

## The Hermit and the Milkmaid

### The Tale of Ásólfr in *Landnámabók* and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*

The tale of the Christian, pre-conversion settler Ásólfr is preserved in two redactions of *Landnámabók*, namely *Sturlubók* (*S*) from the latter half of the thirteenth century, and the slightly younger *Hauksbók* (*H*), dated to 1302–1310.<sup>1</sup> Besides, a shorter version of the Ásólfr narrative is included in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (*ÓlTr*), probably composed in the early fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I intend to examine the tale of Ásólfr as hagiography, with special emphasis on the dream sequence of the narrative. The following is an outline of the tale:

1. Arrival in Iceland *S, H, ÓlTr*.
2. Ásólfr avoids communication with pagan neighbours *S, ÓlTr* (conflict with pagans *H*).
3. Rivers near Ásólfr's dwelling place become filled with fish *S, H, ÓlTr*.
4. Envious pagans drive him away *S, H, ÓlTr*.
5. Fish disappears from rivers when he leaves *S, H, ÓlTr*.
6. Ásólfr becomes a hermit in his old age *S, H*.
7. Appears in dreams *H, ÓlTr*.
8. Ásólfr's relics are exhumed *H*.
9. A church stands where Ásólfr was buried *S* (where his hut stood *H*).
10. Ásólfr is called a most holy man *S, ÓlTr*.

The *S* version begins by introducing Ásólfr as a good Christian who did not want to communicate with pagans or accept any food from

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<sup>1</sup> *Landnámabók* 1968, 61–65.

<sup>2</sup> *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar I* 1958, 277–279.

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 Ásólftr's former food supply. The story repeats itself three times. Ásólftr then seeks shelters with his relative Jǫrundr of Garðar who invited him to stay, but Ásólftr preferred to live on his own. Jǫrundr built him a house and brought him food for the rest of his life. He was buried near the house, a church stands over his burial place and he is called a most holy man. The *ÓlTr* version in AM 61 fol. resembles the *S* text. It tells of the conflict with the neighbours, but the *ÓlTr* version emphasised that the troublesome neighbours were pagan:

*S*: Þá var um forvitnask, hvat hann hafði til fæzlu ok sá menn í skálanum á fiska marga.<sup>3</sup>

*ÓlTr*, AM 61 fol: [E]n heiðingjar fóru at forvitnaz hvat hann hefði til fæðu, ok sá þeir í skálanum marga fiska.<sup>4</sup>

*S*: Þá hvarf á brutt veiði oll ór læknum, er menn skyldi til taka.<sup>5</sup>

*ÓlTr*, AM 61 fol: [A]llir fiskar voru horfnir ór læknum þá er heiðnir menn komu til ok ætluðu at veiða.<sup>6</sup>

The *Flateyjarbók* text states in addition that waters were filled with fish because of divine intervention:

[E]n guð hafði gefit honum svá mikla gipt at lækr er fram féll hjá skála hans var fullr af fiskum ok svá kyrrir at Ásólftr mátti höndum taka hvern er hann vildi. Þat fundu heiðingjar ok ráku hann burt þaðan ok ætluðu sér veiðina þvíat þeir fyrirmundu honum hennar.<sup>7</sup>

*Hauksbók* describes how Ásólftr and his companions arrive at Þorgeirr inn horski's farm at Holt below Eyjafjöll and camp there. After his companions' death Þorgeirr advised Ásólftr to move his dwelling place closer to a church, "því nær sem nú er kirkjuhornit at Ásólfsskála,"<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Landnámabók* 1968, 62.

<sup>4</sup> *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1958, 277.

<sup>5</sup> *Landnámabók* 1968, 62.

<sup>6</sup> *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1958, 277.

<sup>7</sup> *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1958, 276.

<sup>8</sup> *Landnámabók* 1968, 63.

because Þorgeirr did not like to have them staying close to his own home — probably because of the difference in their religious beliefs, although the *Hauksbók* text does not explicitly say so. When Ásólfir has been compelled to move three times, the *Hauksbók* text says that “bændr kolluðu þá fjölkunniga, en Þorgeirr kvazk hyggja, at þeir mundu vera góðir menn.”<sup>9</sup> The phrase „góðr maðr“ is often used to designate a pious man. Þorgeir is given the role of the „noble heathen“, because he is the only one who understood that Ásólfir and his companions did not practice magic.<sup>10</sup> The farmers’ suspicion of sorcery is not mentioned in *Sturlubók* or the *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* versions. It is a recurrent theme in hagiography that pagans are unable to distinguish between miracles and sorcery or magic. The reason given for the farmers’ hostility is that they do not want him to enjoy this miraculous food-supply.

Dreams are frequent features in hagiography and precede major events in the saint’s life. No less importantly, they occur before his death, which is a rebirth to sainthood, and the discovery or exhumation of the saint’s relics. In the *Hauksbók* and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, the most important feature is the discovery of Ásólfir’s relics and the preceding dreams. The *Hauksbók* version has a series of three dreams. Ásólfir first appears to a milkmaid:

[Þ]á vanðisk fjóskona ein at þerra fœtr sína á þúfu þeiri, er var á leiði Ásólfis. Hana dreymði, at Ásólfir ávitaði hana um þat er hon þerrði fœtr sína saurga á húsi hans, — „en þá munu vit sátta,“ segir hann, „ef þú segir Halldóri draum þinn.“ Hon sagði honum, ok kvað hann ekki mark at því er konur dreymði ok gaf ekki gaum at.<sup>11</sup>

The farmer Halldór ignored her words and experiences. In his opinion women’s dreams were not worthy of attention. Ásólfir then appeared to two men, a monk at Bær<sup>12</sup> and the aforementioned Halldór, confirming the milkmaid’s dream. The monk dreamt that Ásólfir told him

<sup>9</sup> *Landnámabók* 1968, 63

<sup>10</sup> On the noble heathen, see Lönnroth 1969, 1–29.

<sup>11</sup> *Landnámabók* 1968, 63, 65

<sup>12</sup> A small monastery was established at Bær. The *Hauksbóks* narrative tells that three monks were left at this time. *Landnámabók* 1968, 65, 64, fn. 4.

to go to Halldór and tell him to buy the place where he lay buried, and what price he should pay. Although Halldór originally doubted the milkmaid's words, he has Ásólf's relics exhumed and placed in a shrine above an altar. Later, he sent his son abroad for timber, built a church and dedicated it to St Columcille. No dreams occur in the *Sturlubók* version, but it concludes by stating that a church had been built where Ásólf was buried and that he is considered a most holy man.

The *Flateyjarbók* version of *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* tells that the king had heard of Ásólf and would have liked to invite him to his court had they both been alive at the same time, because he thought that he would have benefitted from Ásólf's company:

Þar endi Ásólf með ágætum lifnaði sitt líf. Ok er svá sagt at Ólafr Tryggvason réð fyrir Noregi at hann hefði mikla frétt af fyrrsögðum Ásólf ok let Ólafr konungr þau orð um fara at hann skyldi honum til sín boðit hafa ef þeir hefði báðir lifat, því at konungr kveðst hyggja at sá mundi betr hafa er sálufélag ætti við hann.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Ásólf episodes in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* contain hagiographic material, they lack one important feature; the discovery and the invention and translation of the relics. Ásólf only tells that he knows that Halldór intends to build a church and asks him to build it over his grave.

The three Ásólf narratives are obviously related. Haukr Erlends-son based his version on the earlier *Sturlubók*, as he himself mentions. He also writes that he had used the now lost *Landnámabók* version attributed to Styrmir inn fróði.<sup>14</sup> Scholars have had differing opinions on Haukr's sources for his additional Ásólf material. A lost Ásólf legend has been suggested, possibly written by Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218/19).<sup>15</sup> Judith Jesch, who has convincingly argued that Gunn-

<sup>13</sup> *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1958, 276–277

<sup>14</sup> *Landnámabók* 1968, 396–397.

<sup>15</sup> Jesch 1985, 513–529; Helgi Guðmundsson 1997, 113–115. It has also been suggested that Haukr's material could have been derived from the lost *Styrmisbók* or even originally composed by Haukr himself. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1974, 74–79, 85.

laugr Leifsson wrote an *Ásólfr* legend, pointed out that in the early thirteenth century there was intense hagiographic activity in the monastery of Þingeyrar where Gunnlaugr was a monk.<sup>16</sup> Being a skilful hagiographer he would certainly have known how to put a story of a saintly hermit in writing. If the original source is written by Gunnlaugr it is not unlikely that it was in Latin. Gunnlaugr wrote *Jóns saga helga* and *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* in Latin. *Jóns saga* is preserved in three Icelandic versions but the Latin version is now lost. Gunnlaugr's *Ólafs saga* is also lost.

Gunnlaugr is also known as a translator. He translated *Prophetiae Merlini* by Geoffrey of Monmouth into Icelandic and wrote an account of several visions of a young woman preserved in *Þorláks saga*. The text does not say explicitly that Gunnlaugr was asked to translate the visions into Latin, but it seems likely because Gunnlaugr was clearly a skilled Latin writer.<sup>17</sup> Besides he composed a rhymed *officium* of St Ambrose. Judith Jesch suggests that the assumed *Ásólfr* legend was the source of *Sturlubók*, and then, consequently formed the basis of all versions. She brings forward some analogues to the *Ásólfr* narrative in other medieval Icelandic texts. The hermit Máni in *Þorvalds þáttur víðförla* wanted to feed hungry people during a period of famine.<sup>18</sup> A nearby river became filled with salmon that Máni donated to his church. Gunnlaugr Leifsson is referred to in this tale. The tale of Máni describes a pious hermit but there is no indication of a cult. Judith Jesch also mentions the invention-translation dream in *Jóns saga* where the bishop appears to a poor woman in a dream.<sup>19</sup> However, the poor woman in *Jóns saga* is not cast in the Mary Magdalene role. It is not mentioned that her words were not believed.

Haukr Erlendsson had a special interest in Irish matters.<sup>20</sup> He was a descendant of the Irish king Kjartan, which could have been enough reason for him to give *Ásólfr* Irish origin and parentage. In addition,

<sup>16</sup> Jesch 1985, 520–521.

<sup>17</sup> “Vitranir þær er Guðmundr prestur er síðan var byskup sendi Gunnlaugi múk at hann skyldi dikta, mun ek skyndilega yfir fara,” *Biskupa sögur* II, 243.

<sup>18</sup> *Biskupa sögur* I 2003, 83–85.

<sup>19</sup> *Biskupa sögur* I 2003, 268–269.

<sup>20</sup> Jakob Benediktsson 1968, lxxx–lxxxi.

Judith Jesch has pointed out that Haukr may have recognised 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. St Columba did send men fishing with miraculous result, but that could be a copy from the gospel narratives. 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.<sup>21</sup> However, it has to be borne in mind that the fish is a Christian symbol and associated with Christ's miraculous miracle of providing loaves and fishes to feed the multitudes in the gospel narratives. Miraculous catching of fish also occurs in non-Celtic saints' lives, such as the lives of St Martin, and multiplication of food is also common in Icelandic miracles, which are more or less concerned with survival in harsh surroundings. 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>

Ásólfur is portrayed as a Christian, possibly a Celtic hermit, who lived in Iceland before the advent of Christianity. Margaret Clunies Ross has suggested that Sturla Þórðarson and Haukr Erlendsson found the early Celtic *eremetical vita* of the Ásólfur narrative both non-Norse and dated and therefore created a new image of Ásólfur by showing that he did not live completely isolated from the world as did the hermits of the early church.<sup>23</sup> Saints' lives were constantly rewritten to fit new trends in ideology and literary fashion. But it is not certain that a more up to date narrative was made to rehabilitate an older Celtic-style text, because it must have been important to Haukr that Ásólfur's origin was Irish.

In *Hauksbók*, Ásólfur has the curious nickname *alskik*. Helgi Guðmundsson suggests that Ásólfur may not have been of Norse origin and that Alskik was his original, given name. He pointed out that the

<sup>21</sup> Hermann Pálsson 1996, 114–116.

<sup>22</sup> Irish-Norse relationship within religious literature needs more thorough study, see Rekdal 2004, 159–196 and 2004, 256–275.

<sup>23</sup> Clunies Ross 2002, 29–49.

suffix –ik is frequent in Armenian names.<sup>24</sup> “Ermskir biskupar” are mentioned in the *Kristinna laga þáttur* in *Grágás*, where people are warned against receiving service from Armenian or Greek bishops who are not learned in the Latin language.<sup>25</sup> The “ermskir biskupar” were in Iceland in 1120–1130. The Irish origin of Ásólfur could be Haukr’s invention, possibly derived from oral tradition or place-name lore. It is an interesting suggestion that he may have been “ermskr” although the negative attitude towards “ermskir” speaks against it. If this had been the case, it was forgotten and no nationality attached to him until Haukr Erlendsson gave him Irish parentage.

Although humble and easily overlooked, the milkmaid plays an important part in the *Hauksbók* version. The gospels according to Mark (16:9–11), Luke (24:10–12) and John (20:11–18) tell that Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mark and Luke add that the disciples didn’t believe her. In Luke, two other women accompany Mary to meet the disciples and tell of their experiences. The milkmaid in *Hauksbók* has a similar role in the narrative as Mary Magdalene in the gospels. She is the one who first receives the message, her words are rejected by men, who think they know better, but later it is discovered that they should have listened to her message.

The milkmaid does not get a prominent role in the *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* version. There is only one dream in this text, where Ásólfur appears to Halldór and tells him that he finds it annoying that the milkmaid wipes her muddy feet on his grave. He explains to Halldór that he had been a Christian settler and promised God that he would have a church built over his grave. Halldór then marked the place and prepared the building of the church. By leaving out the milkmaid, this text places more emphasis on Halldór, who is said to be “vel kristinn” (pious) and does not have to be threatened in the same way as in *Hauksbók*, where Ásólfur says in the dream that he is going to “bæði augu sprengja ór hausi honum” (make both his eyes burst) unless he acquired the bones discovered by the monks’ serving man.

<sup>24</sup> Helgi Guðmundsson 1997, 113.

<sup>25</sup> *Grágás. Elzta lögbók Íslendinga* I 1852–1870, 22.

#### THE HERMIT AND THE MILKMAID

The writers of the Ásólfir narratives lived in a time and age where saintly relics were taken seriously. It is unlikely that a story of Ásólfir's relics, how they were discovered after Ásólfir himself had appeared in dreams, then translated and placed in shrine above the altar, would have been told if there was no historical evidence at that time to support it.

Ásólfir is one out of three medieval Icelandic lay individuals described in narratives with hagiographic character, the others being the anchoress Hildir in *Jóns saga helga* and the chieftain and physician Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson. They are depicted with promising saintly qualities but none of them became a saint.<sup>26</sup> All recognized Icelandic saints were confessors and bishops. A hermit, an anchoress and a martyred chieftain do not seem to have had the social background needed to promote their sanctity.

Recent studies have shown that there is a close connection between the hagiography and the construction of national identities. Ásólfir was a settler, but his non-Norse origins may have prevented his cult.<sup>27</sup> There are no *post mortem* miracles attributed to Ásólfir. In the cult of saints such miracles are the decisive ones, only when they have occurred, can the *in vita* miracles be recognized as such. Although Ásólfir draws attention to his grave when he appears in dreams, there is no promise given, no cures or improvement of weather conditions take place. The strongest indication for a cult of Ásólfir is the description of the shrine and the church above his grave. The tale of Ásólfir may show remnants of a temporary cult, associated with the church of Innrihólmr and its patrons.<sup>28</sup> If all preserved versions can be traced to a lost legend, it may have contained all the significant elements, the fish miracles, the dreams, the story of the relics, and the milkmaid as well as the hermit.

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<sup>26</sup> Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2011, 47–52.

<sup>27</sup> Clunies Ross 2002, 46–47.

<sup>28</sup> Cormack 1994, 11, 92.



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