from the outset a protégé of the powerful family of Oddaverjar although he was not as easy to handle as they must have hoped. They supported his election as a bishop and they also pro-

²² Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1996.

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moted his sanctity with their influence within the diocese. Bishop Páll Jónsson was the fruit of his father's illicit union with Þorlákr's sister, a descendant of the Oddaverjar family but also Þorlákr's nephew. When Páll was elected bishop a descendant of the Oddaverjar family was now ensconced in the bishopric. The family was then victorious in the dispute over disestablishment until a similar dispute reawakened in the thirteenth century. After matters had calmed down, the Oddaverjar family did not oppose the cult of Þorlákr. He had grown up under their protection, was connected to them and they could present him as one of theirs.

Although the roots of Þorlákr's cult were as much in the northern diocese as in the south, the final decision to promote the cult was made by Bishop Páll Jónsson of Skálholt. His attitude is described as happy and willing but it is also noted that he wanted to handle the case with utmost care. In *Páls saga*, the bishop's biography, he is said to have consulted all chieftains and the wisest of men. His own kinsmen were, no doubt, among them. Bishop Brandr, the bishop of Hólar in fact, was also one of them. Once again the Oddaverjar could show their power. When Bishop Páll Jónsson, descendant of the Oddaverjar and the saint's nephew, declared his predecessor a saint, they had their share in the glory of the event. A continuous history in writing must have been in the family's interest.

The almost contemporary *Þorláks saga* is an institutionalised work. 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. In *Jóns saga* a poor woman dreams the ultimate dream. Sick and crippled young girls were among the first to be cured by St Jón's intervention. In this way the hagiographer ties the saint to his people at Hólar, in accordance with the gentle images he wants to give of him. These translation narratives represent well the difference between the two legends and their different ways of constructing the past.

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