Saints and their Legacies in Medieval Iceland

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Introduction: The Splendor of the Saints[1]

Dario Bullitta

Biblical precedents are a critical milestone in the construction of sanctity. It is in the interpretation and imitation of a wide range of biblical events, which exemplify the often-ungraspable relationship between the Creator and the created, that the investigation of the miraculous has its origin. While the Old Testament narratives contain a wealth of wondrous examples that move from those showcasing God's majesty on earth to acts performed by divinely inspired people serving as his agents, the New Testament miracles provide excellent paradigms of spiritual preaching as well as physical and mental healing that served as models for aspiring saints throughout the history of Christianity.[2] From the early days of the Church, Scriptural images and examples were recalled and deployed to mold hagiographic narratives, while biblical tropes studded preaching on saints and their miracles. Accordingly, saints' lives are by their very nature permeated with God's grace and holiness, and the miracles related in them were logically seen as manifestations of God's glory and power. Expressions of wonder by the spectators and recipients of miracles were necessary prerequisites for the credibility and validation of a saint's sanctity. Consequently, such emotional features of awe and surprise became particularly prominent in medieval hagiographic literature, where both the faithful and the unfaithful marveled at the heavenly

1 For the sake of consistency, medieval names and titles of works produced before the Icelandic Reformation are provided in normalized Old Norse according to the ONP editorial conventions, which reconstructs a stage of the language from around 1200–1250. Here and in the following, all Icelandic place-names are given in their modern Icelandic forms.

2 See most recently, Erkki Koskenniemi, *The Old Testament Miracle-workers in Early Judaism*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 206 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) and Stefan Alkier and Annette Weissenrieder, eds, *Miracles Revisited: New Testament Miracle Stories and their Concepts of Reality*. Studies of the Bible and Its Reception 2 (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2013).

performance of holy men and women and sang in unison the praises of the Lord. The adoption and accommodation of such paradigms, established through centuries of Christian literature, strongly influenced the religious and secular lore of even more peripheral areas of the Latin West. Iceland in particular benefited enormously from the creative interplay between translated and native saints' lives and secular literature.[3]

The *locus classicus* for such models of awe and astonishment during public manifestations of the saintly miraculous appears early on in Icelandic hagiographic literature. The older redaction of *Jóns saga Helga* (S-text)[4] relates that during a banquet at the Danish court of King Sveinn II (*c*. 1019–1076), Jón Ǫgmundarson (1052–1121) – a quick-witted Icelander soon-to-be elected first bishop of Hólar (northern Iceland) and locally translated in 1200 – recounts a dream vision of a magnificent cathedral in which he saw Christ sitting on the bishop's seat with King David playing the harp at his feet, the fairest harmony resonating throughout the church. With the king's consent, Jón is given a harp, which he tunes and plays with such mastery, recalling and reproducing David's melody so closely, that the king and the royal retinue marveled at his heavenly performance. Everyone who subsequently heard of the prodigious event 'took it so much at heart and praised the Almighty God, *who deigns to reveal the splendor of the saints*',[5] a passage echoing Gregory of Tours' (*c*. 538–594) words in the *Vita sancti Aridii abbatis*,

3 See the excellent discussion in Siân E. Grønlie, *The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature*. Studies in Old Norse Literature 2 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017).

4 The text has been dated to around 1200, after the translation of Jón's relics at Hólar. Gunnlaugr ultimately alludes to God's *splendor sanctorum* of Psalm 110 (109):3: 'Tecum principium in die virtutis tuae in splendoribus sanctorum: ex utero ante luciferum genui te' ('With thee is the principality in the day of thy strength: in the brightness [i.e. splendor] of the saints: from the womb before the day star I begot thee'). For a discussion of Jón's exemplum, see also the articles below by Haki Antonsson and Ásdís Egilsdóttir below, respectively at pp. 143–49 and 190. The S-redaction of the saga has been translated by Margaret Cormack, 'Saga of Bishop Jón of Hólar', in *Medieval Hagiography*: *An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head. Garland Library of Medieval Literature (New York/London, Garland: 2000; Routledge: 2001), pp. 595–626. Unless otherwise stated, the text of the Latin Vulgate is taken from *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. Robert Weber, Boniface Fischer, Jean Gribmont, H.F.D. Sparks, and Walter Thiele (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1969; 5th ed. rev. Roger Gryson. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007). All English translations are from the Douay-Rheims Bible, last accessed October 29 2020, available at http://drbo.org.

5 'Avllum þotti mikils vm vert þenna atbvrð þeim er fra var sagtt ok lofvðv allir almaktan gvð þann er ser lætʀ soma at birta dyrð heilagra manna sinna'. *Jóns saga Hólabyskups ens helga*, ed. Peter Foote. Editiones Arnamagnæanæ, Ser. A, vol. 14 (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 2003), p. 9/16–18 (my italics).

where St Aredius (*c.* 510–591), bishop of Limoges and personal friend of Gregory, is said to be assisted by 'the Almighty God, who (through him) *deigned to reveal many* (*divine*) *signs and wonders*'.[6] Accordingly, the *heilagra manna dýrð* ('splendor of the saints') referred to by Gunnlaugr Leifsson, abbot of Þingeyrar (d. 1218/1219), which inspired the title of this section, should be interpreted as the numerous heavenly *signa* ('signs'), *mirabilia* ('wonders'), *portenta* ('portents'), and *miracula* ('miracles') performed through divine assistance by saints and holy men and women *ante* and *post mortem* and testifies to the enormous popularity of hagiographical literature throughout the Icelandic Middle Ages and beyond.

The twelve essays collected in this volume deal with various aspects of the 'fate' of local and imported saints and the literature inspired by them in medieval Iceland. They approach the topic from a variety of angles and are based on an array of documentary materials, including Old Norse, Icelandic, Low German, Latin hagiographical literature, and historical records ranging from eleventh-century fragmentary skaldic stanzas to post-Reformation poems invoking the saints. The investigations are all historical and/or philological in nature. They explore in detail both the legacy of the cult of the saints in medieval Iceland on the basis of selected examples of Old Norse and Latin hagiographical texts and the evidence provided by Icelandic homilies, prayers, diplomas, sacred art, place-names, and churches dedicated to specific saints.

The book is divided into four main sections: 1) a comprehensive overview of critical editions and scholarship on Icelandic hagiography (Kirsten Wolf), and two case studies devoted to new identification of the Latin sources underlying two Icelandic texts dealing with hagiographical matters, namely, a sermon on All Saints' Day and a translation of the Old Icelandic narrative of Mary's apocryphal transit into heaven (Stephen Pelle, Dario Bullitta); 2) three surveys of original Icelandic and Latin texts centered on the lives of three bishops of Iceland, St Jón of Hólar (d. April 23 1121, canonized at Hólar March 3 1200), St Þorlákr of Skálholt (d. 1193, canonized at Skálholt July 20 1198),[7] and Lárentíus of Hólar (d. 1324), presented as saintly by his biographer (Gottskálk Jensson, Haki Antonsson, Fulvio Ferrari), and an overview of hagiography and memorialization in medieval Iceland (Ásdís Egilsdóttir); 3) two essays on the Icelandic lives of Benedict of Nursia and Dominic of Caleruega,

6 'Omnipotens Deus multa signa et mirabilia declarare dignatus est'. Gregory of Tours, *Vita sancti Aridii abbatis*, in *PL* 71, cols 1119A–1150B, at col. 1124B.

7 Contrary to popular misconception, the Alþingi or Icelandic National Assembly had no part in the process of either declaring these men to be saints or establishing their feast-days. It did subsequently adopt those feast days as holy days of obligation for Iceland; they might otherwise have been local feasts in the appropriate diocese. I am grateful to Margaret Cormack for discussing this matter with me.

translated from Latin and Middle Low German material, respectively (Mauro Camiz, Simonetta Battista) and a survey of the Icelandic cult of Michael the Archangel (Margaret Cormack); 4) two examinations of the Icelandic place-names and poetical texts invoking, respectively, the virgin martyrs Catherine of Alexandria and Agnes of Rome (Helgi Þorláksson, Natalie M. Van Deusen).

The first section, '*Rannsǫkun heilagra bóka*: The Search for Holy Books', provides a general context for the cult of saints in medieval Iceland and Icelandic hagiographical texts translated from Latin, as well as the search for and selection of their manuscript sources on the Continent. In the opening essay, 'Medieval Icelandic Hagiography: The State of the Art', Kirsten Wolf provides an overview of scholarship on the lives of the saints in Iceland and identifies three distinct phases of scholarly interest. She identifies the first phase as the late nineteenth century, represented primarily by the enormous work of Carl R. Unger, the first large-scale editor of Old Norse-Icelandic saints lives. The second phase is assigned to the mid-twentieth century and is represented by the editorial efforts of Ole Widding, Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Peter Foote, Stefán Karlsson, and Agnete Loth. It is characterized by the production of a first index of saints' lives and several authoritative editions of hagiographical texts. It is argued that the third phase begins in the late 1980s when scholars such as Kirsten Wolf, Margaret Cormack, Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Marianne E. Kalinke, and Sverrir Tómasson began to pay closer attention to the cult, commemoration, and veneration of the saints of Iceland. Wolf concludes her essay by celebrating the enormous amount of work achieved within the field of medieval Icelandic hagiography and highlights future scholarly desiderata, such as new critical editions, a closer examination of the legends of the apostles, and an investigation of the enormous number of post-Reformation hagiographical poems. In 'An Old Norse Adaptation of an All Saints Sermon by Maurice de Sully', Stephen Pelle surveys a nearly forgotten vernacular sermon on the significance and observance of All Saints' and All Souls' Days (November 1 and 2) extant in Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 671 4to (*c.* 1300–1350), a theological miscellany containing both Latin and Old Norse items. Through a comparison of the Old Norse adaptation to other Latin homilies for All Saints' Day, Pelle demonstrates how the Icelandic author made use of a sermon composed by the twelfth-century bishop of Paris Maurice de Sully (d. 1196). The Norse sermon appears to represent the first Scandinavian vernacularization of Maurice's influential collection, which circulated widely in Middle French and was at least partially translated into Middle English. Pelle argues that the parallel use of Maurice de Sully's sermons in France, England, and Iceland provides tangible evidence of the participation of the Icelandic Church in contemporary European developments in terms of preaching and theology. Moreover,

the identification of sections of the profession of faith that emanated from the Second Council of Lyon (1274) allows Pelle to provide a suitable *post quem* date for the composition of the final section of the Norse sermon. In the following essay, 'The Tuscan Provenance of *Framfǫr Maríu*', I trace the paths of transmission of *Framfǫr Maríu*, an Icelandic translation of the most recent Latin redaction of the apocryphal *Transitus Mariae* – a twelfth-century Italian text attributed to Joseph of Arimathea describing the Apostle Thomas' late arrival at Mary's burial. The study explores the provenance and circulation of the Norse translation in Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 232 fol. (*c.* 1300–1450) and argues that the presence in *Framfǫr Maríu* of variant readings typical of a newly identified 'Tuscan redaction' indicates that its lost manuscript source was a Latin codex circulating in Florence during the second quarter of the fifteenth century. It concludes that the lost Latin volume was likely acquired in Florence by the English Bishop of Hólar Jón Vilhjálmsson Craxton (d. 1440) during his visit to Pope Eugene IV (1383–1447) in the years 1433–1436, and that before his death Jón himself may have sent it to Hólar on an English ship, which must have had in his cargo also other manuscripts of English provenance. Finally, evidence is provided of the knowledge of the Pseudo-Joseph's *Transitus* in the visual arts through a discussion of two previously unnoticed Assumption scenes in the alabaster altarpieces of Hítardalur (Mýrasýsla) and Möðruvellir (Eyjafjörður) that were also imported from England around 1450.

The second section, '*Heilagir byskupar*: Holy Bishops', which focuses on indigenous hagiographic and semi-hagiographic literature composed about three acclaimed bishops of Iceland, Jón, Þorlákr, and Lárentíus, is the lengthiest section of the volume. In the opening essay 'Latin Oratory at the Edge of the World: The Fragments of Gizurr Hallsson's **Gesta Scalotensis ecclesie presulum* and the **Vita sancti Thorlaci*', which follows naturally the discussion on imported Latin literature by Pelle and Bullitta, Gottskálk Jensson discusses the now-lost **Gesta Scalotensis ecclesie presulum* and the surviving sections of **Vita sancti Thorlaci* preserved in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 386 I, II, and III 4to. Gottskálk points out that *Þorláks saga helga* appears to be a vernacular rendition of the **Vita sancti Thorlaci* and argues that the Norse fragments seem to ultimately derive from the Latin text of the **Gesta* of the first five bishops of Skálholt (*c.* 1193) composed by the lawspeaker Gizurr Hallsson (d. 1206), and that this text was conflated with the *vita* of St Þorlákr (*c.* 1199) by Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218/1219). In agreement with the editor of the first printed edition of *Hungrvaka* (1778), Gottskálk concludes that the first redactor of the Norse texts was Magnús Gizurarson (*c.* 1175–1237), son of Gizurr Hallsson and the eighth bishop of Skálholt, who held the bishopric during the years 1216–1237. In 'Three Scenes from *Jóns saga helga*: A Typological Mode of Thought in Early Icelandic Hagiography', Haki Antonsson examines

three topical scenes in *Jóns saga helga* – the *vita* of Jón Qgmundarson, first bishop of Hólar (1052–1122) and Iceland's second canonized saint – which has been attributed to Gunnlaugr Leifsson. Haki stresses how, with the help of oral, written, and visual source material, Gunnlaugr was able to construct narratives of considerable originality in terms of form and content. Haki explores the narrative possibilities of a typological mode of thinking based on similarities and oppositions and stresses the emphasis of the marked bifocal quality of the three scenes, which may have their origin in the combined use of traditional and new learning in these early stages of saga writing. The following essay by Fulvio Ferrari, '*Lárentíus saga byskups* between History and Historiography', focuses on another episcopal biography, *Lárentíus saga byskups*, possibly the youngest of the extant *byskupa sǫgur*, which deals with the life of Lárentíus Kálfsson (1267–1324), the eleventh bishop of Hólar. The saga was composed by Lárentíus' friend Einarr Hafliðason (1307–1393) during the third quarter of the fourteenth century. It demonstrates how narrative, style, and structural elements pertaining to the hagiographical and historical genres of saga literature are highly interwoven. Ferrari also notes how Lárentíus, who was never canonized, is presented by Einarr as a righteous man and a saintly model, who would appeal to both the Icelandic clergy and laity. In Ferrari's view, *Lárentíus saga* is the product of a masterful combination and harmonization of secular and hagiographical motifs, and the result is a highly edifying and very humorous literary piece. The last essay, 'Remembering Saints and Bishops in Medieval Iceland' by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, serves as a conclusion to the section in that it provides an overview of the cult and lives of the saints and bishops discussed in the previous chapters from the perspective of memory studies. She comments on the manner in which both original and imported Icelandic *vitae* appear to contain numerous references and allusions to memory and knowledge. As examples of mnemonic aid, Ásdís mentions the first half of the preface to *Stjórn*, in which knowledge is compared to parts of a room, and the well-known *Stave Church Dedication Homily* in the *Icelandic Homily Book* (*c*. 1200), where the individual parts of a typical Norwegian stave church construction serve as a memory aid for religious instruction. She concludes her essay with an example from *Jóns saga helga* and demonstrates that the variety of Biblical quotations in narratives and manuscripts indicates that the Norse hagiographers quoted from memory. Drawing on excerpts from both prose and poetry, she emphasizes the importance of memory in the composition of hagiographical texts and the significance of a continuous interplay between *memoria naturalis* ('natural memory') and *memoria artificialis* ('artificial memory').

The third section, '*Heilagir karlar ok englar*: Holy Men and Angels' is devoted to the Icelandic lives of Benedict of Nursia (*c*. 480–*c*. 547) and Dominic of Caleruega (1170–1221), founding fathers of the Benedictine and Dominican religious orders, and that of St Michael, who customarily

occupies a special place among the saints because of his Christ-like functions as psychopomp and opponent of Satan. In '*Þat vóro lavg munka*: A Reading of *Benedikts saga* in Light of the *Regula sancti Benedicti*', Mauro Camiz examines *Benedikts saga*, a translation of the *Vita sancti Benedicti*. He highlights how the vernacular account shows precise connections with specific recommendations from and prescriptions of the *Regula sancti Benedicti* and stresses how several verbal interactions between Benedict and his monks that do not appear in the Latin original may be considered a Norse dramatization of the source text. He also draws attention to the fact that in the vernacular version, inappropriate behavior is more easily stigmatized than in the Latin original and that, accordingly, the path to redemption is made clearer to the Icelandic audience. In 'The Lore of St Dominic in Medieval Iceland and Norway', Simonetta Battista reviews the legacy of St Dominic in medieval Iceland and Norway. In contrast to Denmark and Sweden, the cult of St Dominic appears to have been virtually non-existent in medieval Iceland, where no monastery and only one church (at Kolbeinsstaðir) was dedicated to him. Battista examines *Dóminíkuss saga* in *Reykjahólabók* (*c*. 1530–1540) – a well-known late medieval legendary based mainly on a now-lost version of the Low German *Der Heiligen Leben* and the only manuscript preserving the legend – and a few relevant episodes in *Maríu saga*. She draws attention to the fact that in comparison to the surviving Latin sources, both the Low German and the Icelandic versions of Dominic's legend appear to center on the major themes of the saints' biography, including his ardent fight against heresy and the founding of the Order of Preachers. Looking at translated and indigenous literature, homilies, prayers, diplomas, church dedications, and the visual arts, the third essay entitled 'The Veneration of St Michael in Medieval Iceland' by Margaret Cormack surveys the reception of the cult of the archangel in medieval Iceland from the eleventh-century skaldic stanza by Arnórr jarlaskáld (*c*. 1020–*c*. 1070) to the angelic invocations found in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 426 12mo (*c*. 1650–1700).

The fourth section, '*Heilagar meyjar*: Holy Maidens', is concerned with two examples of the cult of holy virgins in medieval Iceland. In 'Katrínarhólar: St Catherine's Hills, Milk, and Mount Sinai', Helgi Þorláksson discusses the possibility that seven Icelandic hillocks called Katrínarhólar ('Catherine's hillocks') were named after St Catherine of Alexandria (*c*. 287–*c*. 305), possibly because such small hills were considered reminiscent of Mount Sinai in Egypt, where the celebrated monastery is dedicated to the saint. Helgi notes that another possible explanation for the seven Katrínarhólar place-names is their logical association with the milking of ewes and cows. He suggests that both explanations might be applicable to several hillocks where Icelanders engaged especially in grazing activities. In 'St Agnes of Rome in Late

Medieval and Early Modern Icelandic Verse', Natalie M. Van Deusen analyzes four representative Icelandic poems dedicated to St Agnes of Rome. The essay sheds new light on the transmission, dissemination, and treatment of the primitive hagiographical legend through an examination of the late medieval *Agnesardiktur* (*c.* 1300–1550), the early seventeenth-century *Agnesarrímur* by the Reverend Eiríkur Hallson í Höfða (1614–1698), the *Agnesarkvæði* composed by Þorvaldur Magnússon (1670–1747) around 1725, and a hitherto unknown and unedited nineteenth-century stanza entitled *Agnesarvísa*. It is shown that Agnes' *vita* and exempla proved malleable to various literary contexts and paradigmatic purposes according to the expectations of the audience.

While these studies all shed valuable light on their respective themes and subjects, they also collectively illuminate the genesis, developments, and idiosyncrasies of medieval Icelandic hagiography. One very important conclusion to be drawn from these essays when read in unison is that the composition and celebration of saints' lives in medieval Iceland was firmly embedded in the European context. Textual, cultic, linguistic, and iconographic evidence confirms unequivocally that the literary elite of medieval Iceland was well aware of contemporary Continental currents in hagiographic literature, theological discussions, and worship practices. The following chapters trace, on the one hand, the learned European networks from which medieval Icelandic hagiography sprouted, developed, and partially survived the Reformation. On the other hand, such precise identifications allow the authors of the volume to isolate and inspect the creative processes of accommodation and adaptation of foreign sources and models. These two approaches combine in the volume to form a clear picture of an Icelandic hagiographic literature and culture that celebrate the splendor of foreign and local saints through the creation of a highly captivating literary genre that became immensely popular throughout the Icelandic Middle Ages and beyond.

Dario Bullitta,
Turin, Sollemnitas Omnium Sanctorum, 2020