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## SAINTS AND SINNERS<sup>1</sup>

### *Reflections on death in some Icelandic sagas*

WHILE IT was once the fashion to use the literature of medieval Iceland as evidence for pagan Germanic ideology, scholarship of the past century has laid increasing emphasis on its incorporation of Christian learning. The importance of saints' lives as models has been pointed out, and numerous episodes have been traced to Latin sources.<sup>2</sup> The function of the borrowed material in its new context, however, has been the subject of far less attention. Does the presence of Christian motifs represent purely literary imitation, or were parallels with the writings of the Church meant to be recognized? If the latter is the case, what was the significance of the borrowing? The answers to these questions will differ from saga to saga, and each example must be analyzed in context. It may be useful, however, to compare the treatment of a particular situation in a number of works, to see whether they share common elements which may facilitate our interpretation. In the following, I have examined descriptions of deaths which contain either overt demonstrations of religion or hagiographic motifs. For the most part I have restricted myself to sagas whose protagonists were Christian, i.e. sagas of the later Norwegian kings and the sagas of contemporaries, although some relevant passages from sagas of the Icelanders have also been included. It should be noted at the outset that I am considering the material from a literary point of view, and am not concerned with its historical accuracy. The extent to which fact has been embroidered with fiction, or life imitated art, is beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper read at the Sixth International Saga Conference held in Helsingør, Denmark, July 28–August 2, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> See G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, Oxford, 1953, reprinted 1967; Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Sagas and Saints' Lives,' *Workshop Papers of the Sixth International Saga Conference, 28/7 – 2/8 1985*, vol. 1, Copenhagen, 1985, pp. 551–71, also in *Cultura classica e cultura germanica settentrionale*, Macerata 1988, pp. 125–143.

'The good fame a man has won for himself never dies,' says Háva-mál.<sup>3</sup> It is clear from the extant literature of medieval Iceland that the way in which a man met his death contributed to his posthumous reputation, whether he was a legendary hero or a neighbor slain in a local feud. The sagas of *Sturlunga*, no less than other genres, contain numerous passages which bear witness to bravery in the face of death; we frequently find comments such as 'his courage was much praised,' 'his defense was unparalleled,' or 'he departed this life with courage and honour.'<sup>4</sup> The characters themselves may express concern about the way their last moments will be described; when dragged outside on a cold night, Tumi Sighvatsson (the elder, † 1222) asks to be killed quickly, lest it be thought that he is shaking with fear.<sup>5</sup> After confessing his sins, Þórðr Bjarnarson lies on his back so that he will face the oncoming blade, and bids bystanders observe whether he flinches.<sup>6</sup> The theme takes on a rather gruesome tone when we read that the three men chosen to slay Gizurr Þorvaldsson 'should each strike his blow, and not hurry about it, and see how he reacted.'<sup>7</sup>

In the thirteenth century, however, a man facing death had more at stake than his reputation. On leaving this world, he entered another, and if his life had been spent in raiding and bloodshed, he might reasonably be concerned about his destination. This was his last chance to escape the fires of hell, and even hardened sinners who had previously showed little interest in religion might give some thought to the welfare of their souls. As Hrani Koðránsson remarks after hearing confession, 'Vera má at yðr þykki eigi karlmannliga við orðit minnar handar. En mik má mjök ugga, at eigi sé vís gistingin, sú er mér gegni.'<sup>8</sup> When he again takes up weapons to defend himself, it is with the priest's permission.

<sup>3</sup> 'orztír deyr aldregi, hveim er sér góðan getr' (stanza 76), cf. stanza 77 'ek veit einn, at aldri deyr: dómr um dauðan hvern.' *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius*, ed. Gustav Neckel, revised by Hans Kuhn, 4th edition, Heidelberg, 1962, vol. I, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> For example with reference to Sveinn Jónsson (Stu I 253 / K I 288 / Bp I 500 / Gs I 165), Oddr Þórarinnsson (Stu I 515-16 / K II 238-9), or Kolbeinn grön (Stu I 499 / K II 213).

<sup>5</sup> Stu I 288 / K I 353.

<sup>6</sup> Stu II 40 / K II 42.

<sup>7</sup> 'skyldi sitt högg höggva hverr ok fara ekki ótt at ok vita, hvernig hann yrði við.' Stu I 492-3 / K II 203.

<sup>8</sup> Stu I 505 / K II 220-1.

Ideally, sins should be formally confessed and atoned for during this life; where this was not possible, last-minute repentance might suffice to attain a state of grace and mitigate some of the pains of purgatory. Although theologians disagreed about the precise extent to which this was possible, popular miracle literature was full of examples illustrating the precept that 'er eigi sva þung synd, at eigi megi hreinsaz fyrir iðranar tar,'<sup>9</sup> and that God 'dæmer hvern epter idran þeiri er hann hefer i liflati sinu.'<sup>10</sup> Death could serve as a penance, as noted in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great: 'oc ma þ[at] vera at farligr dæþe reinfe neqveriar sýnþer þeifar.'<sup>11</sup> The same idea is expressed in the famous passage in *Njáls saga*: 'guð er miskunnsamr, ok mun hann oss eigi bæði láta brenna þessa heims ok annars.'<sup>12</sup> *Hungrvaka* emphasizes the piety of two bishops by describing their desire for a painful death.<sup>13</sup>

Accounts of confession or other pious actions preceding a man's death can thus suggest his subsequent fate. An author can provide evidence of an appropriate spiritual condition by informing his readers that men had attended church, observed a feast day, or recited prayers shortly before death, or that doomed captives asked to speak to a priest. Several condemned men express a desire to atone for their sins; Hákon Þórðarson, Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson and Þórðr Þorvaldsson offer to go on pilgrimage. This resembles a Christianized version of the traditional punishment of outlawry, but those proposing it go even further. Hrafn and Þórðr demonstrate Christian charity by offering to make the journey for the benefit of their enemies' souls as well as their own,<sup>14</sup> while Hákon offers to have an arm and leg cut off before he sets out. When this request is refused, he asks to be stabbed to death.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Postola sögur*, ed. C.R. Unger, Christiania, 1874, p. 803. See also the text of Homily for the dedication of a church found in AM 237a fol: 'Íva scolom ver oc innan þva iþranartaórum fýnþa flecca af aðnd várre', ed. Oluf Kolsrud, *Messuskýringar*, Oslo, 1952, pp. 103-4.

<sup>10</sup> *Duggals leiðsla*, ed. Peter Cahill (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi: Rit 25), Reykjavík, 1983, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> *The Life of St. Gregory and his dialogues: fragments of an Icelandic manuscript from the 13th century*. Hreinn Benediktsson, ed. (Editiones Arnarnagænanæ, series B, vol. 4), Copenhagen, 1963, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Ns 329.

<sup>13</sup> Bp I 70, 78 note 8 / Bs I 88, 103-4.

<sup>14</sup> Stu I 198 / K I 203, Bp I 673 / Hs 55 / Stu I 226 / K I 314, Stu I 354 / K I 438.

<sup>15</sup> Stu I 198 / K I 203.

Sveinn Jónsson, who realizes that death is inescapable, asks to have his arms and legs cut off before he is beheaded. He bears this bravely, and recites the *Ave Maria* while it is taking place,<sup>16</sup> demonstrating secular and religious fortitude simultaneously.

If there had been no witnesses present at a man's death, there were other ways of indicating his spiritual state. The bodies of Eyjólfur Kárrson and Þorvaldur Snorrason are found lying with arms spread out in a cross, a common position of prayer or penance.<sup>17</sup> Skarpheðinn's arms are crossed on his breast (another attitude associated with devotions), and the crosses burned on his chest and back are thought to be self-inflicted.<sup>18</sup> The dream in which Brandr Kolbeinsson is seen commending his soul to Christ<sup>19</sup> serves a similar purpose, as does Guðmundr Arason's prophecy to Þórðr Sturluson.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, Kolbeinn Tumaason's failure to hear the church-bells on the eve of St. Mary's augurs ill for his soul's reception.<sup>21</sup>

Descriptions of pious actions may be reinforced by parallels with the Bible or saints' lives. The martyrdom of Thomas Beckett appears to have been an especially influential text.<sup>22</sup> It is specifically mentioned in the saga of Þorgils skarði: 'Veittist Þorgils þat, at hann hafði þvílíkt

<sup>16</sup> Stu I 253 / K I 288 / Bp I 500 / Gs I 165.

<sup>17</sup> Stu I 292 / K I 358, Stu I 322 / K I 396. It is interesting to note that the practice of praying while lying with arms spread in a cross is ascribed to the teachings of Guðmundr Arason in *Arons saga* (Stu II 268).

<sup>18</sup> Ns 343-4. While death by fire may have been a sufficient purgatory for the rest of the family, Skarpheðinn undoubtedly bore the greatest burden of sin. In view of his troll-like appearance (to say nothing of the verses heard emerging from the smoking ruins of the farm) an unambiguous sign of religion on his part was probably considered necessary.

<sup>19</sup> Stu II 74 / K II 91.

<sup>20</sup> Stu I 399 / K I 489. The prophecy that they will meet in the spring indicates their coming deaths, and implies that Þórðr will reach heaven.

<sup>21</sup> Bp I 494, Gs 156.

<sup>22</sup> It is worth citing both versions edited by C.R. Unger (*Thomas saga erkibyskups*, Christiania, 1869).

*Thomas saga* II, p. 441: 'Hann hneigir sik fyrir alltarinu æ beði kne með þessum sid-  
aztum ordum . . . 'Almattigum gudi ok hans sæluztu modur sancte Marie ok þessarrar  
kirkiu patronis heilogum Dionisio ok ollum helgum fel ek mik æ hendi ok kirkiunnar  
sauk.' . . . Uilhialmr af Traz hauggr til erchibyskups ok stefnir i . . . haufudit . . . kemr  
hauggit . . . síþan i haufudit erchibyskupsins . . . Enn uid þenna fyrsta auerka hefir þat  
meinlausa fornarlamb lifanda guds hinn heilagi Thomas sinar hendr ok augu til himins

sár, sem sagt var um kveldit, at inn heilagi Tómas erkibiskup hafði særðr verit í kirkiunni í Cantia, ok Þorgilsi þótti um kveldit fagrligast vera mundu at taka slíkan dauða.<sup>23</sup> The death of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson also appears to be modelled on that of the archbishop; both receive a fatal blow in a position of devotion (Thomas on his knees, Hrafn on knees and elbows as prescribed by the penitential of St. Þorlákr),<sup>24</sup> and their bodies lie as if in prayer. So does the corpse of Eyjólfur Kársson according to *Arons saga*.<sup>25</sup> Höskuldr Hvítanesgoði and Kolbeinn grön Dufgusson, like Thomas, fall to their knees after receiving a wound in the head,<sup>26</sup> and Sveinn Jónsson stretches his neck under his slayer's ax.<sup>27</sup> The delimiting which precedes this is reminiscent of the martyrdom of Bishop Jón the Irish as reported in *Hungrvaka*.<sup>28</sup>

The descriptions of Hrafn's and Kolbeinn's deaths may also reflect knowledge of a saga of St. Magnús of Orkney (which may itself be related to Thomas's).<sup>29</sup> Both Hrafn and Magnús make offers of exile and

bidandi sua annars hauggs með hneigdu haufdi. Ok þui næst hauggr enn annar riddari ofan i haufudit, ok uid þat sar fellr erchibyskup fram a golfit með riettum likama, sua fagrliga sem til bænar offrandi sik lifandi forn, sem þeim er sefðiz at leysa mannkynit.'

*Thomas saga* I, p. 260 ff: 'þa snyzt hann at allterino . . . ok neiger sitt heilaga hofuð mote allterino, þessor orð siðarst mælande . . . æinn af riddarunum hæggr . . . til hans meðr ollu afle. En hann hinn signaðe retter framm hofuðet . . . kæmr hogget i hofuð erkibyskupenum . . . Hinn signaðe Thomas gæfande sek guðe fell a kne, sem hann feck hit fyrsta hogget, augunum meðr samtengðum hondum framme fyrir ser til himinsens uppléttum, a þann hátt sem goþer menn biðiaz fyrir til guðs, offrande sua guðe sialfan sek lifande forn i mustere fyrir heilagho alltare. Ok sua sem hann stendr sua meðr neigðo hofðe biðande annars hoggs, leypr framm annarr riddare ok hæggr enn i hofuð honum. Enn er hann fær þetta sár, fellr hann fram a, rekkiande sek út meðr rettum likame til iarðarennar, framfallenn sua sem til bænar.'

<sup>23</sup> Stu II 221 / K II 298.

<sup>24</sup> Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 'Skriftaboð Þorláks biskups,' *Gripla* V, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi: Rit 23), Reykjavík, 1982, pp. 105–6.

<sup>25</sup> 'þa lagðist Rafn niðr á knè ok olboga, ok lagði hálsinn á eitt rekatrè, ok Bárðr hjó af honum höfut þar við trènu. Rafn hrærði hvorki hönd nè fót er hann sæfðist, heldr lá hann á knjánum ok olbogunum, sem hann var vanr at liggja til bænar.' Bp I 674 / Hs 56 / Stu I 226 / K I 315. *Arons saga*: Stu II 251 (see note 29).

<sup>26</sup> Ns 280–1, Stu I 499 / K II 213.

<sup>27</sup> Stu I 253 / K I 288.

<sup>28</sup> Bp I 64 / Bs I 80.

<sup>29</sup> Closely related descriptions of the death of St. Magnús of Orkney are found in *Orkneyinga saga* and the longer and shorter sagas of St. Magnús (which are also printed in the edition of *Orkneyinga saga*). The question of the relationship between these sagas

pilgrimage to their captors, and green fields mark the spots where they are slain.<sup>30</sup> In dying in a cross position, Eyjólfur and Þorvaldr, as well as Þórðr Andréasson, resemble two reputed saints, Valbjófr and Eysteinn Haraldsson.<sup>31</sup> It may be added that the accounts of Eysteinn's and Valbjófr's deaths also contain certain parallels with that of St. Mag-

and/or their Latin sources cannot be entered into here. It may, indeed, be insoluble, as the Latin *vita* mentioned in the longer version of the saga no longer exists. See the introduction to *Ork*, and the article by E.F. Halvorsen in *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, Copenhagen, 1966, vol. XI, col. 238-9. I have quoted the passages from the various sagas which best illustrate the motifs under consideration.

Ork 110 (Orkneyinga saga): 'Svá var inn virðuligi Magnús jarl glaðligr sem honum væri til veizlu boðit. Hvárki mælti hann með styggð né reiðiorðum. Ok eptir þessa ræðu fell hann til bænar ok laut í gaupnir sér ok helkti út mörpum tárurum í guðs augliti.'

Ork 368 (Magnús saga lengri): 'Eptir þetta fell heilagr Magnús til bænar ok laut í gaupnir sér ok helkti út mörpum tárurum í guðs augliti, gefandi sína sök, sitt líf, ok sjálfan sik í vald drottins.'

Ork 321 (Magnús saga skemmri): 'þat sagði hann, at Magnús jarl væri þá með mikilli hugar staðfesti . . . mælti hvárki með styggð né reiði. Eptir þat fell hann til bænar ok laut í gaupnir sér ok helkti út mörpum tárurum í guðs augliti.'

Ork 368-69 (Magnús saga lengri): after jarl Hákon's *merkismaðr* has refused to slay Magnús, Lifólfr, the cook, is ordered to do so 'en hann tók at gráta hástöfum. Þá mælti heilagr Magnús jarl til hans: 'Eigi skaltu gráta,' segir hann, 'því at þér er frægd í at vinna slíkt. Vertu með staðföstum hug, því at þú skalt hafa klæði mín, sem siðr er til ok lög inna fyrri manna. Ekki skaltu hræðast, því þú gerir þetta nauðigr ok sá, er þik nauðgar til, hefir meiri synd en þú.' . . . Þá steypiti hann af sér kyrtlinum ok gaf Lifólfi. Síðan bað blessaðr Magnús jarl sér leyfis at biðjast fyrir; ok þat var honum veitt. Hann fell þá allt til jarðar ok gaf sik guði í vald, færandi honum sjálfan sik í fórn. Ekki at eins bað hann fyrir sjálfum sér, heldr ok jafnvel fyrir óvinum sínum ok banamönnum, ok fyrirgaf hann þeim öllum af öllu hjarta þat, er þeir misgerðu við hann; ok játti hann guði allar afgörðir sínar ok bað þær allar af sér þvást í úthellingu síns blóðs ok fal guði önd sína á hendi, biðjandi guðs engla at koma á móti henni ok flytja hana í hvíld paradísar.'

<sup>30</sup> Ork 109, 320, and 367 ff; Bp I 673 ff. / Hs 55 ff. / Stu I 226 / K I 314.

<sup>31</sup> Stu I 292 / K I 358 (*Íslendinga saga*): 'lá Eyjólfur á grúfu ok hafði lagt hendr í kross frá sér.' Stu II 251 (*Arons saga*): 'lagðist þar á kné, en síðan fell hann allr til jarðar ok breiddi hendr frá sér ok horfði sjálfur í austr svá sem til bænar.'

Stu I 534 / K II 317: 'þá lagðist Þórðr niðr . . . ok rétti hendr frá sér í kross.'

Stu I 322 / K I 396: 'Þorvaldr gekk í eldahuð . . . lagðist yfir eldstó ok lagði hendr frá sér í kross, ok þar fannst hann síðan.'

Hkr III, 345 Eysteinn: 'Síðan lagðisk hann niðr á grúfu ok breiddi hendr frá sér út ok bað sik hoggva i kross á milli herðanna, kvað þá skyldu reyna, hvárt hann mundi þola járn eða eigi . . . Símun . . . kvað konung hólzti lengi hafa kropit þar um lyng.'

Fagr. 299 Valbjófr: 'En þa er iarlenn vissi hværr hann skyldi hoggva þa firir gaf hann þeim riddara vannlega oc sva konongenom. oc allum oðrum þeim er æftir hanum hafðu

nús.<sup>32</sup> Auðunn Tómasson thirsts before he dies, and is thus comparable to St. Þorlákr and to Christ himself.<sup>33</sup>

Outside of *Sturlunga*, Erlingr skakki drowns Frírekr kæna by tying an anchor around his neck and throwing him into the sea, as was done to St. Clement.<sup>34</sup> Bjarni Einarsson has pointed out parallels between the last hours of Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld and the biblical account of the temptation of St. Peter.<sup>35</sup> The bright light which prevents a definitive statement concerning the death of Ólafr Tryggvason has undoubtedly been borrowed from the story of John the Evangelist, the

faret. oc til iartegna gaf hann riddara silkikyrtil sinn þeim er hoggva skyldi hann. Ðui nest lagðe hann sik til iarðar i cross oc rette baðar hendr i fra ser.'

For the sake of completeness, I include the following passage from 'Hemings þátrr' (Hauksbók, p. 347): 'Valþjófr ste af baki ok fyribavð sinvm monnum at veria sig. hann geck til einar kirkiv ok var þar drepin ok þar er hann iarðaðr ok hygia menn hann goð-an mann.'

It is worth comparing these accounts with the following passage in Ordericus Vitalis (*The Ecclesiastical History of England and Normandy*, transl. Thomas Forester, London, 1856, AMS reprint New York, 1968, vol. II, p. 85): 'having distributed among the clergy and poor who happened to be present the robes of honour which his rank of earl entitled him to wear, he threw himself on the ground and continued some time in prayer to God, mixed with sobbings and tears. The executioners called . . . to the kneeling earl: 'Rise, sir . . .' to which he replied, 'Wait awhile, for the love of God almighty, at least while I say the Lord's prayer on your behalf and my own' . . . But when he came to the last petition his tears fell so fast, and his sobbings were so violent, that he was unable to conclude the prayer. The executioner would wait no longer, but . . . severed the earl's head from his body with a single stroke. But the head, after it was severed, uttered . . . 'But deliver us from evil. Amen.'

I suspect a relationship between a story of jarl Valþjófr and the accounts of Eysteinn's death, and possibly *Magnús saga* as well. (cf. note 30 above). The impatience of the person who has ordered a slaying is frequently paralleled in *Sturlunga*, but the giving away of clothing is not a common motif. Earl Valþjófr, a victim of the Norman conquest of England, was buried and venerated at Croyland in Lincoln. From there his story might easily have reached both Iceland and the Orkneys, conceivably *via* liturgical books. Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson of Skálholt is known to have spent time in Lincoln (in the 1150s), and his nephew, Bishop Páll, may also have done so. Aside from the hagiographic elements, it is interesting to note this example of a head which speaks after being cut off, well known from *Laxdæla* (pp. 198–9) and *Njála* (p. 461).

<sup>32</sup> See previous note.

<sup>33</sup> Stu II 191 / K II 270, Bp I 112 / Bs II 224.

<sup>34</sup> Hkr III 394.

<sup>35</sup> Bjarni Einarsson, 'Frá Þormóði, kappá hins helga Ólafs konungs,' *Lingua Islandica: Íslensk tunga* 4, Reykjavík, 1963, pp. 112–121.

fate of whose body was also unknown.<sup>36</sup> His biographer points out the parallels between Ólafr's life as a monk after the battle of Svoldr and that of Harold Godwinson, 'er fumir menn calla helgan vera.'<sup>37</sup> Kjartan Ólafsson, like St. Olaf, flings away his sword even though he has not yet been seriously wounded; similarly Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, who (for no obvious reason) has taken his sword with him to sow corn, makes no attempt to defend himself.<sup>38</sup> Lars Lönnroth has suggested the influence of *Placitus saga* on *Njáls saga*, comparing the bodies of Njáll, Bergþóra, and Þórðr, preserved unburned under the ox-hide, to those of Placitus and his family, which were found unscathed inside a brazen ox.<sup>39</sup> Njáll's body, like those of the martyrs, is preternaturally bright. It may be added that both Placitus and Njáll had chosen to undergo suffering immediately rather than postpone it (to the end of his life in the case of Placitus, to the next world in the case of Njáll.)

In addition to these parallels with specific saints' lives, the following hagiographic commonplaces are found. Forgiving one's enemies, as Christ did on the cross, was the duty of all Christians; however, as Bjarni Guðnason has pointed out,<sup>40</sup> in practice it is rarely mentioned outside hagiographic literature. The only layman I have found who expresses such sentiments is Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, whose dying words echo Christ's.<sup>41</sup> After confessing, the Arnþrúðarsons wash their hands and comb their hair as if going to a celebration (*fagnaðr*), actions reminiscent simultaneously of the Jómsvíkings and the early Christian

<sup>36</sup> *Det Arnarnagæanske Haandskrift 310 4to: Saga Olafs konungs Tryggvasonar er ritaði Oddr muncr*, ed. P. Groth, Christiania, 1895, p. 111. *Postola Sögur*, ed. C.R. Unger, Christiania, 1874, p. 454.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 118–19. Of course it is necessary for him to reverse the chronology, making Harold imitate Ólafr. 'Hemings þátrr' in *Hauksbók* calls Harold 'sannheilagr' (p. 348).

<sup>38</sup> *Laxdæla*, p. 154, *Njála*, p. 280–81, cf. *Hkr* II, p. 385. It must not be forgotten, however, that both Kjartan and Höskuldr are in a particularly difficult situation, in that their attackers are tied to them by the relationship of fostering. The idea that 'it is better to be killed by than to kill' a close relation is voiced by others than saints – besides Kjartan and Höskuldr in the passages cited above, it is attributed to Tostig Godwinson before the battle of Stamford bridge (*Mork* 276, *Fagr* 289).

<sup>39</sup> Lars Lönnroth, 'Kroppen som själens spegel,' *Lychnos* 1963–4, p. 32; *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*, Berkeley, 1976, p. 122 ff.

<sup>40</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, *Fyrsta Sagan* (*Studia Islandica* 37), 1978, p. 102.

<sup>41</sup> *Ns* 281.

martyrs.<sup>42</sup> Hákon Þórðarson, under some form of ecclesiastical censure and therefore prohibited from entering a church, refuses to desecrate one by seeking sanctuary in it, even though a priest offers to take responsibility for the action and opens the door in case he should change his mind.<sup>43</sup> In a sense, Hákon gives his life for the Church. The same may perhaps be said of others, for example Sveinn Jónsson and his companions, who emerge to their deaths rather than see the church where they had sought refuge polluted with their blood.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Kálfr Guttormsson moves from his chosen position by a cross so that his blood will not fall on it.<sup>45</sup> Although Þórðr Sturluson and King Hákon Hákonarson die in their beds, Sturla Þórðarson's descriptions of their last hours call to mind the deaths of saintly bishops.<sup>46</sup> The deaths of Hákon Þórðarson and Sigurðr slembir resemble the passions of the martyrs.

Other motifs associated with sanctity include a 'bright' and/or 'pleasant' (*þekkilegr*) corpse, for example in the cases of Magnús Erlingsson, Sverrir, Hákon Hákonarson, Þorgils skarði, and Njáll.<sup>47</sup> The incorrupt condition of Ingimundr Þorgeirsson's body, discovered beside the bones of his six companions, was considered evidence that his actions had been pleasing to God.<sup>48</sup> Even more striking is the green field which appears on the spot where Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson was

<sup>42</sup> Stu I 198 / K I 203 (cf. the first passage from *Orkneyinga saga* quoted in note 29), *Jómsvíkinga saga*, ed. Gustaf Cederschiöld, Lund, 1875, p. 33.

<sup>43</sup> Stu I 197 / K I 202.

<sup>44</sup> Stu I 253 / K I 288.

<sup>45</sup> Stu I 370 / K I 456.

<sup>46</sup> Stu I 401 / K I 492. *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores, Icelandic Sagas*, vol. 2, *Hakonar saga* and a fragment of *Magnus saga*, ed. Guðbrandur Vigfusson, London, 1887, vol. 2, p. 354.

<sup>47</sup> Ss 102, 194; *Hákonar saga* 355; Stu II 221 / K II 298; Ns 343. The body of Haraldr Godwinson is described thus in 'Hemings þátrr: 'líkú var fagrt ok þekkileg(t) ok kendv menn þar sætan ilm sva at allir vndir stoðv þeir er hia varv at hann var sanheilagr maðr' (*Hauksbók*, p. 348). In this context it is interesting to note the description in the *Life* of St. Hugh of Lincoln of a particularly noisome corpse, the state of which confirms the nature of the life led by its owner (*Magna Vita Sancti Hugonis: The Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. Decima L. Douie and Dom Hugh Farmer, O.S.B., London, 1962, vol. 2, pp. 82-3). The fact that Skarpheðinn's body was not as unpleasant as expected (Ns 344) suggests that the repentance implied by his self-inflicted burns has been accepted.

<sup>48</sup> St I 138 / K I 153.

killed, and where a mysterious light had been seen during the preceding winter.<sup>49</sup>

The question which presents itself to the modern reader is whether or not these hagiographic motifs were meant to be recognized, and if they were, what purpose they were intended to serve. On the whole, I think it unlikely that the parallels with specific *vitæ* would have been noticed by other than learned clerks. Some, indeed, may be the result of coincidence, and reflect historical reality rather than hagiographic modelling – though this does not preclude the possibility that those who witnessed or read about them would interpret them in hagiographic terms. Others may reflect purely literary imitation.

It must not be forgotten, however, that the primary purpose of saints' lives was to provide religious, rather than stylistic, instruction. It is unlikely that religious motifs borrowed from them can be completely dissociated from their original contexts. At the very least, such passages suggest that the individual in question died in a state of grace, whether or not he had formally atoned for his sins. The importance of this should not be underestimated; aside from purely sentimental considerations, it could help determine a man's right to church burial.<sup>50</sup> An example is the case of Oddr Þórarinsson, slain in 1255 while under a double ban and denied burial in consecrated ground. His family appealed to the Pope on his behalf, and evidence that he had asked for a priest in his dying breath was essential for the removal of the bans and his subsequent re-interment.<sup>51</sup>

Several of the individuals mentioned above were also in a sensitive position vis á vis the church, so that indications of a suitable frame of mind at the time of death may have been considered especially important. Kolbeinn Tumason died leading an attack on bishop Guðmundr, and although Sturla Sighvatsson had done penance in Rome for the same crime, he had subsequently committed many more. The passage cited on p. 188 above shows that Hrani Koðránsón had also accumulated a significant burden of sin. The reason that Hákon Þórðarson *átta ekki kirkjugengt* is unknown; possibly the killing of his wife's former

<sup>49</sup> Bp I 674 / Hs 56.

<sup>50</sup> This seems to have been of particular concern to Guðmundr Arason and his followers; cf. Stu I 253 / K I 288.

<sup>51</sup> Ás 57–8, cf. Stu I 516 / K II 238.

husband<sup>52</sup> was still on his conscience. The fact that he was himself slain by another of her lovers recalls the deed, and Hákon admits the appropriateness of the situation. The remark that he had spared this man on three occasions when he had discovered him with her (and might therefore legally have killed him) demonstrates the virtue of mercy while reminding the reader why he himself needed to do penance. In the end one feels not only that poetic justice had been administered, but that Hákon's crime has been paid for, both in this world and the next.

Evidence of a man's salvation might also have important consequences for his survivors. The condition of Sverrir's corpse, for example, was supposed to demonstrate that the ban on him – and his followers – had been ineffective.<sup>53</sup>

Echoes of saints' lives could direct the sympathies of the reader by emphasizing the innocence of the deceased and/or the iniquity of his slayers. Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, Kálfr Guttormsson, Þorgils skarði, the Ormssons, and the Þorvaldssons are all represented as being at peace with their enemies when they are slain, and the fact that Hrafn and Kálfr were deacons makes the crimes doubly heinous. The Arnþrúðarsons are in a slightly more equivocal position, but a comment ascribed to Ormr Jónsson makes it clear that, in the eyes of the author, their attackers were breaking a truce (*sætt*).<sup>54</sup> It may be added that the victim of such deceit was virtually guaranteed a good reception in the next world; *Sólarljóð* tells how the souls of two men killed treacherously are carried straight to heaven. The sins of the first, who had been a robber and murderer, appear to be transferred to his slayer.<sup>55</sup>

When a man was like a saint, his enemies automatically became agents of the devil. While statements to this effect can probably be dismissed as rhetoric in most cases, they may sometimes be meant literally, for example in the mutual recriminations of Sverrir and his opponents.<sup>56</sup> The reverse was also true; descriptions of gratuitous cruelty in a slaying might go far to rehabilitate the reputation of the victim.

The trappings of sanctity were in fact a valuable form of propagan-

<sup>52</sup> Stu I 170 / K I 168.

<sup>53</sup> Ss 194.

<sup>54</sup> Stu I 200 / K I 206.

<sup>55</sup> *Den Norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, B: rettet tekst, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen, 1912, vol I, pp. 636–9.

<sup>56</sup> For example Ss 107. Another interesting passage in this context is the description

da, one which King Sverrir made use of when he commissioned a biography from Abbot Karl of Þingeyrar. The result, produced under his close supervision, resembles a *vita* both in structure and content. It represents Sverrir as the chosen servant of God and St. Ólafr, thus countering the claims of Magnús Erlingsson. Þorleifr breiðskeggr, a subsequent pretender to the throne, paid Sverrir the compliment of imitating his tactics; he was rumoured to have the same sort of supernatural luck and wisdom as are attributed to Sverrir.<sup>57</sup> Needless to say, *Sverris saga* scoffs at these claims.

If someone resembled a saint during his lifetime, there was all the more reason for calling him one after he had died. The requirements for sainthood were minimal; it was often sufficient for an innocent person to die a violent death.<sup>58</sup> In 1176 Margaret of Roskilde was murdered by her husband, accused of suicide, and buried in unconsecrated ground. A light shining from heaven indicated her innocence, and within the year Archbishop Absalon had translated her body to the cathedral in Roskilde.<sup>59</sup> The life of St. Ansgar places a schoolboy slain by one of his companions among the martyrs because he bore his wound patiently and loved his slayer no less on account of it.<sup>60</sup> St. Hallvarðr, St. Knútr, and St. Magnús attained their status by dying 'for righteousness;' of the last mentioned we are told that a green field appeared at the place of his death:

Sá staðr var áðr mosóttir ok grýttir, en litlu síðarr birtusk verðleikar Magnúss jarls við guð, svá at þar varð grœnn völlr, er hann var veginn, ok sýndi guð þat, at hann var fyrir réttlæti veginn ok hann qðlaðisk fegrð ok grænleik paradísar, er kallask jorð lifandi manna.<sup>61</sup>

of Sturla Sighvatsson's death with its references to 'fiends' and 'small devils' (Stu I 435 / K I 528-9).

<sup>57</sup> Ss 121-2.

<sup>58</sup> An early example is Edward the martyr (see entry in Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, Baltimore, 1965).

<sup>59</sup> M. Cl. Gertz, *Vitæ Sanctorum Danorum*, Copenhagen, 1908-12, pp. 388-9.

<sup>60</sup> Rudolf Buchner, ed., *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der Hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*, Darmstadt, 1973, p. 28, chapter 5.

<sup>61</sup> Ork 111.

When describing the death of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, Abbot Arngrímur notes that Hrafn

þá, sem trúist, æskilegan enda með píslarvætti, þá er hann var fyrir eina saman öfund leiddr um nátt af sæng sinni undir brugðit sverð, því meirr en saklauss, at þann er fyrir var heimsókninni hafði hann elskat, fætt, ok fóstrat sem sinn kjötligan son.<sup>62</sup>

Although papal approval for new cults was sometimes sought, it was not formally required until 1234, and was frequently dispensed with even after that date. Cults could even develop in the face of opposition by ecclesiastical authorities; a woman executed at Nordnes, Norway, after having laid claim to the throne, was venerated by both laymen and clergy in spite of the archbishop's objections.<sup>63</sup>

Many of those recognized as saints by the church were extremely unlikely candidates for sanctity according to modern ideas. It must, however, be remembered that in the Middle Ages a violent career did not necessarily disqualify one from canonization. Sts. Ólafr, Magnús, and Knútr are typical of the many victims of political conflicts who subsequently became saints. Indeed, attempts to establish the holiness of fallen leaders were almost the rule, rather than the exception, during the twelfth century, even when the life of the individual in question had been less than exemplary. We are told that Haraldr Gilli, murdered in 1136, was considered a saint by some,<sup>64</sup> and the extant account of his death (which is preserved in the saga of his slayer, Sigurðr slembir) is clearly designed to disprove their claim. It describes Haraldr as dying in bed with his mistress, too drunk to know what was happening to him, much less give any consideration to the state of his soul – which, under the circumstances, left much to be desired.<sup>65</sup> Bjarni Guðnason has argued that Sigurðr's own saga was written with his

<sup>62</sup> *Guðmundar saga*, Bp II, pp. 55–56.

<sup>63</sup> *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, vol. 6. Christiania, 1863, no. 100; vol. 8, 1871, no. 67.

<sup>64</sup> Mork 414.

<sup>65</sup> Mork 413 / Hkr III 301. A similar situation – or perhaps a rumour of Haraldr's veneration which had been mis-located to Sweden – called forth the following censure by Pope Alexander in a letter to King Knut: 'magno nobis fuit horrore, quod quidam inter vos sunt qui diabolica fraude decepti, hominem quendam in potatione et ebrietate occisum quasi sanctum, more infidelium, venerantur, cum vix etiam pro talibus in suis ebrietatibus interemptis orare permittat Ecclesia.' J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, series secunda, vol. CC, Paris, 1855, col. 1261. It may be noted in passing that

canonization in mind.<sup>66</sup> The Danes appear to have considered the fallen Ólafr Guðbrandsson a saint, and miracles are said to have been performed where Eysteinn Haraldsson was slain.<sup>67</sup> The latter was Sverrir's uncle, and I suspect that Sverrir encouraged – if, indeed, he did not initiate – Eysteinn's cult. *Heimskringla* informs us that he was responsible for an account of Eysteinn's death which laid the blame squarely on the shoulders of Eysteinn's brother, Ingi (who had also fought against Sverrir's half-brother, Hákon herðibreiðr.)<sup>68</sup> Þorleifr breiðskeggr's death was followed by rumours of his sanctity,<sup>69</sup> and Sverrir, too, might well have been considered holy if he had not been at odds with the Church during most of his career. As it turned out it was his opponent, Archbishop Eysteinn, whose canonization was promoted by Hákon Hákonarson in the mid-thirteenth century.<sup>70</sup> Hákon himself appears to have been venerated as a saint in the late Middle Ages.<sup>71</sup>

Although Iceland was somewhat slower to produce saints than Denmark and Norway, its inhabitants were clearly eager to have their own. The first attempt in this direction probably involved Ólafr Tryggvason, represented as responsible for the island's conversion in extant historical writings. A Latin biography with unmistakable hagiographic overtones was composed about him in the second half of the twelfth century.<sup>72</sup> Ólafr, however, was not as obliging as his namesake in the performance of miracles, and by the end of the century Icelanders may well have despaired of having a patron saint for their island. We are told that after St. Þorlákur's death in 1193, 'margra vitra manna orð

this document is one of the first attestations of papal claims of the right to approve the cults of new saints.

<sup>66</sup> *Fyrsta Sagan*, *Studia Islandica* 37, 1978.

<sup>67</sup> Hkr III 410, 345.

<sup>68</sup> Hkr III 345–6.

<sup>69</sup> Ss 122.

<sup>70</sup> Ludwig Daae, *Norges Helgener*, Christiania, 1879, p. 170 ff. 'helgi Eysteins erki-byskups' is entered under the year 1229 in most of the Icelandic annals. As Daae points out, the apparent anomaly of the promotion of Eysteinn's sanctity by King Hákon, who traced his claim to the throne to Sverrir, is undoubtedly due to the fact that Hákon wanted to conciliate the church as far as possible.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p. 180–88.

<sup>72</sup> Jan de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, 2nd ed., Berlin, 1967, vol. 2, p. 245.

vóru á því, at annathvært myndi helgi Þorláks biskups upp koma, ella mundi þess engum auðit verða hér á Íslandi.<sup>73</sup> The faith of the 'wise men' turned out to be justified; dreams and portents led to the exhumation of Þorlákr's remains in 1198, miracles were immediately forthcoming, and he was declared a saint at the *alþingi* the following year. Indeed, his success was so great that the clergy of the see of Hólar (where his cult had originated) decided to acquire a patron for their diocese as well. The remains of two former bishops were disinterred, and the sanctity of the oldest, Jón Ögmundarson, was announced in 1200. They may not have given up in the case of the other, Björn Gils-son, in spite of the lack of miracles; Ólafur Halldórsson has pointed out that passages in *Grænendinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða* refer to him in terms which suggest his holiness.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, perusal of the bishops' sagas reveals that although only Þorlákr and Jón were formally recognized as saints, Icelandic clerics were ready to claim holiness within generous limits. *Hungrvaka* reports miracles for nearly all the bishops of Skálholt, and *Guðmundar saga byskups* confirms their reputations. The saga describes a vision in which the recipient is told that 'biskupar yðrir ero helgir menn allir.' Also mentioned are the hermit Björn of Þingeyrar and Guðmundr himself: 'man hann [Guðmundr] verða mestr upphaldsmaðr lande þesso ok sitea eige í lêgra sête en Thomas erchibiskup á Englande.'<sup>75</sup> The saga also suggests the sanctity of a number of other individuals; when Guðmundr sang over the body of the nun Ketilbjörg, 'var sú þjónusta svá merkilig, at Gizurr [Hallsson, chieftain and deacon, who appears to have been involved in the establishment of Þorlákr's sanctity] váttaði þat í tölu sinni yfir greftinum, at þeir þóttust eigi slíkan lífsöng heyrta hafa, ok virði henni til heilagleiks, er henni skyldi slíks söngs auðit verða.'<sup>76</sup> The bell rings by itself when the body of the boy Ingjaldr is brought to church,<sup>77</sup> and when the undecomposed corpse of Guð-

<sup>73</sup> Bp I 302 / Bs II 226.

<sup>74</sup> *Grænendinga saga*: 'bjart og ágætt, sætt og ilmað vel.' *Eiríks saga rauða*: 'og yfir þínum ættkvíslum mun skína bjartur geisli.' *Grænland í miðaldaritum*, Reykjavík, 1978, pp. 392-94.

<sup>75</sup> Bp I 454 / Gs I 98.

<sup>76</sup> Stu I 146 / K I 251 / Bp I 466 / Gs I 117.

<sup>77</sup> Bp I 443 / Gs I 79.

mundr's uncle is found beside the bones of his six companions, the author comments: 'þetta þótti mönnum mikil merki, hvé guði hafði líkat atferð Ingimundar prests, er hann skyldi svá lengi legit hafa úti með heilum líkam ok ósköddum.'<sup>78</sup> The statement that God was pleased with Ingimundr's conduct (*atferð*) echoes the words applied to Guðmundr himself when his holiness is first recognized.<sup>79</sup>

The priest Einarr Hafliðason, author of *Laurentius saga byskups* and *Lögmanns annáll*, does his best for Bishop Egill of Hólar,<sup>80</sup> and cites the hero of his saga regarding two other churchmen: Laurence 'þottizt æ ij. monnum hafa sed heilags manz yfirbragd. einkannlíkt æ Arna biskupi Þorlaks syni. ok Biarna abota æ Þyngeyrum.'<sup>81</sup> *Lögmanns annáll* notes that there were 'margir merkiligir atburðir' at the funeral (*líkfylgja*) of Abbot Guðmundr of Þingeyrar in 1339, 'ok hyggia menn hann goðan mann fyrir gudi.' The corresponding entry in *Flateyjar annáll* substitutes 'helgan' for 'góðan'. Einarr leaves us in no doubt about Laurence himself, who dreams that he 'þottiz halda a heilags mannz beine.'<sup>82</sup> The dream resembles one in which St. Þorlákr thought he was carrying the head of St. Martin, which was interpreted as indicating his future sanctity.<sup>83</sup>

A passage attributed to the monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson describes how Ólafr Tryggvason and his bishop, Sigurðr, come to meet the soul of Bishop Þorlákr Rúnólfsson, the implication being that all three are saints.<sup>84</sup>

Little more than the name of another reputed saint has survived. The slaying of Þórðr Jónsson in 1385 is recorded in both *Gottskálks* and *Flateyjar annals*, and the latter notes under the year 1389 that his bones were moved to the churchyard of Stafholt 'eftir skipan officialis ok samþycki allra lærðra manna ok hyggia menn hann helgann mann.' The entry for the next year describes a landslide which destroyed the

<sup>78</sup> Stu I 138 / K I 153 / Bp I 435 / Gs I 68.

<sup>79</sup> Stu I 135 / K I 148 / Bp I 431 / Gs I 62.

<sup>80</sup> See entries for 1332 and 1341 in *Lögmanns annáll*. It may be added that the incident describing Bishop Jörundr's insight (Ls 28 ff.) could easily be turned into an example of divinely inspired awareness of distant events.

<sup>81</sup> Ls 13.

<sup>82</sup> *Lögmanns annáll*, *sub anno* 1332.

<sup>83</sup> Bp I 109 / Bs II 221.

<sup>84</sup> *Flateyjarbók*, Christiania, 1860, vol. 1, pp. 516-17.

farm at Búðarnes, killing twelve men, but 'einn lifdi i husbrotunum ok hafdi heitid a Þord Jonsson.'

Mention should also be made of the hermit Ásólfur alskik whose tribulations are described in *Landnámabók*.<sup>85</sup> These stories may reflect an early attempt to establish a cult, and the scribe of the greater saga of Ólafr Tryggvason goes so far as to say that Ásólfur was 'kallaðr heilagr.'<sup>86</sup> The dates of these developments, however, are unknown.

Given the above evidence for the enthusiasm with which Norwegians and Icelanders greeted potential saints, it is worth asking whether similar claims may have been made for other individuals as well. It would have been very much in the spirit of the Norwegian church party to sanctify Magnús Erlingsson, and there are indications that an attempt to do so may have been made. Magnús receives a remarkably good press in the extant sagas; even in *Sverris saga* hostility is focussed on his father, Erlingr skakki. (This may, of course, represent tact on the part of Sverrir, who wished to reconcile as many of his opponents as possible.) Magnús's claim to the throne is based on his coronation oath, the fulfillment of which was regarded (at least by the author of the saga) as a religious duty.<sup>87</sup> It is interesting to note that precisely the same argument was ascribed to St. Edward the Confessor as the basis for his right to rule England, and said to have been recognized by the would-be invader, Magnús the Good.<sup>88</sup> Magnús Erlingsson's body is described as being well-preserved after several days' immersion, a fact which was useful to Sverrir, as it enabled unambiguous identification of the corpse. It is interesting to note, however, that the phrase used to describe it recalls the description of the body of St. Ólafr.<sup>89</sup> While I do not wish to enter the debate on the authorship of *Sverris saga*, there can be little doubt that the extant text includes information from both parties in the conflict; Ólafía Einarsdóttir has suggested that Arch-

<sup>85</sup> *Íslendingabók Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Íslenzk fornrit, vol. 1), Reykjavík, 1968, pp. 61-5.

<sup>86</sup> *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (Editiones Arnarnæna, Series A, vol. 1), Copenhagen, 1958, p. 279.

<sup>87</sup> Ss 67, 90.

<sup>88</sup> Mork 54.

<sup>89</sup> Ss 102: 'ecki var brugðit yfir-bragþino oc eigi roðinn or kinnunum oc ecki ftirðnat.' Hkr II 387: 'roði var í kinnum, sem þá at hann svæfi.' Hkr II 404: 'var engan veg brugðit ásjónu hans, svá roði í kinnunum, sem þá myndi, ef hann væri nýsofnaðr.'

bishop Eysteinn was a source man for some of the material dealing with Magnús.<sup>90</sup> Whether or not this was the case, it appears likely that the above-mentioned features derive ultimately from an attempt to show that Magnús, rather than Sverrir, was the true representative of God and St. Ólafr.

It is possible that an earlier Magnús was also the object of an incipient cult. The son of St. Ólafr received the soubriquet 'the good', which was often applied to holy men.<sup>91</sup> Although he was always in the shadow of his saintly father, a few miracles attributed to Magnús himself suggest the beginning of a cult.<sup>92</sup>

The hagiographic elements in the sagas of contemporaries may also have carried implications of sanctity. Those whose deaths are described are no less likely saints than many others who acquired the status; as mentioned above, the mere fact of dying as an 'innocent' victim could be a sufficient qualification. A passage in *Íslendinga saga* suggests that attempts to sanctify the victims of civil strife were not unknown; after ordering the execution of the Porvaldssons – with whom he was technically at peace – Sturla Sighvatsson notes that 'þú munt skjótt kalla þá helga.'<sup>93</sup> This sarcastic comment would lose its point if it did not reflect a real possibility.<sup>94</sup>

It should be noted in this connection that many of the individuals

<sup>90</sup> Ólafía Einarsdóttir, 'Áret 1164 for Magnus Erlingssons kroning,' *Gripla* V (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar: Rit 23), Reykjavík, 1982, p. 132.

<sup>91</sup> For example Edward the Confessor and Guðmundr Arason. The latter is so designated after his blessings are observed to have beneficial results (St I 135 / K I 148). The alternation between 'góðr' and 'heilagr' in the annal entries describing Abbot Guðmundr of Pingeyrar (Lögmanns annáll and Flateyjar annáll under the year 1332) is also worth noting, and *Jóns saga byskups* mentions 'einn heilagr maðr, er hét Guðini, kallaðr hinn góði, ok þat hyggja menn svá verit hafa' (Bp I 217). A comprehensive study of the terminology applied to saints is beyond the scope of this article; however, the above examples suggest that the soubriquet 'inn góði' was often applied to persons who were considered holy, but whose sanctity had not been formally confirmed.

<sup>92</sup> Mork 119, 146–7. It may be added that it was quite common for sanctity to run in families; confining ourselves to Norwegian material, St. Hallvard was said to have been a kinsman of St. Ólafr, and Ásta, Ólafr's mother, appears to have enjoyed some sort of veneration in the later Middle Ages (see Ludwig Daae, *Norges Helgener*, Christiania, 1879).

<sup>93</sup> Stu I 357 / K I 441.

<sup>94</sup> An alternative interpretation is that *heilagr* reflects the fact that the Porvaldssons were in a state of truce, and Sturla could not legally attack them.

who come under consideration as potential saints had close ties with the Church. Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson and his young kinsman, Aron Hjörleifsson, were friends and supporters of Guðmundr Arason, and both their sagas incorporate miracles attributed to him. Eyjólfur Kásson and Sveinn Jónsson were also followers of Bishop Guðmundr, whom Eyjólfur had once rescued from the hands of his enemies. Aron Hjörleifsson's brother, Ólafr, was abbot of Helgafell. The Ormssons were nephews of Brandr Jónsson, abbot of Helgafell and subsequently bishop of Hólar. Hákon Þórðarson was the nephew of Guðmundr dýri, who ended his days in a monastery, and in whose saga Hákon's death is described.

Ecclesiastical connections are not in themselves proof that an attempt would be made to sanctify a man; the churchmen who were most likely to create saints might also want to demonstrate evidence for salvation. By itself, the description of a death may not suffice to indicate which issue was at stake. Knowledge of the life that preceded it, however, can sometimes clarify the situation. It is worth examining the careers of some of the individuals mentioned above to see what evidence they provide.

Starting with Sturla Sighvatsson, guilty of peace-breaking and numerous other crimes (including an attack on the saintly Bishop Guðmundr), Marlene Ciklamini has made a convincing analysis of his portrayal by his cousin, Sturla Þórðarson, in *Íslendinga saga*.<sup>95</sup> Dr. Ciklamini shows how, in this presentation, the pride of the warrior gives way to humility and repentance at the eleventh hour; Sturla's actions before and during the battle of Örlygsstaðir can leave little doubt that, at the moment of his death, his soul was in a more hopeful state than it had been for some time. I would also submit that the references to his attacking enemies as 'fjandi' and 'smádjöflar' suggest that he is undergoing the pains of purgatory in this world rather than the next. Given his past history, such indications of contrition and punishment were probably considered necessary to guarantee his salvation – there can, however, be no question of sanctity.

Porgils skarði is another unprepossessing character. The first anecdote

<sup>95</sup> Ciklamini, Marlene, 'Sturla Sighvatsson's Chieftaincy. A Moral Probe', *Sturlú-stefna. Ráðstefna haldin á sjö alda ártíð Sturlu Þórðarsonar sagnaritara 1984*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi: Rit 32), Reykjavík, 1988, pp. 222–241.

dote about him in his saga illustrates the fact that he is 'illr viðrskiptis ok vandlyndr,'<sup>96</sup> an assessment which is amply justified by his subsequent career. He is represented as violent and overbearing, his only concern in the face of death being to obtain fame and avenge his honor.<sup>97</sup> He pays scant attention to church observances; although he attends mass on the feast of the apostle Thomas, he ignores the fast required before the much more important *Porláksmessa* two days later.<sup>98</sup> An expedition in alliance with Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson is represented as being in accordance with God's wishes,<sup>99</sup> but it is Þorvarðr, rather than Þorgils, who invokes His aid and orders his men to sing the Pater Noster.<sup>100</sup> It may be added that neither the expedition nor the alliance was approved of by Abbot (subsequently Bishop) Brandr, who sends Þorgils the following message: 'bið hann, at hann geri sem minnst rangt jafnan saklausum mönnum.' The abbot continues: 'Þykkir mér nú allmiklu skipta, hvat ek spyrða til hans, ok mjök mun ek vera áhyggjusamr um ferð þessa, þar til er ek spyr, hvernig yðr tekst . . . Vilda ek nú, at guð væri yðr fyrir vápn ok vörð ok hyljanarmaðr Tómas erki-biskup. En treystið lítt á drengskap Þorvarðs, því at mér segir eigi mjök hugr um, hversu til enda ganga skipti þeira Þorgils ok Þorvarðs, ok ætla ek Þorvarðr valdi afbrigðum.'<sup>101</sup> He is clearly as much concerned about the state of Þorgils' soul as he is about Þorvarðr's treachery, and his misgivings on both accounts are soon seen to be justified. Þorvarðr tries to get out of giving Þorgils the aid he had promised, and a confrontation is prevented only by the arrival of the news that both of them have been excommunicated by Bishop Heinrekr Kársson of Hólar.

<sup>96</sup> Stu II 105 / K II 137.

<sup>97</sup> Stu II 132 / K II 162.

<sup>98</sup> Stu II 138 / K II 166. While the reference to *Tómasmessa* may have been included for chronological purposes, it is conceivable that mention of this particular feast results from confusion between the apostle and Thomas of Canterbury, who is later described as Þorgils' favorite saint. The fact that the bishop of Hólar acquiesces in Þorgils' fast-breaking need not indicate approval on the part of the author – Bishop Heinrekr himself comes in for criticism later in the saga.

<sup>99</sup> There is a general wish that God will overthrow Hrafn and Eyjólfir (Stu II p. 181 / K II 260), and an evil spirit is seen before their forces (Stu II 188 / K II 267). The fact that the weaker side wins (Stu II 191 / K II 271) is also significant.

<sup>100</sup> Stu II 183 / K II 262.

<sup>101</sup> Stu II 177 / K II 256.

The events of the following weeks are to the credit neither of Þorgils nor of the bishop. The author describes Heinrekr's behaviour as follows: 'Biskup varð þá reiðr mjök ok mælti mörg óþægileg orð við Þorgils, þau sem eigi hæfir at rita.'<sup>102</sup> At first, Þorgils reacts with unusual self-control: 'Eigi mun ek leggja hendr á yðr, herra, ok eigi ræna staðinn á Hólum, en svá munuð þér til mega ætla, at ek muna lítils virða yðvarn vilja í heraði, ef þér virðið minn vilja einskis.'<sup>103</sup> When the bishop threatens to put the entire district under interdict, however, his response is more characteristic: 'Mun ek taka vini hans ok vanðamenn ok hrekja suma, en ræna eða berja suma, ok góðra gjalda vert, ef eigi eru drepnir sumir.'<sup>104</sup> When they finally meet at Hólar cathedral, Þorgils orders that hay be given to his horses, and has no qualms about having the bishop's men beaten when they refuse to obey.<sup>105</sup> Interestingly enough, these tactics prove successful; he is released from the ban, peace is established between him and his main enemies in the district, and, if we are to believe his saga, 'Sat Þorgils þá um kyrrt ok gerðist inn vinsælasti maðr í heraði.'<sup>106</sup>

Although he now seems to be at peace with God and man, the situation cannot last. Þorvarðr refuses to oblige Þorgils at the *alþingi*, and we are told that the following winter saw numerous portents of great events (which Þorgils took pains to hush up.)<sup>107</sup> He also, oddly enough, refuses to believe ill of Þorvarðr, whose plots against his life are described in detail and condemned by one of Þorvarðr's own men as 'it mesta níðingsverk ok óráð.'<sup>108</sup>

Although Þorgils is clearly doomed, the prayers of Abbot Brandr on behalf of his soul have had their effect. Nothing else can account for the way his thoughts turn to religion at the eleventh hour, so that on the eve of his slaying he chooses to listen to the story of Thomas of Canterbury, 'því at hann elskaði hann frammar en aðra helga menn.'<sup>109</sup> It

<sup>102</sup> Stu II 198–9 / K II 277.

<sup>103</sup> Stu II 199 / K II 278.

<sup>104</sup> Stu II 204 / K 282.

<sup>105</sup> Stu II 205 / K II 282–3.

<sup>106</sup> Stu II 206 / K II 284.

<sup>107</sup> Stu II 217 / K II 294.

<sup>108</sup> Stu II 219 / K II 296.

<sup>109</sup> Stu II 218 / K II 295.

will be recalled that it was Thomas whom Abbot Brandr had asked to watch over him.

Porgils' comment on the beauty of the archbishop's martyrdom foreshadows his own end.<sup>110</sup> He is attacked in bed, refused the chance to confess, and struck by all who could reach him. One of the 22 wounds on his body resembled that which slew the archbishop. 'Veittist Porgils þat, at hann hafði þvílft sár, sem sagt var um kveldit, at inn heilagi Tómas erkibiskup hafði særðr verit í kirkjunni í Cantia, ok Þorgils þótti um kveldit fagrligast vera mundu at taka slíkan dauða.'<sup>111</sup> Abbot Brandr himself prepared the corpse for burial, 'ok segir svá, sem margir hafa heyrtr, at hann kvaðst engis manns líkama hafa sét þekkiligra en Þorgils.'<sup>112</sup> While the form of his death and appearance of his body are clear manifestations of divine favour, given his career, and the fact that he died unconfessed, they need signify no more than that his numerous sins have been forgiven.

In contrast to Sturla and Porgils, Aron Hjörleifsson is a hero without fault. The nearest the author of his saga comes to criticism is the comment that he was 'kappsamr í öllu því, er honum þótti ekki at sínu skapi gert vera en þó þat allt sköruligt ok með hófi.'<sup>113</sup> Moderation (*hóf*) was a virtue that most of the chieftains of the period appear to have lacked. Aron also had luck (*gipta*) which enabled him to help others,<sup>114</sup> and is the beneficiary of a small miracle. The saga tells how he breaks through a ring of his enemies and continues: 'Má þat sýnast skipat með guðs miskunn, at þegar Aron komst ór mannhringinum, rak á kafahríð svá sterka, at þegar skilði með þeim. Höfðu menn þá hríð lengi í minnum. Segir svá, at þar hafi veðrit verit miklu linara, sem Aron fór.'<sup>115</sup>

Where the miraculous is concerned, however, Guðmundr Arason is the most prominent figure in *Arons saga*. His presence is felt throughout; before the battle of Grímsey, when Aron has declined to confess for lack of time, he predicts that they will meet again 'ok þykkir þat orðin in mesta spásaga, því at þat þótti þá in mestu ólíkindi fyrst í stað

<sup>110</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>111</sup> Stu II 221 / K II 298.

<sup>112</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>113</sup> Stu II 238.

<sup>114</sup> Stu II 277.

<sup>115</sup> Stu II 268.

ok svá jafnan síðan.<sup>116</sup> In the battle itself, Aron defends himself well, but 'þótt Aron sýndi í vörn þessi meira mátt en líkindi væri á, þá kenna menn þat meir guðs miskunn ok bænum Guðmundar biskups en einkum framkvæmð sjálfs hans, ok hitt annat, at þeir hafa minni ábyrgð hafða fyrir guði, er vörðu Guðmund biskup, en hinir, er at sóttu.'<sup>117</sup> Water blessed by Guðmundr helps Aron's wounds to heal more quickly and painlessly than expected,<sup>118</sup> and the bishop aids him indirectly during his subsequent flight; at one point when he is in a tight situation, Aron lies on the earth with his arms stretched in a cross and sings a psalm and the *Ave Maria*, explaining that Guðmundr had taught him to do so.<sup>119</sup> Guðmundr's appearance to him in a dream before another battle clearly indicates that Aron is under his protection.<sup>120</sup> It may be added that in all the situations when Guðmundr appears, Aron ran the risk of dying unconfessed. When he finally dies in Norway, having received all the necessary rites, we are told that 'er þat væntanda, at sál hans hafi gott heimili fengit, bæði fyrir meðalgöngu vinar síns, ins góða Guðmundar biskups Arasonar, ok einkanliga fyrir mjúkustu várs lausnara miskunn, hvers píligrímr hann má réttlíga kallast fyrir þat, er hann heimsótti hans helgustu gröf ok marga aðra heilaga staði.'<sup>121</sup> Although the saga contains a passing reference to a pilgrimage vow, in context it reads almost like an excuse,<sup>122</sup> and nothing is heard of the journey itself. Possibly the author had no other information about it than the brief mention in *Íslendinga saga*.<sup>123</sup> Even without sources, no medieval hagiographer would have allowed such an omission to stand. Aron is portrayed as a heroic and Christian warrior, and although he is a friend and supporter of Guðmundr the good, cannot be compared to him in terms of sanctity.

*Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* is introduced with a pious prologue,

<sup>116</sup> Stu II 246.

<sup>117</sup> Stu II 248.

<sup>118</sup> Stu II 253.

<sup>119</sup> Stu II 268.

<sup>120</sup> Stu II 261.

<sup>121</sup> Stu II 278.

<sup>122</sup> Stu II 269.

<sup>123</sup> Stu I 308 / K I 379. Sturla Þórðarson here quotes a verse by Ólafr Þórðarson which mentions the journey. While *Arons saga* quotes more of the poem, there is no additional information about the pilgrimage.

in which we are told that in the events to be described 'mun sýnast mikil þolinmæði guðs almáttigs, sú er hann hefir hvern dag við oss, ok sjálfræði þat, er hann gefr hverjum manni, at hvern má geyra þat sem vill, gott eðr illt.'<sup>124</sup> Hrafn, like Aron, was a friend of Bishop Guðmundr's, but his saga makes it clear that his own merits would justify his salvation. The fate of his soul is established near the beginning of his saga, when he visits the shrine of St. Egidius. 'Þá mintist hann þess, er mælt er af alþýðu, at guð veiti hverjum manni, þeim er kemr til Egidium, eina bæn, þá er maðr vildi helzt biðja, af verðleikum Egidii. Þá bað Rafn þess guð almáttkan, at af verðleikum Egidii skyldi hvorki fjárhlutr, nè þessa heims virðing, svo veita[st] honum, at þeir lutir hnekði fyrir honum fagnaði himinríkis dýrðar. Ok þat hyggjum vær, at Kristr veitti honum þetta.'<sup>125</sup>

*Hrafns saga* is infused with the odor of sanctity. The introductory genealogical material tells how the power of healing which ran in Hrafn's family was acquired as a gift from St. Ólafr, and on his trip abroad Hrafn visits not the courts of kings, but the shrines of the saints and Bishop Bjarni of Orkney. The first of his deeds to be reported in detail is his vow to St. Thomas, which results in a pilgrimage to Canterbury, St. Gilles (where he makes the prayer mentioned above), Compostella, and Rome. In the Holy City he 'fal líf sitt á hendi guðs postulum ok öðrum helgum mönnum,' and 'varði fè sínu til helgra dóma, þar sem hann kom.'<sup>126</sup> His household at Arnarfjörður was a model of charity and hospitality; free meals were provided for all comers, and there was a free ferry service over the fjord. Hrafn's services as a craftsman (*smiðr*) and a healer were available to all without charge, and neither meals nor sleep would prevent him from immediately seeking to ease the pains of those who sought his aid. The author comments that 'Fyrir því væntum vær, at Kristr mun kauplaust veitt hafa Rafni með sèr andliga lækning á dauðdegi hans.'<sup>127</sup> This is followed by an account of some of his cures, in which the divine origin of his ability is emphasized in a short excursus which reminds us that 'all true healing comes from God.'<sup>128</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Bp I 639.

<sup>125</sup> Bp I 642 / Hs 4-5.

<sup>126</sup> loc. cit.

<sup>127</sup> Bp I 643-4 / Hs 7.

<sup>128</sup> Bp I 643-5 / Hs 6-8.

After this description of Hrafn's virtues, the author describes the disputes which ultimately led to his death. Throughout the escalating conflict, his actions show him to be just, merciful, and possessed of almost super-human patience. He is thrice attacked by Þorvaldr Snorrason, who has become his mortal enemy (in spite of the fact that he had once lived with Hrafn and been treated like a son or brother).<sup>129</sup> On the first two occasions, Hrafn is saved by the arrival of reinforcements at the eleventh hour, causing Þorvaldr to seek a truce; Hrafn, who is now in the stronger position, nonetheless refuses to attack. The first time this happens the truce has been agreed to, and Hrafn refuses to break it, even though his reputation suffers thereby; 'þat sýndist opt, at Rafn var ógrimmr maðr, ok hann vildi heldr deyja fyrir trygðar sakir en fyrir ótrygðar . . . hann vildi eigi vinna þat til fárra vetra virðingar, sem opt kunnu manna ráð verða, heldr vildi Rafn hafa svívirðing af mönnum í orðlagi fyrir guðs sakir, ok hætta svo lífi sínu til eilífrar miskunnar almáttigs guðs. Fyrir þessa trygð Rafns ámæltu honum margir menn, fyrir þat er hann hafði látið Þorvald undan ganga.'<sup>130</sup> Þorvaldr's second attack takes place on the eve of St. Jacob's mass, and Hrafn chooses to honor the saint rather than take advantage of a situation where victory is virtually guaranteed.<sup>131</sup> On the feast day itself a settlement is arranged, and Hrafn invites Þorvaldr and all his men to a banquet. He also provides shoes for those of them who have none. Þorvaldr, however, is clearly not interested in keeping the peace – he fails to appear at any of the subsequent meetings which are arranged between them, and is considered to have broken the settlement.

The following winter is characterized by various portents of disaster, which are described in detail. While such phenomena are hardly restricted to Christian literature, it is worth mentioning one which has a particular significance in a hagiographic context; the pillar of light reaching from heaven to earth at the spot where Hrafn is eventually slain. Such lights shine with great regularity over the bodies of saints, and may also indicate places whose sanctity has yet to be established, for example the site of the church at Skarð.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Bp I 654 / Hs 23.

<sup>130</sup> Bp I 665 / Hs 41–2.

<sup>131</sup> Bp I 668 / Hs 47.

<sup>132</sup> Stu I 9 / K I 5–6.

Porvaldr's third attack is made in Lent.<sup>133</sup> The evening before it takes place, Hrafn is unable to sleep, and orders the recitation of the 'Andreas drápa,' explaining each verse himself (the impact is such that Tómas Þórarinnsson dreams about the martyrdom of St. Andrew all night).<sup>134</sup> In spite of Hrafn's better judgement, no guard has been set, and Porvaldr takes Hrafn's men by surprise and sets the farm alight. When initial parleys are unsuccessful, Hrafn (who was a deacon) sings matins with the clergy while the laymen do their best to extinguish the flames. Neither procedure has much effect, however. Hrafn then offers to leave the country and go on a pilgrimage for his soul and those of his enemies. When this is refused, he attempts to barter his own life for those of the others on the farm; in the words of the poet Guðmundr:

hann bauð sveit fyrir sinni  
snjallri einn at falla.<sup>135</sup>

Porvaldr, however, will accept nothing short of unconditional surrender, and in the end the defenders choose this over death by fire. Hrafn's life is declared forfeit, but he is allowed to see a priest; he receives communion and prays, shedding tears of repentance – a unique occurrence in the *samtíðarsögur* – before being slain in the pious position described above (p. 191 and note 23). If the echo of *Thomas saga* is intentional, this passage provides a fitting conclusion to a career which began with a pilgrimage to Canterbury.

Hrafn's death is followed by two miraculous events. The first reflects the sanctity of Guðmundr Arason and sinfulness of Porvaldr's attack: when Porvaldr and his men plunder the farm, they are unable to recognize the value of two treasures given Hrafn by the bishop, and throw them away. The second, however, pertains to Hrafn alone. The summer after his death, a green field has replaced clay on the spot where he was slain.<sup>136</sup> There can be little doubt that this field has the

<sup>133</sup> Bp I 671 / Hs 51.

<sup>134</sup> The priest, Tómas Þórarinnsson, was a close kinsman of Hrafn's, and may well have been a source-man for the saga (see Bp I 562 / Hs 28).

<sup>135</sup> Bp I 673 / Hs 55.

<sup>136</sup> Bp I 674 / Hs 56.

same significance for Hrafn as it does for St. Magnús, both as regards his innocence and his salvation.

In cases like the above, where we have an extended text by a single author dealing with the character in question, we can arrive at fairly secure conclusions as to its import. Many of the deaths described in *Sturlunga*, however, are relatively minor incidents, and we have insufficient knowledge of the individuals and issues involved to be sure how contemporaries would have interpreted them. It must be remembered that even in the Middle Ages, opinions concerning holiness might vary. The sanctity of Bishop Jón was not immediately accepted,<sup>137</sup> and the suggestion that someone slain in a feud was a saint might well meet with scepticism. Fortitude in the face of death was an ambiguous virtue, even when accompanied by prayers; it could equally well indicate divine favour or worldly bravery. Nor were these two types of virtue mutually exclusive; most of the passages examined praise an individual's courage or prowess as well as his devotions. The combination of ideals is most clearly exemplified in the description of Sæmundr Ormsson, 'er varð við dauðann bæði harðliga ok hjálpvænliga'.<sup>138</sup>

The difficulties involved in interpreting such descriptions are compounded by the fact that the extant text does not necessarily represent a single point of view, but may have been altered by an unknown number of redactors. Generally speaking, the passage of time tended to increase a reputation for sanctity; Harold Godwinson, 'er sumir menn kalla helgan vera' according to Oddr's saga of Ólafr Tryggvason is 'sannheilagr' in *Hauksbók*. Ásólftr alskik's sanctity is implied in *Landnáma* – more clearly in *Hauksbók* than *Sturlubók* – but the greater saga of Ólafr Tryggvason has no hesitation in stating that he was 'kallaðr heilagr.' The annals frequently differ among themselves as to whether various individuals were, or were merely said to be, saints. (Statements of the latter type need not imply disbelief; they may merely indicate lack of information, or the fact that canonization had not been approved by the papacy at the time the entry was written.)

It is sometimes possible to assess the bias of an author or redactor, which can then be taken into account in evaluating his work. *Heims-*

<sup>137</sup> Bp I 197 and 468–9 / Gs I 120.

<sup>138</sup> Stu II 100 / K II 127.

*kringla* is relatively skeptical regarding saints, generally being content to quote public opinion as such. It reports the local rumours of the sanctity of Eysteinn Haraldsson, but describes his death in worldly, rather than religious, terms. One wonders whether the source for this account may have read more like a martyrdom.

Sturla Þórðarson was undoubtedly too familiar with the issues and personalities of his day to credit secular figures with sanctity. While he is clearly interested in showing that his friends and kinsmen made a good end, he commits himself no further. It is revealing to compare his treatment of Eyjólfur Kársson's death with that in *Arons saga*.<sup>139</sup> In the latter, Eyjólfur's last moments are described in detail, in spite of the lack of possible witnesses; Sturla, on the other hand, merely relates the position in which the body was found, and leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions. The most striking example of a 'hagiographic' death in *Íslendinga saga* is that of Sveinn Jónsson, which occurred several years before Sturla was born. Sveinn had been a follower of Bishop Guðmundr, and association with the holy bishop may have made the account of his actions more believable. Sturla could have gotten the story either from Guðmundr and his followers, who stayed at Hvammr in 1227, or from the materials collected at the church at Laufás for the composition of the bishop's biography. It may be noted that the omission of Guðmundr's miraculous doings in Steingrímsfjörðr from *Íslendinga saga* appears to have been due to their irrelevance to the subject rather than to Sturla's disbelief.<sup>140</sup>

The compiler of *Sturlunga* also omitted material not pertinent to his topic. *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, for example, is used only for the period after Hrafn's return from Norway with Bishop Guðmundr. We would know nothing of Hrafn's vow or pilgrimage, let alone his exemplary life-style, if his saga had not been independently preserved. The account of his death in the saga also contains details not found in *Sturlunga*. The fact that in the latter he goes down on his elbows, rather than knees and elbows, may be due to scribal error, as the descriptions of his preparations for death and beheading are otherwise identi-

<sup>139</sup> Quoted in note 29.

<sup>140</sup> 'urðu þar margir hlutir þeir, er frásagnar væri verðir ok jartegnum þótti gegna, þótt þat sé eigi ritat í þessa bók.' Stu I 254-5 / K I 290.

cal. The reference to the body lying as if in prayer, however, is found only in *Hrafn's saga*, as is the green field on the spot where he was slain.

It is not necessary to conclude that Sturla Þórðarson or the compiler of *Sturlunga* deleted hagiographic elements from his sources; it is equally possible that the authors of Aron's and Hrafn's sagas elaborated on theirs. However the differences originated, they provide excellent examples of the way emphasis on different aspects of a man's actions could vary from one saga to another. Indeed, both the material and the form in which it is presented may tell us more about the saga's author than about the individuals he describes.

What they do not tell us is the reason these episodes were included. Were they meant to indicate salvation or sanctity, to serve as *exempla* for the living, or simply record current events? Does bravery in the face of death illustrate the coolness of a warrior or the grace of God? Sometimes, as in Hrafn's and Aron's sagas, the authors give us their opinions; in others, they provide information from which we can draw our own conclusions. To the examples cited above it may be added that the account of Sveinn Jónsson's 'martyrdom' concludes with the words 'sem guð hjálpi hans sál,' a wish which would be inappropriate if his soul were considered to be in a position to help others.

While knowledge of an individual's life and death may suggest salvation or even sanctity, such indications by themselves could never be conclusive, and only the latter could ever be 'proved.'<sup>141</sup> The deciding factor was miracles. Not those granted to the living – anyone could receive a miracle, for any number of reasons. Divine assistance might be given in answer to one's own prayers or those of others, because use was made of a relic, or simply from the inexhaustible mercy of God. Its true cause might turn out to be quite different from the one to which it was originally attributed. It was dangerous to credit even the most holy with sanctity during their lifetimes, lest pride lead to a fall.<sup>142</sup>

<sup>141</sup> There are, of course, numerous examples of dreams in which the dreamer is informed of an individual's arrival in heaven; most such examples, however, refer to known or suspected saints.

<sup>142</sup> See Bp I 98 / Bs II 194. While this motif was commonly used to account for the lack of miracles during a saint's lifetime, it was generally ignored if an individual was in fact considered to have performed them, as in the case of Guðmundr Arason.

Not until after their deaths – sometimes a good many years after – could that performance of miracles give proof of their condition. It was therefore in the interest of posterity to record any remarkable deed or event. If it subsequently proved to be significant in a wider context, so much the better; if not, it could nonetheless serve as an *exemplum* for the living, and redound to the glory of God.

The line between sanctity and salvation was, in fact, a very fine one. The essential thing was to secure the latter; with a very few exceptions (living saints, for example) anyone who had done so was closer to God than those who remained on earth, and his prayers more likely to be heard. A countryman or family member who had looked after the interests of his friends while alive would presumably continue to do so after his death if at all possible. The fact that the Church did not consider him qualified to intercede was not important; proof that he *had* been of aid would soon reverse its judgement.

This being the case, the most the author of *Hrafns saga* can do is describe the cures performed by his hero, and note that ‘all healing comes from God.’ As the story stands, Hrafn has acquired his gift by what was, to the medieval mind, a perfectly natural process. That he is a more direct mediator of divine power can only be suggested; however, the green field which appears at the place of his execution gives an unmistakable hint, and Abbot Arngrímur, at least, classified his death as a martyrdom (see p. 199 above). A single miracle attributed to Hrafn after his death would have been sufficient to re-classify his cures as evidence of his sanctity. (This, according to Snorri, is how people reacted to the healings performed by St. Ólafr.) A holy life or death may be sufficient for God, but man requires proof – the modern scholar no less than the medieval monk. A description of a ‘good’ death implies piety on the part of the victim or the recorder; if it once implied something more, in the absence of miracles, each must judge for himself.

## ABBREVIATIONS AND EDITIONS USED

When a passage is found in more than one saga or edition, references to the appropriate texts have been separated by a slash. Quotations are from the first work cited, which is the most widely available text.

- Annals *Íslandske Annaler indtil 1578*, ed. Gustav Storm, Christiania, 1888.
- Ás *Árna saga biskups*, ed. Porleifur Hauksson (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi: Rit 2), Reykjavík, 1972.
- Bp *Biskupa sögur*, ed. Guðbrandur Vigfússon for Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Copenhagen, 1858.
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## ÁGRIP

Í Íslendingasögum bregðast menn að jafnaði 'hetjulega' við dauða sínum, en í lýsingum á dauða manna í Sturlungu og konungasögum er oft að finna kristileg viðbrögð manna. Dauðamaðurinn játar syndir sínar, biðst fyrir og óskar jafnvel eftir því að aftaka hans verði teygð á langinn. Oft má þá finna atriði sem minna á efni úr helgisögum eða hliðstæður við líflát heilagra manna. Í einu tilviki – frásögninni af drápi Sigurðar slembidjákns – hefur því verið haldið fram að líflátinu sé lýst sem píslarvætti og að sagan sé rituð í því skyni að gera hetjuna að helgum manni.

Sú skýring er hugsanleg að slíkar lýsingar séu aðeins bókmenntalegt láns-góss sem ekki hafi neina trúarlega merkingu. En með því að Ísland hafði verið kristið í aldir þegar sögurnar voru skrifaðar, verður þetta að teljast ólíklegt.

Ástand sálarinnar á dauðastund mannsins réð farnaði hennar í öðrum heimi. Hún mundi hljóta refsingu í hreinsunareldi fyrir allar ójafnaðar syndir; og væru þær ofurþungar mátti synja hinum framliðna um legstað í vígðri moldu. Lýsing á syndajátningu og bænagjörð og samlíking við líf heilagra manna glæddi von um velfarnað sálarinnar í öðrum heimi. Og ef teikn bentu til þess að maður hefði verið saklaus veginn, styrkti það stöðu frænda hans í illdeilunum.

Þetta mun hafa verið flestum söguhöfundum efst í huga, en þó verður einnig að gera ráð fyrir því að stundum sé reynt að gera menn að helgimönnum. Í valdabaráttu á Norðurlöndum var algengt að reynt væri að upphefja fallna foringja í tölu dýrlinga, og margir þeirra voru helgir haldnir í sinni heimabyggð.

Á Íslandi virðist mönnum hafa gengið miður að koma upp slíkum hér- aðsdýrlingum, þótt stundum væri reynt. Hungurvaka og aðrar biskupasögur kunna margt að segja frá dýrðarverkum íslenskra manna, sem komandi kynslóðir gátu haft í minnum til merkis um heilagleika þeirra. Í ritgerðinni er lýst beinum tilraunum til að hefja menn í flokk dýrlinga.

Í síðasta hluta ritgerðar er fjallað nánar um sögur þriggja Íslendinga og sýnt hversu þær megi túlka samkvæmt því er að framan segir. Ég rek fyrst það sem Marlene Ciklamini segir um feril Sturlu Sighvatssonar og fylgi túlkun hennar: Sturla var mörgum syndum hlaðinn, en iðraðist þó í tæka tíð fyrir dauða sinn. Á sama veg má túlka þróun Þorgils skarða, en bænir Brands biskups virðast þó valda því að hann snýr huga sínum til trúarinnar undir lokin. Aron Hjörleifsson er sýndur sem góður Kristismaður (að minnsta kosti á mælikvarða mið- alda), en eini dýrlingurinn í sögu hans er Guðmundur biskup Arason. En Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar er hins vegar hlaðin af helgiefni, og má vel vera að höfundur hafi litið á Hrafn sem helgan mann og vænst þess að saga hans mundi stuðla að því að hann yrði tekinn í dýrlinga tölu.