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## THE END OF *ÁRNA SAGA BISKUPS* AND THE CULT OF ST MAGNÚS OF ORKNEY

### *Hagiography and Ecclesiastical Politics in Early Fourteenth-Century Iceland*

#### Part I

i

Of all the biographical Old Norse sagas, *Árna saga biskups* is unique in ending abruptly not with, or after, but before its hero's death. The saga terminates in 1290, eight years before the demise of its subject, Bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt (1269–1298).<sup>1</sup> Although it survives in some forty manuscript witnesses, there is no certainty about its conclusion. Except for two fragments, all the surviving witnesses derive from the late fourteenth-century *Reykjarfjarðarbók*. This manuscript originally had around a hundred and forty leaves, but only about thirty of them still exist today, while the rest are known from later transcripts. In this way, *Árna saga's* abrupt ending may reflect a loss of leaves from the manuscript at an early stage of its copying. Alternatively, *Reykjarfjarðarbók* may never have included a different ending for this saga in the first place.<sup>2</sup> What is certain, however, is that *Árna saga biskups* was produced after the death of its protagonist. Both the latest editors of *Árna saga biskups* agree on a date of composition during the episcopacy of Árni Helgason of Skálholt (1304–1320), either by the bishop himself or someone within his circle of authority.<sup>3</sup>

1 I express my gratitude to Professor Richard North for his valuable advice during the early phase of this research, and I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on the submitted manuscript.

2 Þorleifur Hauksson (ed.). *Árna saga biskups* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1972), vii–lx. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.). *Biskupasögur 3: Árna saga biskups, Lárentius saga biskups, Söguþáttur Jóns Halldórssonar biskups, Biskupa ættir*. Íslensk fornrit 17 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1998), lii–lvi.

3 Þorleifur Hauksson (ed.), civ–cvii. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), xxii–xxvii.

The saga's ending in 1290 arguably leaves out the summation of Árni Þorláksson's episcopal career. This was a settlement, brokered in 1297 by King Eiríkr Magnússon of Norway (1273–1299), which marked the bishop's victory in the so-called *Staðamál* ('The Issues of the Staðir'). The *Staðamál* was a protracted conflict over whether the Icelandic Church or the secular landed elite should ultimately control the Church Farms (*staðir*). These were farms that secular landowners had donated to the Church, yet in many cases landowners and their families had continued to hold and benefit from these properties. The settlement of 1297 would eventually transfer to the Church a significant part of Iceland's landed wealth.<sup>4</sup>

As it now stands, *Árna saga biskups* has in fact two endings, for two of the three principal classes of the copies from *Reykjarfjarðarbók*, entitled \*B and J, conclude the saga in a different manner. J signifies a copy made by Jón Gissurarson from Núpur in Dýrafjörður (1589/90–1648). \*B (B1–B3) stands for redactions made by Björn Jónsson from Skarðsa (1574–1655) from a lost copy. There is also B4 which, as Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir has shown, is an autograph copy of an abridged version of *Árna saga* that the same Björn made directly from *Reykjarfjarðarbók*.<sup>5</sup> The text of B1, transcribed in Oddi in 1686 and now preserved in the British Museum, best represents the \*B group, and it is used as the base text for both the diplomatic edition of 1972 and the *Íslensk fornrit* edition of 2018.

In its B1 text, the saga ends with a chapter designated as no. 146 in the modern editions. By this point – 1290 – Árni Þorláksson had resided for two years in Niðaróss as a guest of Archbishop Jörundur (1288–1309), having left for Norway in the autumn of 1288 as did his adversary and royal representative, Hrafn Oddsson (1225–1289). The departure of these two principal disputants in the *Staðamál* had been prompted by the coming of Óláfr Ragnríðarson to Iceland earlier in the year.<sup>6</sup> The visit of this Norwegian courtier clearly focused their minds, and they agreed to submit their case to the judgement of the king and the archbishop. Yet matters did not run smoothly. While he was in Norway, Bishop Árni, supported

4 Magnús Stefánsson, 'Um staði og staðamál', *Saga* 40.2 (2002): 139–166.

5 Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, 'Árna saga biskups og Björn á Skarðsa', in *Sagnaþing helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. apríl*, ed. by Gisli Sigurðsson, Guðrún Kvaran & Sigurgeir Steingrímsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1994), vol. I, 243–256.

6 Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), 177.

by his archbishop, went on the offensive by asking Jörundr Þorsteinsson of Hólar to bring churches in Skálholt under episcopal control.<sup>7</sup> Hrafn Oddsson's death in November 1289 put another spanner in the works. This came from an injury Hrafn sustained in Denmark while campaigning with the Norwegian king.<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 146, which concludes the \*B version of *Árna saga biskups*, records the fallout from these developments which, in its own way, offers a resolution to the saga. Bishop Árni sends a letter to Iceland that announces Hrafn Oddsson's death. The missive also states that any laymen who refuse to forfeit *staðir* and to confess their sins will fall into a state of excommunication. The episode further relates how Abbot Runólfr Sigmundsson of Þykkvibær (d. 1307), who had acted as the bishop's caretaker in his absence, progressed with appropriating Church Farms in the Western Quarter. The \*B version ends by highlighting the case of Óláfr Arnesson from Staðarstaður in Western Iceland who, some six years earlier, had played a prominent role in usurping ecclesiastical properties:

Óláfr Arnesson hafði þetta sumar fregnat andlát herra Hrafns; varð hann þar fyrir skelfdr ok gekk af stað til Laurentíusmessu ok kom til móts við ábóta at Máriumessu í Skálholt ok var leyst at fyrirfarandi eiði. Veitti guðlig mildi þessum manni, forstjóra kristinnar, mikit fullting, herra Árna byskupi er utanlands diktaði röksemðir. Herra ábóti lét ok eigi dvína atgönguna at allr múgr leikmanna varð sinn munn at byrgja.<sup>9</sup>

That summer, Óláfr Arnesson had heard about Sir Hrafn's passing. It scared him, and he left on the Mass of St Lawrence and met the abbot at Skálholt on St Mary's Mass and was absolved of the afore-said oath. God's grace afforded strong support to Bishop Árni, the leader of Christianity, who prescribed the ensuing strictures from Norway. Nor did the lord abbot let his offensive diminish, so all the laity were obliged to keep their mouths shut.<sup>10</sup>

7 *Ibid.*, 192–193; 230.

8 *Ibid.* On this whole episode in *Staðamál*, see Magnús Stefánsson, 'Frá goðakirkju til biskupskirkju', in *Saga Íslands* III, ed. by Sigurður Línal (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1978), 210–218.

9 *Ibid.*, 205–206.

10 All translations from *Árna saga biskups* are my own.

The saga ends here. Just after these words, in the margin of B4 (the condensed version of *Árna saga* which he copied directly from *Reykjarfjarðarbók*), is a note written by Björn Jónsson at Skarðsá: ‘vantar við söguna’ (‘missing from the saga’). To bridge the perceived gap, Björn added a short annalistic account that focuses on key events in *Staðamál* and ends with Árne’s death.<sup>11</sup>

The J version, also copied from *Reykjarfjarðarbók* but probably older than \*B, concludes with an episode which is designated as chapter 147 in the modern editions. It recounts the travels of a *prófastr* (‘provost’) named Þorvaldr Helgason to Norway:

Á þessu sumri fór síra Þorvaldr í skip at nýju í óleyfi herra Runólfs ábóta. Hafði hann næsta vetr þá atferð sem áðr er frá sagt, en hans sigling tókz ei betr en svo at þeir létu skipit við Færeyar, en tóku allir land. Í þessari ferð féll honum til hörmuligt tilfelli – at þar áðr var hann fyrir sakir frænda ok framkvæmðar ok mikilla mennta öruggr ásóknarmaðr óvina Guðs kristni meðan hann hélt trúnað við sinn herra – var hann gripinn af óhreinum anda svo harðliga at til heilagar Magnússkirkju leiddu hann fyrir nauðsyn tíu menn í sömu kirkju. Ok er hann kom inn að dyrunum varð sá hlutr er ótrúligr mætti þykkja, ef ei vitat væri þann grun á sem helgi Magnús patron sömu kirkju þíndist fyrir ekki ok varð ei forgefins Krists þíslarvottr. Nú sem þeir komu með þennan mann í kirkjuna varð hann svo linr í vitleysi at hann féll sem dauðr niðr í höndum þeim, ok þau bein sem áðr voru styrk á móti náttúru urðu nú blaut og breysklig móti allri náttúru, svo hann lofaði lifanda Guð, jómfrú Máriu ok Magnús patron. Þeir voru nokkrir sem töluðu svo hégómliga um þetta ok sögðu tilefnit vera af sterkri drykkju, ok þat hefði hans vitleysi ollat. En til prófunar að illt er satt, vitjaði þetta mein hann eptir þat hann kom í Noreg á fund herra Eiríks konungs. Voru ok þeir menn er þat sinnuðu at þá er hann tók at ásaka sinn herra fyrir Eiríki konungi, kemr aptr hit sama tilfelli. Geymdu hans þá fyrst íslenzkir menn ok síðan norrænir. Var þá heittr sérdeilis bakstr ok bundit við höfut honum, en þat hjálpaði ekki, ok andaðiz hann í þessari hörmung. Þann vetr annan var Árne byskup öruggr í Noregi at því sinni.<sup>12</sup>

11 *Ibid.*, 207–208.

12 *Ibid.*, 206–207.

This summer Priest Þorvaldr embarked again without receiving permission from Lord Abbot Runólfr. The conduct of Þorvaldr the previous winter has already been narrated, but his voyage went no better this time, for they lost the ship in the Faroes even though they all got to shore. On this journey Þorvaldr was afflicted by a distressing incident. Previously his family, advancement and high learning had kept him safe as a plaintiff against the enemies of God's Christendom, so long as he remained faithful to his lord. Now he was attacked by an unclean spirit so violently that ten men were needed to bring him into the holy Church of St Magnús. And when he came through the door, such a thing happened as might have seemed unbelievable if it had not been proved beyond doubt that St Magnús, the patron of the same church, had suffered and become the aforesaid Christ's martyr. When they brought this man to the church, he became so limp with madness that he fell down as if dead in their hands, while his legs, which had been so unnaturally strong, became likewise so unnaturally limp and weak that he praised the living God, the Virgin Mary and the patron, St Magnús. There were some who spoke falsely about what had occurred, saying that it was due to heavy drinking and that this had caused his madness. And as proof that the evil was real, it attacked Þorvaldr again when he came before King Eiríkr. There were also men who testified that he was afflicted by the same condition when he began to accuse his lord bishop to King Eiríkr. First he was cared for by the Icelanders and then by the Norwegians. A special poultice was heated up and tied around his head, but this did not help, and it was in this distressing state that he died. Bishop Árni had a safe stay in Norway that time, his second winter there.

This episode features in Jón Gissurarson's copy of *Reykjarfjarðarbók* (J), but it is in neither Björn Jónsson's autograph copy of his abridged *Árna saga* (B4) nor in the copies of his fuller version (B1–B3). Þorleifur Hauksson suggests that by the time Jón produced his copy, this part of the manuscript may have become difficult to read.<sup>13</sup> Also worth considering

13 Þorleifur Hauksson (ed.), xxvii. In 1279 Hrafn was dubbed *merkismaðr* at the Norwegian court, see Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), 75. In this context, the honour appears to have meant seniority among the king's representatives in Iceland (*sýslumenn*). Hrafn likely held

is whether Björn, unlike Jón Gissurarson, simply judged the episode unworthy of copying. As Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir points out, Björn Jónsson adopted a broadly utilitarian approach towards his copying activity. Thus, when copying B4 Björn omitted passages of a religious or theological nature that he considered superfluous to his interests, which centred on legal history. \*B was copied for Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason of Skálholt (1628–1656) in a version which ostensibly included the whole of *Árna saga biskups*. Nevertheless, chapter 147 may still have appeared to Björn as an episode undeserving of inclusion. After all, to him this account of a miracle in the Faroes and the personal fate of one prelate may have seemed irrelevant to the major themes of Iceland's history.

## ii

To properly interpret this concluding chapter, it is crucial to have knowledge about the background of its main protagonist, *Prófastr* Þorvaldr Helgason. Þorvaldur first appears in *Árna saga* in 1285, at a time of increasing tension between Bishop Árni Þorláksson and Hrafn Oddsson, the king's most prominent representative in Iceland, regarding *staðir*.<sup>14</sup> As a part of his strategy in the dispute, Hrafn sought to undermine the authority of the provosts. As a recently created office at the time, the provost represented the bishop's authority within larger districts. He held a supervisory role over parishes and wielded important financial responsibilities. Most importantly, the office holder collected the St Peter's Pence (*Rómarskattur*) and the bishop's quarter of the tithe.<sup>15</sup>

In 1285 Árni made Þorvaldr provost in the Western-fjords, with the wealthy *staðir* of Holt in Öfundarfjörður as his main residence. This act angered Hrafn who, it appears, had only recently dispossessed Þorvaldr of both his authority and the farm. Hrafn accused the bishop of reneging on a previous agreement. In his letter to the bishop, Hrafn claimed that as long as he was the king's man in the Western-fjords, 'Þorvaldr will not hold the

the office of *sýslumaðr* in the country's northern and western quarters uninterrupted from 1270 to his death in 1289. See Axel Kristinsson, 'Embættismenn konungs fyrir 1400', *Saga* 36 (1998): 113–117.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>15</sup> Erika Sigurdson, *The Church in Fourteenth-Century Iceland: The Formation of an Elite Clerical Identity* (Brill: Leiden, 2016), 72–75.

office of a provost, nor will he keep the *staður* at Holt unless he becomes more powerful than me' ('skal Þorvaldr eigi hafa prófastdæmi, ok eigi hefir hann staðinn í Holti nema hann verði ríkari en ek').<sup>16</sup>

Undeterred by these menaces, Árni moved against one of Hrafn's most important supporters in the region, Eiríkr Marðarson, who had himself earlier appropriated major church farms, including Holt, and had spread Hrafn's message throughout the Western-fjords. Confronting Eiríkr at his farmstead at Eyri in Arnarfjörður, the bishop enumerated his misdeeds and demanded that he repented before God. When Eiríkr refused, Árni excommunicated him. Eiríkr then sent a messenger to Hrafn with news of what had occurred. Hrafn immediately asked Eiríkr to meet him in Steingrímsfjörður where they could arrest Þorvaldr Helgason together.<sup>17</sup>

*Árna saga biskups* now offers further information about Þorvaldr. Hrafn refers to his 'forn fjandskapur' ('old enmity') towards the *prófastr*. It transpires that Þorvaldr and his brother, Aðalbrandr, had never repaid Hrafn fifty marks that they had borrowed from him in Norway.<sup>18</sup> Þorvaldr had manifestly once been on sufficiently good terms with Hrafn to solicit such a loan from him in the first place.

Árni learned about Hrafn's plans and was waiting for him with his retinue in Steingrímsfjörður when the royal representative arrived there to arrest Þorvaldr. An ill-tempered discussion ensued, but in the end, they made an uneasy truce in which they agreed to uphold whatever judgement was reached by the king and the archbishop.<sup>19</sup>

### iii

At this point, in the year 1287, a stylistic shift can be observed in *Árna saga biskups*.<sup>20</sup> Before this juncture, overt biblical and other learned references are infrequent, but thereafter they become more prominent. One of these, of particular interest for our purpose, is the saga's comparison of Árni with the Prophet Elijah, and of Hrafn with Elijah's adversary King Ahab:

16 Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), 151.

17 *Ibid.*, 160.

18 *Ibid.*, 162.

19 *Ibid.*, 162–164.

20 Haki Antonsson, 'Árna saga biskups as Literature and History', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 116.3 (2017): 278–279.

Á þessu sama vári stóð fyrrnefndr Árni byskup frammi fáliðaður vígmaðr i fylking síns signaða herra [...]

En virðuligr herra Árni byskup sem Helias óttaðiz eigi liðsfjölða sinna óvina [...]<sup>21</sup>

In this same spring, the aforementioned Bishop Árni stood with a few followers as a warrior in the van of the legion of his sanctified Lord [...]

Yet worthy Lord Bishop Árni, just like Elijah, did not fear the great host of his enemies [...]

As the conflict between Hrafn and Árni escalates, the biblical comparison is developed further. This is in the context of Hrafn's accusations:

Hér at móti þagði eigi Árni byskup med öllu, ok þótt Hrafn vildi sem annar Achab gera at kálgarði vingarð hins rétláta Naboth, lét Árni byskup sem annarr Helias fljúga yfir sína óvini eld ógnar mála af heilögum ritningum, takandi dæmi af fornu ok nýju lögmáli hvílíkan enda lífsins höfðu niðrbrotsmenn rétrar trúar ok saurganarmenn heilagra mustara [...].<sup>22</sup>

Bishop Árni was not completely silent about these, and although Hrafn, like a second Ahab, would turn Naboth's vineyard into a cabbage patch, like a second Elijah did Bishop Árni let a fire of threats from the Holy Scriptures fly over his enemies, taking examples from the new and the old Covenant about what kind of end of life those endured who broke down the true faith and defiled the holy temples [...].

In the context of *Staðamál*, the saga's evocation of Elijah's heroic fortitude and Ahab's unjust confiscation of Naboth's vineyard is highly appropriate. Additionally, the saga compares Árni's enemies to historical figures who had defiled sacred spaces, namely 'Antiochus Epiphanes', 'Heródes' (Herod

<sup>21</sup> Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), 168.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.



Antipas), 'Gaius Sesar (Julius Caesar) and 'Theodoricus valónir' (Þiðrekur af Bern/King Theodoric the Great).<sup>23</sup>

The identification of Hrafn with Ahab continues, albeit more obliquely, in the manner of his death. Like the Israelite king, Hrafn dies after being struck by a stray arrow in battle. Further, just as Elijah grants Ahab an opportunity to repent before his death, Árni hears Hrafn's penance in the days leading up to the fateful incident. Indeed, it is on the day that Hrafn fails to meet Árni for this purpose that he suffers the stray shot.<sup>24</sup>

Present in the saga's latter part is the possibility of Hrafn exacting violence on Árni to achieve his aims. Of course, the saga's intended audience would have known that the bishop was not fated to die as a martyr. Further, *Árna saga's* portrayal of Hrafn Oddsson is nuanced so that he is in no way the 'evil enemy' common in medieval hagiography. Thus, while the saga depicts Árni's fierce opposition to Hrafn's unjust ambitions, near the end of the saga, the bishop draws him into his orbit. A reconciliation of a kind is achieved. This is not in respect to *Staðamál* but rather in a spiritual sense. In the days leading up to his death, Hrafn seeks out Bishop Árni to make his confession, and there is a suggestion that through his long painful death, he is atoning for his previous misdeeds. To aid a good outcome, Bishop Árni prays for his soul:

[...] ok veitti Árni byskup honum þá fagrliga bæn móti mörgum meingerðum, eigi ólíkt þeim Ambrosio er fyrir þeim mönnum það eptir dauðann er hans mótstöðumenn voru í lífinu.<sup>25</sup>

... and praying, Bishop Árni made a beautiful intercession for him regarding his many misdeeds, not unlike Ambrosius when, after their deaths, he prayed for the men who had been his opponents in life.

Emphasised here is the Church's ultimate authority over laymen, however powerful they may have been during their lifetime.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 197–198.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

Þorvaldr Helgason's trajectory is quite different from that of Hrafn Oddsson. When Hrafn failed to apprehend the provost in Steingrímsfjörður, he announced that anyone who recognised Þorvaldr's authority would forfeit their 'peace and possessions' ('fé ok friði'). Hrafn also declared that Holt in Önundarfjörður should be repossessed.<sup>26</sup> In 1288, the following year, he rode with his henchmen to Holt, where Þorvaldr just managed to flee into the church with a portion of his wealth. Following a short siege, the provost gave himself up, with the provision that he would 'obey only God, the Holy Church and his bishop' ('ok þó at haldinni hlýðni við Guð ok heilaga kirkju ok byskup sinn').<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, Þorvaldr's principled stance proved short-lived as he now joined Hrafn's side: 'Fór Þorvaldr nokkot skeið með Hrafn, ok þótti mönnum nokkot breytt orðlagi hans til byskups'<sup>28</sup> ('Þorvaldr was with Hrafn for some time, and people thought his words towards the bishop were somewhat changed'). This development angered Árne, who thought Þorvaldr had capitulated unnecessarily and out of fear: Þorvaldr had committed a misdeed, and the bishop 'never trusted him again' ('trúði byskup honum aldrei síðan').<sup>29</sup>

Unsurprisingly, according to his saga, Árne's mood was heavy when he met Þorvaldr at Pentecost in the same year, and it hardly lifted when he heard about his provost's financial improprieties. Not only had Þorvaldr squandered the resources of Holt, but he had also underwritten the profligacy of Aðalbrandr, his brother, who served as a priest at Breiðabólstaður in Reykjanes until his death in 1286. Reading between the lines, it appears that Árne had been willing to overlook Þorvaldr's transgressions until he became a turncoat.

At this point, a farmer named Njáll brought a case against Þorvaldr before the bishop, involving an unpaid debt. Árne judged that Þorvaldr should repay what he owed to the farmer as well as to the Church. After protesting, Þorvaldr asked the bishop to stipulate the amount to hand over. Árne made known that, along with other goods, Þorvaldr should relinquish a narwhal tooth that he had tricked ('með klókskap') out of a farmer in the

26 Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), 169.

27 *Ibid.*, 174.

28 *Ibid.*, 174.

29 *Ibid.*, 174.

Western-fjords.<sup>30</sup> A dismayed Þorvaldr replied he would only relinquish such a precious object to the bishop and not to Njáll. Þorvaldr now asked to be allowed to leave for Norway, but this was denied. In response, Þorvaldr spread the rumour that he had in fact promised the object to Eiríkr of Norway.

This was a cue for Hrafn Oddsson, as the king's representative, to enter the dispute on Þorvaldr's side. *Árna saga* is clear about Hrafn's motivation: 'Þótti honum [i.e. Hrafn] vænt um er hann hafði veiddan hinn vildasta af yfirklerkum biskups ok dregið mjög til sinnar þykkju, ok vilnaðiz at svá mundu fara fleiri'<sup>31</sup> ('He appreciated having netted the very best of the bishop's higher clerics and having won him over to his way of thinking. He expected to bring more over like him'). Finally, after some wrangling, the case of the narwhal tooth was mediated by Óláfr Ragnríðarson, the aforementioned royal emissary, who had been sent to Iceland to facilitate a settlement in *Staðamál*. It was agreed that the Skálholt bishop should bring the tusk to the king, who would himself then choose the man who had given it, whether Árne or Þorvaldr.

Earlier that same summer (1288) Þorvaldr had attempted to leave Iceland. Loaded with his wealth, he boarded a vessel at Hvítá that ran aground at Hvalseyjar in Western Iceland. *Árna saga* implies that this was a divinely ordained outcome, as it relates how Þorvaldr mocked the bishop's travel-ban as he prayed before departure.<sup>32</sup> Next spring, Abbot Runólfr Sigmundarson of Þykkvibær, the bishop's caretaker, informed Árne about both Þorvaldr's abortive attempt to leave the country and his misdemeanours at Holt the previous winter. The *prófastr* had namely eloped with a woman and squandered the wealth of his district's churches. He had also appropriated Peter's Pence (*Rómarskattur*), a tax intended for the defence of Christendom.<sup>33</sup> This is the last we hear of Þorvaldr until his second and successful attempt to leave for Norway.

There is a curious coda to Þorvaldr's colourful participation in *Árna saga biskups*.<sup>34</sup> *Konungsnámáll* for the year 1285 includes this entry: 'Fundu

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>34</sup> For a study of this episode, see Hermann Pálsson, 'Landafundurinn árið 1285', *Saga* 4 (1964): 53–69.

Helgasynir Nýjaland, Aðalbrandr ok Þorvaldr' ('The Helgasons discovered New-land, Aðalbrandr ok Þorvaldr').<sup>35</sup> In the same year, *Höyers-annáll* mentions that the two brothers sailed into Greenland's wilderness ('Helgasynir sigldu í Grænlands óbyggðir').<sup>36</sup> Other annals for the year 1285 note this discovery, yet without mentioning the brothers. *Gottskálksannáll*,<sup>37</sup> *Flateyjarbókaramáll*<sup>38</sup> and *Forni annáll*<sup>39</sup> state that a land was found west of Iceland, whereas *Skálholtsannáll* refers to the newly discovered place as 'Duneyjar' (probably Dúneyjar, i.e., Eiderdown Islands).<sup>40</sup>

What land, if any, Þorvaldr and Aðalbrandr discovered is not central to our purpose. The most likely scenario is that they landed on an island off Greenland's east coast, perhaps in another abortive attempt to reach Norway. On their return, the brothers may have presented their find in an exaggerated, even misleading, manner. It is noteworthy that in the year of the purported discovery, Hrafn had complained to Bishop Árni about Þorvaldr's mismanagement of ecclesiastical assets and, it appears, about his diversion of resources to his brother.<sup>41</sup> The discovery of a 'new land' may have been opportunistic, a ruse concocted by the brothers to ingratiate themselves with the king of Norway. If so, this plan did not bear fruit until a few years later. *Lárentius saga* (Laurentius saga) relates that in 1289 King Eiríkr sent a certain Hrólfr to Iceland with the brief of finding *Nýjaland* (which the Icelanders called 'Landa-Hrólfr').

The timing of this mission is interesting because Þorvaldr had switched to Hrafn's side only a year earlier. Having gained his ear, Þorvaldr may have leveraged his knowledge of this new land for self-advancement. With his prospects highly uncertain in Iceland, Þorvaldr planned to escape

35 Gustav Storm (ed.), *Islandske annaler indtil 1578* (Christiania [Oslo]: Grøndahl og søns bogtrykkeri, 1888), 142. For further historical contextualisation of this episode, see Helgi Þorláksson, 'The Vinland Sagas in a Contemporary Light', in *Approaches to Vinland: A Conference on the Written and Archaeological Sources for the Norse Settlements in the North-Atlantic Region and Exploration of America*, ed. by Andrew Wawn and Þórunn Sigurðardóttir (Reykjavík: Sigurður Nordal Institute, 2001), 70–75.

36 *Ibid.*, 70.

37 *Ibid.*, 337.

38 *Ibid.*, 383.

39 *Ibid.*, 50.

40 *Ibid.*, 196.

41 Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), 145.

Iceland to Norway with his wealth and garner favour with the king and his court. This, at least, would explain his insistence on personally presenting the narwhal tusk to King Eiríkr. From the perspective of this study, the ‘*Nýjaland* episode’ also underlines the impact that the fame and notoriety of Þorvaldr Helgason may have had on the early audience of chapter 147 in *Árna saga biskups*.

## v

The end of *Árna saga biskups*, as presented in the J version of the saga, is marked by the deaths of Hrafn Oddsson (22 November 1289) and Þorvaldr Helgason (in the summer of 1290). Bishop Árni aside, these are the characters the saga follows most closely in its concluding part (1285–1290). Unsurprisingly, Hrafn receives the greater share of attention. As we have seen, his end brings about a reconciliation between him and the bishop. This is neither political nor even personal. Rather, as we have already observed, the saga draws Hrafn closer into Árni’s intercessional orbit with the implication of his reprieve in the afterlife. The bishop hears Hrafn’s confession in the days leading up to the fatal battle incident, and he prays for the soul of his deceased adversary.

This presentation should be read in light of the historical context in which *Árna saga biskups* was composed. *Staðamál* had been resolved largely in favour of the Church. Thereafter it was in the Church’s interest to reconcile with the secular elite, while also emphasising the salvific benefits that only this institution could offer. *Árna saga* stresses this point perhaps most obviously and dramatically in its description of the reburial of Oddr Þórarinsson (d. 1255) in 1279. Oddr was a prominent chieftain who died in battle while excommunicated and was therefore buried in unconsecrated ground. Twenty-four years later, Bishop Árni, with the archbishop’s permission, lifted Oddr’s excommunication and reburied his bones in Skálholt.<sup>42</sup> The level of detail and the length at which the saga relates these events show the importance of its message. Even in the afterlife, the bishop, the embodiment of the Church, could alter the fate of seemingly lost causes among the laity.

In the case of Þorvaldr Helgason, the pendulum swings in the oppo-

42 *Ibid.*, 71–74. The episode is analysed in Haki Antonsson, *Damnation and Salvation in Old-Norse Literature* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2018), 44–50.

site direction. He is a high-ranking ecclesiastic who partakes in corrupt practices of every kind and betrays the Church. In return, Þorvaldr is divinely punished with death and dire prospects in the afterlife. In the Faroe Islands, St Magnús of Orkney and St Mary allow Þorvaldr to mend his ways. When the provost chooses to continue on his iniquitous path, he suffers the ultimate consequence.

At the close of *Árna saga* biskups, the deaths of Hrafn Oddsson and Þorvaldr Helgason juxtapose the fates of these two characters. One draws towards the Church near the end, whereas the other heads in a different direction. Such an arrangement aligns with a thematic pattern I have identified elsewhere in the Old Norse saga corpus.<sup>43</sup> Broadly speaking, this involves the activities of characters, (usually) near the end of their lives, which leads to their posthumous fates developing in contrasting ways. *Njáls saga*, for instance, is especially rich in this formulation. Thus in the saga's latter part, the fate of Flosi, the leader of the group that burnt Bergþórshváll, contrasts with that of many of his followers, who perish at the Battle of Clontarf. Flosi's famous dream foreshadows this development.<sup>44</sup> In the same battle, a similar, yet still more explicit, juxtaposition involves the brothers Óspakr and Bróðir.<sup>45</sup>

Near *Laxdæla saga's* close there is the example of Þorkell Eyjólfsson and Gestr Oddleifsson. The former drowns in Breiðarfjörður as he attempts to transport timber for a large church at Helgafell. Þorkell's fate in the afterlife appears grim, for shortly thereafter Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir sees his ghost appear before the gates of Helgafell's church, unable to enter.<sup>46</sup> His fate is juxtaposed with that of Gestr, whose corpse is seemingly miraculously transported over Breiðarfjörður to the church at Helgafell, when, for a short period, a clear passage-way forms in the otherwise frozen sea.<sup>47</sup> It was, of course, Gestr who had foreseen Þorkell's drowning in Guðrún's fourth dream.<sup>48</sup>

43 *Ibid.*

44 Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.). *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Íslensk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), 346.

45 *Ibid.*, 445–451.

46 Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.). *Laxdæla saga, Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar, Stífs þáttur*. Íslensk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), 222–223.

47 *Ibid.*, 196–197.

48 *Ibid.*, 90–91.

It is only to be expected that *Árna saga's* author would adopt narrative devices that were familiar to him from other sagas of the same period. Here I have identified an example that not only serves a pressing ideological purpose but also provides the narrative with a greater sense of cohesion at the end of the preserved *Árna saga biskups* with chapter 147 included. This verdict, I stress, somewhat contradicts the view of previous commentators who have found the ending unconvincing and unsatisfying within the context of the overall saga. This applies as much to Þorleifur Hauksson, who sees 'nothing contradicting the case that the chapter [i.e. ch. 147] was original to the saga', as it does to Richard Cole, who suggests that the same chapter was added early in the process of its transmission.<sup>49</sup>

49 'Óneitanlega eru sögulokin engan veginn sannfærandi'. 'The ending of the saga is in no way convincing'. Þorleifur Hauksson (ed.), cvi.

'An ending of sorts was added fairly early on in the transmission of the saga, perhaps out of an awareness of the saga's narrative deformity. This is a rather *non secquiturs* miracle tale, where St Magnus and the Virgin Mary intercede to drive out demons who have possessed Þorvaldr Helgason while on a trip to Orkney. There is a slender connection to Árni: Þorvaldr was a priest who defected to Hrafn's faction in *staðamál*. But the narrator makes no attempt to connect this to any agency on the part of the bishop. Ultimately, this intervention only exacerbates the disunity of the plot.' Richard Cole, 'Árna saga biskups /Kafka / Bureaucracy /Desire', *Collegium Medievale* 28 (2015): 38.

## PART II

## i

Chapter 147, which concludes the J version of *Árna saga biskups*, notes that some believed Þorvaldr's distressed condition was due to his drunkenness rather than demonic possession: 'Þeir voru nokkrir sem töluðu svo hégómlega um þetta ok sögðu tilefnit vera af sterkri drykkju, ok þat hefði hans vitleysi ollat' ('There were some who spoke falsely about what had occurred, saying that it was due to heavy drinking and that this had caused his madness'). What happened to Þorvaldr on his last voyage was clearly a matter of debate. Although it is futile to speculate about what the author knew of this incident, he chose to recount the episode at some length and emphasise its truthfulness. The author's defensive style may indeed suggest that drunkenness was the prevailing interpretation of Þorvaldr's condition (and one which otherwise seems quite in keeping with his character). However, in order to convey the episode's intended meaning, it was necessary to incorporate demonic possession as a crucial element in the story. In other words, the narrative was constructed for a specific purpose.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of this purpose, one must look beyond *Árna saga biskups*, namely to an Icelandic text composed in the same period. This is the so-called *Magnúss saga lengri*, 'Magnúss saga the Longer', which recounts the life and death of St Magnús of Orkney (d. 1116/17).<sup>50</sup> At the heart of this hagiographic work lies Magnús' martyrdom on Egilsay, a location where the earl had agreed to meet and negotiate with his cousin and co-earl, Hákon Pálsson (d. 1123). As Magnús sets foot on the island, he discovers that Hákon wants him dead. But Magnús neither flees nor fights his corner. Instead, he spends a night in a church praying for his salvation. In the morning, the earl has mass sung, and he receives communion. The same morning, Hákon sends four retainers into the church to apprehend him:

Þessir fjórir, er heldr megu kallast af sínum grimmeik inir skæðustu  
vargar en skynsamir menn, jafnan þyrstandi til blóðs úthellingar,

50 Finnboði Guðmundsson (ed.). *Orkneyinga saga, Legenda de sancto Magno, Magnúss saga skemmri, Magnúss saga lengri, Helga þátr Úlfs*. Íslensk fornrit 34 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1965), 335–383.



hlupu inn í kirkjuna mjök svá at lokinni messunni. Gripu þeir þegar inn heilaga Magnús jarl með miklu herfangi, harki ok háreysti af friði ok faðmi heilagrar kirkju sem inn hógværa sta sauð af hjarðartröð.<sup>51</sup>

These four, who in their ferocity may be called the most destructive wolves rather than reasonable men, thirsting as they always do for blood, ran swiftly into the church as soon as mass was finished. They seized then the holy Earl Magnús with great commotion, noise and clamour away from the peace and embrace of the holy church, just as they would the gentlest sheep in a sheep-pen.

Magnús is brought before Hákon and executed following a dramatic exchange of words.

This description differs in some significant detail from the one presented in *Orkneyinga saga*.<sup>52</sup> In the latter, Magnús also arrives in Egilsay and knows he is about to be betrayed by his cousin. Still, he refuses to flee and spends the night praying in a church. Unlike in *Magnúss saga lengri*, however, Magnús departs before Hákon's henchmen enter the church. Although the *Flateyjarbók* text of *Orkneyinga saga* does not indicate where Magnús went off to, an eighteenth-century Danish translation of a lost version of this saga says that the earl transferred to 'a secret place' ('hemmelig sted') on the shore. From there Magnús calls to Hákon and his companions and reveals his hiding place.<sup>53</sup> Thereafter the accounts are broadly similar. The thirteenth-century *Magnúss saga skemmri* ('The Shorter Magnúss saga') follows *Orkneyinga saga* regarding the same events.<sup>54</sup>

*Magnúss saga lengri* highlights Hákon's desecration of the church as he orders his men to capture Earl Magnús. This act associates St Magnús' martyrdom with an attack on the sanctity of the Church. The likening of Magnús to a gentle sheep within a sheep-pen emphasises this point. The simile refers, of course, to the Parable of the Shepherd (John 10:1–18) which, among other interpretations, established the sheepfold as a figure

51 *Ibid.*, 366.

52 *Ibid.*, 107–111.

53 *Ibid.*, 108 (fn. 1).

54 *Ibid.*, 318–322.

for the Church (and so for Salvation). Thus, for instance, St Augustine says in his Tractate (no. 45) on St John's Gospel 10:1–10, 'Keep hold of this, that Christ's sheepfold is the Catholic Church'.<sup>55</sup> The reference to the 'meek lamb' connotes Christ's sacrifice, and the wolves, the Church's diabolical enemies. Magnús' presence in the church on Egilsay is therefore elevated to a sacrifice for the Church in general.

In *Magnúss saga lengri* St Magnús becomes associated with the Church. This association is supported by the earl shedding his secular ways for a life of holiness (including adopting chastity). The transformation is accompanied by clear echoes of Thomas Becket's martyrdom.<sup>56</sup> Take for instance, Edward Grim's account of Becket's martyrdom, which represents the earliest and arguably most influential account of this event.<sup>57</sup> Grim notes the loud and vulgar commotion that followed the entry of the four knights, while he likens Becket to a sacrificial lamb and his attackers to wolves. Hákon's four henchmen who burst into the church in Egilsay are manifestly modelled on the four knights who enter Canterbury Cathedral as the archbishop prepares for vespers. The archbishop's slaying in 1170 encapsulated, of course, the most egregious attack on the Church's liberty.

The obvious allusion to Becket's martyrdom in *Magnúss saga lengri* brings us to this text's composite elements. Apart from the authorial prologue, *Magnúss saga lengri* combines two texts: *Orkneyinga saga*, in a version close to the *Flateyjarbók* text of this saga, and a lost Latin Life of St Magnús which *Magnúss saga lengri* attributes to 'Meistari Rodbert' ('Master Robert'). The identity of Robert is uncertain. Finnboði Guðmundsson, the editor of the St Magnús material in *Íslensk fornrit*, suggested he was Robert of Cricklade (ca.1100–1174/79), a prior of St Frideswide's priory in Oxford.<sup>58</sup> Finnboði's reasoning centred on Robert

55 *Tractates on the Gospel of John/St Augustine*, trans. by John W. Rettig (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 190.

56 Haki Antonsson, 'Two Twelfth-Century Martyrs: St Thomas of Canterbury and St Magnús of Orkney', in *Sagas, Saints and Settlements*, ed. by Paul Bibire and Gareth Williams (Leiden: Brill 2004), 56–57.

57 James Robertson (ed.). *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury (Canonized by Pope Alexander III, AD 1173)*, 7 vols. (London: Rolls Series, 1875–1885), vol. 2, 80–82.

58 Finnboði Guðmundsson (ed.). Finnboði's insights in this matter were likely prompted by a footnote in A. B. Taylor's English translation of *Orkneyinga saga*. *Orkneyinga saga: A New Translation*, trans. by A. B. Taylor (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1938), 75 (fn. 1).

of Cricklade's authorship of a Becket *vita* around 1173. This otherwise lost Life constitutes the core of the early thirteenth-century *Thómas saga* I.<sup>59</sup>

This is where matters rested until Peter Foote's study of 1989, in which he analysed the second of the two prologues to *Magnúss saga lengri*.<sup>60</sup> Master Robert's prologue follows on from the Icelandic author's own prologue. Foote observed that in their prologues both Master Robert and William of Canterbury, who completed his Life of Becket in 1174, used a passage from Jerome's introduction to his translation of the Books of Samuel and Kings. Foote concluded that the English authors had likely not used a common intermediary source, but that William's prologue would have influenced Master Robert's introduction to his St Magnús *vita*. Foote also observed that it is known from another source that Robert of Cricklade was familiar with William of Canterbury's composition. My own contribution was to identify more specific parallels between *Magnúss saga lengri* and the Becket corpus.<sup>61</sup> In short, it has been shown beyond reasonable doubt that the early Becket corpus influenced Robert's Life of St Magnús.

Yet Robert's work is unlikely to have been the earliest hagiographic work on the Orkney saint. In 1137 Magnús' relics were translated from Birsay to Kirkwall, and some twenty years later they were moved into his cathedral. The most plausible solution is that Master Robert, who may have been Robert of Cricklade, refashioned an existing Life of the saint. This meant reinterpreting Magnús' life and martyrdom by solidifying the saint's association with the Church. This is explicitly Robert's purpose in the prologue, which highlights how Magnús, figuratively speaking, brought his gifts to the Tabernacle. His gifts are said to be gold, which denotes wisdom; silver, which denotes celibacy; jewels, which denote miracles; goat-hair, which signifies the repentance of sins; and red goatskin, which denotes martyrdom. From these items, so the prologue claims, is fashioned the cover that protects the Tabernacle from the sun and the rain. The Tabernacle stands, of course, for the Church, and the natural elements

59 Margaret Orme, 'A Reconstruction of Robert of Cricklade's Vita et Miracula S. Thomae Cantuariensis', *Analecta Bollandiana* 84 (1966): 379–98.

60 Peter Foote, 'Master Robert's Prologue in Magnúss saga lengri', in *Festskrift til Finn Hødnebo*, ed. by Bjørn Eithun et al. (Oslo: Novus forlag, 1989), 65–81.

61 Haki Antonsson, 'Two Twelfth-Century Martyrs'.

signify the enemies that attack her.<sup>62</sup> Thus St Magnús of Orkney is here presented as the defender of the Church and, in a sense, her embodiment.

Notwithstanding this biblical figuration, the most effective way for Master Robert to associate St Magnús with the Church was by evoking the recent martyrdom of Thomas Becket. As just mentioned, Robert probably based his work on an older *vita* of St Magnús, to which he added not only the prologue but also learned references and theological comments. The rewriting of hagiographic works so as to align them with religious trends and contemporary interests was common in twelfth-century England. For instance, early in the century an anonymous author wrote a Life of St Frideswide, an Anglo-Saxon princess who spurned the advances of a king and died a virgin. The *vita* is composed in a simple style and seems to have been intended for monastic use. Sometime between 1140 and 1170 Robert of Cricklade re-formulated this *vita*. While Robert frequently retained verbatim the original Latin, he also chose to amplify or add certain themes of topical importance.<sup>63</sup> Whether or not this Robert was Robert of Cricklade, I argue that something comparable happened in the early hagiography of St Magnús of Orkney.<sup>64</sup>

Associating Magnús with the Canterbury martyr, and thus with *liber ecclesiae*, is also evident in his liturgy. The martyr's rhymed Office, which was based on Robert's '*vita*', was tailored to specific music, namely the score composed by Benedict of Peterborough (d. 1193) for Becket's Office.<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, when the St Magnús' Office was sung on his Feast Day, both the words and the melodies evoked the Canterbury saint. Such use of pre-existing music both served a practical purpose and, in this case, established an aural intertextual relationship between Magnús and St Thomas Becket.<sup>66</sup>

62 Finnbogi Guðmundsson (ed.), 336–337.

63 For the texts and a comparison see, John Blair, 'Saint Frideswide Reconsidered', *Oxoniensia* 52 (1987): 71–127.

64 It is tempting to speculate that the subtle, yet occasionally notable, differences between *Orkneyinga saga's* and *Magnúss saga lengri's* account can be explained by the former work using the oldest *vita* rather than the reworked text.

65 Ben Whitworth, 'Medieval Music for Saint Magnus: From Research to Performance', *University Campus Oldham. Spark* 4 (2021): 21–30.

66 On aural liturgical intertextuality see, for instance, Margot Fassler, *Music in the Medieval West. Western Music in Context: A Norton History* (New York/London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2014), 3–4. An obvious Icelandic example is the matching of St Þorlákr's Office

## ii

*Magnúss saga lengri* survives in a copy made by Ásgeir Jónsson from around 1700. Ásgeir's exemplar was *Bæjarbók* (from Bær in Rauðasandur in the Western-fjords), a manuscript dated to 1370–1390. With the exception of four leaves, this manuscript was destroyed in a fire in Copenhagen in 1795. The other dating indicator of *Magnúss saga lengri* resides in its use of *skrúðstill* ('ornamental style'), a feature that appeared in the late thirteenth century and is common in fourteenth-century Old Norse ecclesiastical literature. On this basis, the timeframe for *Magnúss saga lengri* is ca. 1290–ca. 1390, with a preference for the early part of the fourteenth century.<sup>67</sup>

In an essay published in 1962, Magnús Már Lárusson argued that the saga's most likely place of origin was the northern diocese of Hólar.<sup>68</sup> His argument rested on the genealogical connection this text makes between the Orkney saint and Bishop Jón Ögmundarson of Hólar (1052–1121). Further, *Magnúss saga lengri* situates Magnús' martyrdom during the papacy of Paschal II (1099–1118) and Jón's episcopacy (1106–1121). These are unconvincing reasons for a northern authorship of *Magnúss saga lengri*, presupposing as they do a factional attitude among Icelandic ecclesiastics towards the cult of the native saints. However, the sources do not reveal such an attitude. From the outset, churchmen from both dioceses contributed to the promotion of the cults of Jón Ögmundarson and Þorlákr Þórhallsson.<sup>69</sup> To Icelandic ecclesiastics, the native saints were manifestly a source of pride irrespective of their diocesan origins. This sentiment is explicitly expressed in the saga's Icelandic prologue: 'Hér með eru blessaðir biskupar, Johannes ok Thorlacus, hverir Ísland hafa geislat með háleitu skini sinna bjartra verðleika' ('Herewith are the saintly bishops, Jón and

with the music for St Dominic's Office which is commonly attributed to the circle around Bishop Jón Halldórsson of Skálholt. Gisela Attinger, 'Some Reflections on the Liturgy for St Þorlákr', in *Dominican Resonances in Medieval Iceland*, ed. by Gunnar Harðarson and Karl G. Johansson (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 204.

67 Finnboði Guðmundsson (ed.), cxxxvii–cxxxviii.

68 Magnús Már Lárusson, 'St. Magnus Orcadensis Comes', *Saga* 3 (1960–1963): 470–508.

69 For instance, Guðmundr Arason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson, who around 1200 both had close associations with the diocese of Hólar, were instrumental in the early recording of St Þorlákr's miracles. Ásdís Egilsdóttir (ed.), *Biskupasögur 2: Hungurvaka, Þorláks byskups in elzta, Jarsteinabók Þorláks byskups önnur, Þorláks saga byskups C, Þorláks saga byskups E, Páls saga byskups, Ísleifs þátr byskups, Latinubrot um Þorlák byskup*. Íslensk fornrit 16 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002), 246–247.

Þorlákr, who have illuminated Iceland with the exalted rays of their shining merits').<sup>70</sup>

The sources rather point to Skálholt diocese as *Magnúss saga lengri's* place of origin. Two events are especially relevant in this context. The first is the arrival of a St Magnús relic in Skálholt Cathedral. According to Icelandic annals, this occurred in 1298, the same year as Bishop Árni Þorláksson died in Norway.<sup>71</sup> Although there is no mention of the relic's place of origin, it is possible that Árni secured the holy object while in Norway, where he would have had the opportunity to engage with bishops from the different parts of the Nidaros archbishopric. This would have placed the bishop in an ideal environment in which to negotiate for and exchange prestigious relics.

Also worth considering is Árni's possible connection to Bishop Erlendr of the Faroe Islands (1269–1308). Árni was consecrated in Norway in the same year as this former cathedral canon of Bergen in Norway, and both attended the coronation in 1280 of King Erlingr Magnússon.<sup>72</sup> Sometime in the 1290s, Bishop Erlendr commenced the building of a new cathedral in Kirkjubøur dedicated to St Magnús of Orkney. Whether in Erlendr's time the cathedral ever amounted to much more than the outer walls is uncertain.<sup>73</sup> In this early phase, however, a plaque was made on the east wall which in high relief depicts Christ flanked by the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Below is a Latin inscription which lists the cathedral's relics. Along with a piece of the Holy Cross, they are of St Magnús, the Virgin Mary and St Þorlákr.<sup>74</sup> This may indicate that around the turn of the thirteenth century Skálholt and the Faroese diocese exchanged relics of their respective patron saints.

The second event to highlight is Althing's adoption, in 1326, of St Magnús' feast (13 December) as an obligatory feast day. The Feast of Corpus Christi was also made obligatory on the same occasion.<sup>75</sup> According to *Lárentius saga*, Jón Halldórsson of Skálholt introduced

70 Finnboði Guðmundsson (ed.), 335.

71 Gustav Storm (ed.), See *Konungssannáll*, 145; *Skálholtsannáll*, 198.

72 Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), 80.

73 Kirstin Eliassen, 'Domkirkeruinen, "Múrurin", i Kirkjubø', *Fróðskaparrit* 43 (1995): 23–58.

74 *Ibid.*, 35–36.

75 Gustav Storm (ed.), *Konungssannáll*, 153. *Skálholtsannáll*, 205.

the latter feast to Iceland.<sup>76</sup> The same bishop was surely also responsible for the codification of St Magnús' feast. The third section (of five) of AM 671 4to contains Jón Halldórsson's *Bannsakabréf* ('Letter of Excommunication') of 1326, which includes a statute for the feast days of St Magnús and Corpus Christi. From the same year, there is a reference to the church day of St Magnús (13 December), as recorded in the so-called *Árstíðaskrá Vestfirðinga* (KBAdd 1). Stefan Drechsler has observed that both references originate from the Western-fjords, which Bishop Jón visited around the same time.<sup>77</sup>

In placing St Magnús' Feast on a more official standing, Jón Halldórsson was probably codifying an existing practice within his diocese. A *máldagi* of Sæból in the Western-Fjords dating to 1306/7 suggests as much.<sup>78</sup> In it, Bishop Árni Helgason allows the celebration of St Magnús' feast day before Christmas (13 December) throughout the parish as with 'the Feast of St Andrew and St Nicholas' (i.e. an obligatory feast) ('þuilijkt sem Andersmesso eda Nichulasmesso').

Along with Sæból, Kolbeinsstaðir on the Snæfellsnes peninsula was one of the five principal churches dedicated to the Orkney martyr. In a late twelfth-century *máldagi*, the church is dedicated to the Virgin Mary.<sup>79</sup> In *Vilkingsbók* from 1397, however, Kolbeinsstaðir is dedicated to St Magnús, St Peter, St Nicholas, the Virgin Mary, St Catherine of Antioch, St Dominic and All the Saints.<sup>80</sup> The *máldagi* records Ketill Þorláksson's donation of this farm and the adjoining church for his own and his wife's salvation. The *máldagi* also states that Ketill, who served as *sýslumaður* in the Western Quarter from 1314 and as *hirðstjóri* from 1320 to ca. 1341, had the church's interior adorned. The inclusion of St Dominic (d. 1221) among the church's patron saints points to the influence of Bishop Jón Halldórsson, Iceland's first Dominican bishop. The refurbishment of Kolbeinsstaðir

76 Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), 383.

77 Stefan Drechsler, 'Jón Halldórsson and Law Manuscripts of Western Iceland, c. 1320–1340', in *Dominican Resonances in Medieval Iceland*, ed. by Gunnar Harðarson and Karl G. Johansson (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 130–131.

78 *Diplomatarium Islandicum – Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn* II: 1253–1350 (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1893), 360–361.

79 *Diplomatarium Islandicum – Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn* I: 834–1284 (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag 1857), 274–275.

80 *Diplomatarium Islandicum – Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn* IV: 1265–1449 (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag 1897), 180–183.



probably concluded with a re-dedication and a public show of Ketill's donation. Such an occasion, conducted for the benefit of the country's highest royal official, called for the participation of the Skálholt bishop. St Magnús' inclusion alongside major universal saints is notable, and, as with St Dominic, an influence here from the Skálholt bishopric seems likely.

This assumption is supported by an event reported in the annals for 1308. In that year, Bishop Árni Helgason of Skálholt and Haukr Erlendsson (d. 1334) established a *spítali*, an institution for the elderly and infirm clergymen ('lærðir menn'), in Gaulverjabær in southern Iceland.<sup>81</sup> Although St Magnús is not specified as the hospital's patron, this is recorded in a separately preserved Latin oath seemingly intended for the institution's foreman.<sup>82</sup>

Haukr Erlendsson's involvement is noteworthy. He appears to have served as a Lawman briefly in 1294.<sup>83</sup> Haukr left for Norway in 1299, and by 1303/4 he had been knighted and made the Lawman of the Gulathing, a position he held until (at least) 1316. Haukr, however, retained close links with Iceland, and during one of his visits, he joined Bishop Árni in founding Gaulverjabær hospital. In 1308 Haukr held no formal office in Iceland, so his participation probably involved a donation. If so, the hospital can be considered alongside another of Haukr Erlendsson's prestigious projects, namely his production of *Hauksbók* (which in 1308 was still ongoing). These undertakings aimed at enhancing Haukr's stature both in Iceland and in Norway.<sup>84</sup> But it was undoubtedly Bishop Árni Helgason who chose St Magnús as the patron saint of Gaulverjabær hospital, and this choice attests to the saint's close association with the Skálholt diocese in the early decades of the fourteenth century.

This is the context for the composition of *Magnúss saga lengri*. The arrival of his relics in Skálholt in 1298 elevated the interest in the Orkney

81 Gustav Storm (ed.), *Konungsannáll*, 149; *Skálholtsannáll*, 291; *Gottskálksannáll*, 341; *Flateyjarannáll*, 391.

82 *Diplomatarium Islandicum* II, 507. Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland. Their Veneration from the Conversion* (Brussels: Société Bollandistes 1994), 120–121.

83 Haukr's father, Erlendr Ólafsson ('digri' according to *Árna saga*) (1312) held the position of lawman in northern and western Iceland from 1283 to 1289, and in 1290 he became a royal representative in the Western-Fjords. In the latter stages of *Staðamál*, Erlendr was arguably Hrafn Oddsson's most important ally against Árni Þorláksson.

84 For an introduction to *Hauksbók* and the manuscript's historical context, see Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Hauksbók and the Construction of an Icelandic World View', *Saga-Book* 31 (2007): 22–38.



martyr, which was already present in this diocese, especially among the ecclesiastical elite. This led to the writing of a new vernacular hagiographical saga about the Northern Isles saint in an effort that resonated with a broader ideological agenda, namely with the defence of the Church's interests. Such an agenda may at first appear surprising considering Magnús' secular and bellicose background. But what attracted Skálholt to St Magnús was precisely the image of a secular lord who transcended his milieu and became, in effect, an embodiment of the Church. In the late twelfth century, Master Robert was the first to formulate this link in his Latin *vita* of the Orkney martyr with its influence from the Becket corpus. In the early fourteenth century, this aspect agreed with the interests of the Icelandic author of *Magnúss saga lengri*, who was the first to allow this foundational work to be foregrounded in the vernacular.

iii

We have seen how *Magnúss saga lengri* draws on the Becket corpus. But how does *Árna saga biskups* and, especially its ending with chapter 147, connect with the Orkney and Canterbury martyrs?

*Magnúss saga lengri* identifies Magnús with Elijah, the prophet who stood firmly against the blasphemous and covetous King Ahab: 'Allar syndir gerast af girnd, ok allar fýstir óleyfðar af ágirni fram ganga. Pat reyndist með Achab, inum ranglátasta konungi, er ofsótti Heliam spámann'<sup>85</sup> ('All sins are the result of cupidity, and all unlawful desires result from cupidity. This was the case of Ahab, the unjust king, who persecuted the Prophet Elijah'). As already mentioned, *Árna saga biskups* twice likens Árni to Elijah who stood alone against King Ahab (i.e. Hrafn Oddsson) and the king's unjust seizing of Naboth's vineyard.<sup>86</sup> This biblical example juxtaposes an unwavering prophet with an unjust king. In the Becket corpus, the corresponding figures are St Thomas and Henry II. Already during Becket's lifetime, John of Salisbury applied this comparison in a letter of 1166.<sup>87</sup> In his biography of Becket, completed in 1186, Herbert of Bosham refers to Ahab's appropriation of Naboth's vineyard as he

85 Finnboði Guðmundsson (ed.), 361.

86 Haki Antonsson, '*Árna saga biskups* as History and Literature', 283.

87 W. J. Millor and N. L. Brooke (ed. & transl.). *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, vol. 2: *The Later Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 172–173. See also another letter of his from the same year, pp. 246–247.

comments on the covetousness of kings.<sup>88</sup> In the Becket liturgy, Naboth's vineyard denotes the Church, which St Thomas defends with his life.<sup>89</sup>

Unlike St Magnús and St Thomas Becket, Árne Þorláksson did not make the ultimate sacrifice for this cause. Although *Árna saga biskups* generally shows the bishop in an admirable light, the text never advocates for his sanctity. Even so, as has already been observed, a latent threat of violence permeates *Árna saga biskups*. This is especially true in the saga's latter stages. His adversaries, headed by Hrafn, could at any point have resorted to violence. In short, Árne might have had to choose the fate of St Magnús or St Thomas Becket. Although Árne never faced this choice, the saga makes clear he would have opted for martyrdom. He is the warrior in God's cause: 'Á þessu sama vári stóð fyrrnefndr Árne byskup frammi fáliðr vigmaðr í fylking síns signaða herra [...]' ('In this same spring the aforementioned Bishop Árne stood with a few followers as a warrior in the van of the legion of his sanctified Lord').<sup>90</sup>

Now we turn for the last time to Þorvaldr Helgason and the conclusion of *Árna saga biskups*, as it appears in the J redaction. Þorvaldr travels literally and figuratively away from the Church. This *prófastr* chooses to become the Church's adversary, and he pays for this stance with his life and, by implication, with his soul. We have seen how in the spring of 1288, when Hrafn Oddsson and his retinue paid Þorvaldr a visit, the provost sought refuge in his church. After a short siege, he capitulated and joined Hrafn's cause. With this act, seen from the side of Árne and his biographer, Þorvaldr betrayed the Church.

The significance of the concluding episode of the extant *Árna saga biskups* now comes into focus. The scene centres on a contrast:

[...] at þar áðr var hann fyrir sakir frænda ok framkvæmdar ok mikilla mennta öruggur ásóknarmaðr óvina Guðs kristni meðan hann hélt trúnað við sinn herra – var hann gripinn af óhreinum anda svo harðliga at til heilagrar Magnússkirkju leiddu hann fyrir nauðsyn tíu menn í sömu kirkju. Ok er hann kom inn at dyrunum varð sá

88 James Craigie Robertson (ed.). *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury (Canonized by Pope Alexander III, AD 1173)*, 7 vols. (London: Rolls Series, 1875–1885), vol. 3, 222.

89 Kay Brainerd Slocum, *Liturgies in Honour of Thomas Becket* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004), 145.

90 Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), 168.

hlutr er ótrúligr mætti þykkja, ef ei vitat væri þann grun á sem helgi Magnús patron sömu kirkju þíndist fyrir ekki ok varð ei forgefins Krists píslarvottr.

Previously his family, advancement and high learning had kept him safe as a plaintiff against the enemies of God's Christendom, so long as he remained faithful to his lord. Now he was attacked by an unclean spirit so violently that ten men were needed to bring him into the holy Church of St Magnús. And when he came through the door, such a thing happened as might have seemed unbelievable if it had not been proved beyond doubt that St Magnús, the patron of the same church, had suffered and become the aforesaid Christ's martyr.

The contrast could hardly be starker. Þorvaldr Helgason is cured by a saint who has made the ultimate sacrifice. At one time, he defended the Church against her enemies, but then he became one of her enemies. Still, despite his cure in the Faroes, Þorvaldr continues on his chosen trajectory and so suffers the fatal and eternal consequence in Norway. The evocation of Magnús' martyrdom is not accidental. He is the warrior who transforms himself into an epigone of ecclesiastical virtues. At the end, in a death-scene amplified by associations with Becket's martyrdom, Earl Magnús gives his life for the Church. Þorvaldr Helgason acts in the opposite way, and his fate reflects this.

## iv

Stefán Karlsson observed how three generations of Icelandic authors created the Old Norse Becket corpus.<sup>91</sup> Further, these three generations align with different periods in the struggle for *libertas ecclesiae*. Bergr Gunnsteinsson (ca. 1160–1230) represents the first generation with his oldest saga of St Thomas Becket. This text (*Thómas saga I*) augments his translation of Robert of Cricklade's aforementioned *vita* with material from other Becket biographies. *Guðmundar saga A* mentions that Bergr was part of Guðmundr Arason's entourage when he travelled to Norway to be consecrated as the bishop of Hólar (1203–1237).<sup>92</sup>

91 Stefán Karlsson, 'Icelandic Lives of Thomas à Becket: Questions of Authorship', in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference, University of Edinburgh, 1971*, ed. by Peter Foote, Hermann Pálsson and Desmond Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), 212–243.

92 Stefán Karlsson (ed.), *Guðmundar sögur biskups. Ævi Guðmundar biskups: Guðmundar saga*

Influence from this first generation is observable elsewhere in Old Norse literature, for example in *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* from around the middle of the thirteenth century. The saga relates the life and violent death of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (ca. 1166–1213), a powerful chieftain in the Western-fjords, who supported Bishop Guðmundr Arason of Hólar (1203–1237) and undertook a pilgrimage to Becket's shrine. The saga's description of Hrafn's death reveals the influence of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, as depicted in his *Life* by Robert of Cricklade.<sup>93</sup>

Arngrímur Brandsson (d. 1361) represents the third generation. This priest and abbot of Þingeyrar (from 1350) used St Thomas as the primary exemplar in his saga about Bishop Guðmundr Arason (*Guðmundar saga D*) and, as Stefán Karlsson has shown, he likely composed the youngest of the Becket compilations (*Thómas saga III*).<sup>94</sup>

Stefán Karlsson identifies Jón Holt (d. 1302) as representative of the second and middle generation. This priest, who may have been of Norwegian origin, translated *Quadriologus*, a composite text of early Becket biographies. It is easy to link Jón Holt's project with Árni Þorláksson's agenda of *libertas ecclesiae*. In *Árna saga biskups*, Jón is arguably the bishop's most trusted supporter and sometime advisor. Priest Jón Holt first appears in 1284 when he is displaced from his rich church farm of Hitardalur in Western Iceland where, the saga claims, he had lived for nearly four decades.<sup>95</sup> Later, compensating for Jón's loss turns into one of the more protracted wrangles between Árni and Hrafn. Near the end of the saga, we find Jón Holt presenting the Church's case before the king and archbishop.<sup>96</sup>

I argue that the impact of this second generation, writing in the early part of the fourteenth century, is also observable in *Magnúss saga lengri*. The arrival of Magnús' relics in 1298 in Skálholt would have enhanced any interest in the Orkney martyr. An existing, yet hardly popular, cult could now be reformulated and in a sense relaunched. From this fermentation came *Magnúss saga lengri*, a text that highlights Robert's Latin *Life* of St

*A* (Copenhagen: Reitzels 1983), 139.

93 Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), lxi–lxxiii.

94 Marlene Ciklamini, 'The Hand of Revision: Abbot Arngrím's Redaction of *Guðmundar Saga Biskups*', *Gripla* 8 (1993): 231–252.

95 Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (ed.), 119.

96 *Ibid.*, 195.

Magnús and its influence from the St Thomas Becket corpus. In this way, St Magnús' cult chimed with the ideological outlook of the Icelandic ecclesiastical elite in the aftermath of *Staðamál*. All this crystallises at the end of *Árna saga biskups* as we have it in the J-version of the saga, which, in all likelihood, represents its original conclusion. This episode juxtaposes an ecclesiastic's betrayal of the Church with St Magnús' martyrdom and so evokes the steadfastness of her great champion, Bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt.

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## SUMMARY

The end of *Árna saga biskups* and the cult of St Magnús of Orkney.  
Hagiography and ecclesiastical politics in early fourteenth-century Iceland

**Keywords:** The Sagas of Bishops, hagiography, Church history, *Árna saga biskups*, the veneration of St Magnús of Orkney in Iceland, the hagiographic corpus on St Thomas Becket

This article begins by focusing on the final chapter of *Árna saga biskups*, specifically chapter 147 found in the saga's modern edition. This chapter is only present in a single transcript of the saga, originating from a lost portion of *Reykjafjarðarbók*.



It narrates the events leading to the death of Provost Þorvaldr Helgason in 1290. The account follows his journey to Norway, where he encountered demonic possession. He received temporary relief from this affliction in the Faroes Isles, thanks to the intervention of St Magnús of Orkney and the Virgin Mary, within a church dedicated to St Magnús. However, Þorvaldr's condition worsened, leading to his demise in Norway. The saga implies a connection between Þorvaldr's fate and his betrayal of Bishop Árni Þorláksson's efforts for the Church's interests during the *Staðamál*.

St Magnús of Orkney plays a significant role in this narrative. The article contends that his role aligns with the promotion of the Orkney martyr's cult by the Skálholt bishopric, likely during the time when *Árna saga biskups* was composed – either in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. This promotion probably included the crafting of *Magnúss saga lengri* ('*The Longer Magnúss Saga*') within the same context. Further, the article argues that the interest in St Magnús is tied to his association with the Church and its freedoms. This connection can be traced back to a twelfth-century Latin Life of St Magnús, which was influenced by the biographies of Thomas Becket, especially his martyrdom in defence of the Church. The article also identifies echoes of the Becket corpus in *Árna saga*, which is unsurprising given the saga's subject matter and the prominence of the Canterbury martyr within Icelandic clerical circles.

Previous research suggests that the original saga likely concluded in 1290, eight years prior to the central character's death. However, the exact reasons for this ending remain uncertain. This article reveals how this seemingly insignificant concluding episode to *Árna saga biskups* combines significant religious and intellectual elements in a manner that the saga's early audience would have understood. This case study underscores the adaptable and allusively fertile nature of the hagiographic tradition to address contemporary concerns.

## Á G R I P

Niðurlag *Árna sögu biskups* og dýrkun heilags Magnúsar Orkneyjajarls  
Helgisögur og kirkjupólitik á Íslandi á fyrri hluta fjórtándu aldar

**Efnisorð:** biskupasögur, helgisagnafræði, kirkjusaga, *Árna saga biskups*, dýrkun Magnúsar Orkneyjajarls á Íslands, helgisögur um heilagan Tómas Becket

Í upphafi þessarar greinar er athyglinni beint að lokakaflanum í *Árna sögu biskups*, einkum kafla 147 í nýjustu útgáfu sögunnar. Þessi kafla er aðeins varðveittur í einni uppskrift sögunnar sem á rætur að rekja til ákveðins hluta í Reykjavjarðarbók sem nú er glataður. Þar segir frá þeim atburðum sem leiddu til dauða Þorvalds Helgasonar prófests árið 1290. Greint er frá ferðalagi hans til Noregs þar sem ill öfl náðu tökum á honum. Þegar hann kemur til Færeyja nær hann sér tímabundið



með aðstoð Magnúsar Orkneyjajarls og Maríu meyjar þegar hann er staddur í kirkju sem helguð er heilögum Magnúsi. Engu að síður versnar ástand Þorvalds aftur og að lokum lætur hann lífið í Noregi. Í sögunni er gefið í skyn að samband sé milli örlaga Þorvalds og svika hans við tilraunir Árna biskups Þorlákssonar til að halda hlut kirkjunnar í hinum svokölluðu Staðamálum.

Magnús Orkneyjajarl leikur mikilvægt hlutverk í þessari frásögn. Í greininni er því haldið fram að það tengist auknum áhuga á dyrkun hans sem píslarvotts í Skálholtsbiskupsdæmi, sennilega um það leyti sem *Árna saga biskups* var samin – annaðhvort seint á þrettándu öld eða snemma á fjórtándu öld. Líklegt er að *Magnúss saga lengri* hafi verið samin um þetta leyti í þessu samhengi. Í greininni eru færð rök fyrir því að áhugi íslenskra kennimanna á Magnúsi tengist afstöðu hans til kirkjunnar og baráttu hans fyrir frelsi hennar. Þessi tengsl má rekja til tólfstu aldar frásagnar af ævi Magnúsar á latínu, sem dregur dóm af frásögnum af ævi Tómasar Becket, þar sem lögd er áhersla á píslarvætti hans í tilraun til að verja kirkjuna. Sýnt er fram á enduróm frá sögunum af Becket í *Árna sögu*, sem kemur ekki á óvart þegar efni sögunnar er haft í huga og sú virðing sem píslarvotturinn frá Canterbury naut meðal kirkjunnar manna á Íslandi.

Í fyrri rannsóknum hefur verið talið að í upphaflegri gerð sögunnar ljúki henni árið 1290 eða átta árum áður en aðalpersóna hennar lést. Ástæður þess eru samt sem áður óljósar. Greinin afhjúpar hvernig atburður í lok *Árna sögu biskups* sem virðist ekki skipta miklu máli tengir saman mikilvæg trúarleg og vitsmunaleg atriði á þann hátt sem fyrstu áheyrndur sögunnar hafa átt auðvelt með að skilja. Þessi afmarkaða rannsókn undirstrikar hvað helgisöguhefðin var sveigjanleg og hversu auðvelt var að tengja hana á frjóan hátt við atburði og áhyggjur líðandi stundar.

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