

The emergence of a saint's cult  
as witnessed by the *Jarleinabækur þorláks biskups*

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The *Jarleinabækur* (Miracle Books) are three collections<sup>1</sup> of miracles attributed to Þorlákr Þórhallsson, Bishop of Skálholt in Southern Iceland from 1175; not miracles that occurred during his lifetime but after his death in 1193. The first collection is said to have been read at the Alþingi, the annual general assembly of free men, in 1199; on this occasion he was officially declared a saint and the day of his death, 23 December, was instituted as a holy day. The second collection must have been gathered over the following years by his nephew and successor Páll Jónsson, bishop in Skálholt until 1211. The third collection was not completed until more than a century later for some events in its final chapters are dated 1323 and 1325. A great number of miracles are also recorded in *Þorláks saga biskups*, especially in its younger version, but for the purpose of this paper I will stick to the *Jarleinabækur*, the approximately 120 miracles contained in them providing sufficient material to be representative.

It is not a work that has attracted much interest among students of Old Norse literature. Neither the bibliographies of the ISLANDICA series nor the annual *Bibliographies of Old Norse/Icelandic Studies* covering the field since 1963 mention a single study of the *Jarleinabækur*, and they do not even rate a separate entry in the monumental *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for nordisk Middelalder*. Neither was there any paper on these texts at the 1985 Saga Conference devoted to Christianity and West Norse literature.

One can see why this is so. These reports, varying in length between half a dozen lines and about two pages, are episodic and to some extent repetitive; there is little build-up, little psychological depth and little dialogue - in short, a poverty of those elements which make Old Norse prose literature so captivating. Even the Lives of Bishops, moulded as they are by partisanship and often by hagiographic stereotypes, have at least the story line of a life, a career with its struggles and triumphs, to keep us interested.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article referred to by Roman numerals; Arabic numerals indicate chapters. The edition used is Guðni Jónsson's *Byskupa sögur* vol. I, *Íslendingasagnatíðáfan/Haukadalsútgáfan*, 1953.

But I do not think the neglect stems merely from these aesthetic causes. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, in his classical work on the period, *Sturlungaöld*<sup>2</sup>, has a curious chapter entitled "Jarteiknir", where he discusses the change from what he sees as a comparatively enlightened, critical attitude in 12th c. Icelandic society to an appetite for the miraculous and to rank superstition in the 13th. He admits that there was a substratum of folk beliefs before, although he would have us think that much of it was lost during Viking expeditions and settlement in a new land not seen through a haze of popular traditions; but basically he thinks it is the influence from Europe, mainly through the Church, that was responsible for a new credulity. He suspects Bishop Páll of "having opened the door to religious superstition, that formless monster hating all moderation."<sup>3</sup>

A deep-seated Lutheran aversion to Popish forms of religious worship probably combined with modern rationalism and an exaggerated notion of the enlightened humanism of the saga age to make works such as the *Jarteinabækur* unattractive to scholars of his generation. Today we have lost a good many certainties, both Lutheran and rationalist, and are less inclined to pass value judgments on past or remote civilisations, knowing that our vantage-point is as partial and insecure as any other. Also, we are less inclined to simply identify Icelandic society with the picture presented in the sagas and the attitudes implied by the narrative. We know that the detached, even humorous view of the gods we find in the Homeric epics, or the scepticism of the Augustan golden age in Rome, did not go very deep, sociologically speaking, and the same may have been true of Iceland, although we tend to think of it as a simpler and more homogeneous society. The fact that the same century, the 13th, saw the flowering of saga writing and of sophisticated history (if we think of *Heimskringla*) and a spread of superstition and an appetite for the miraculous, should have alerted Einar to the existence of vastly differing modes of thinking at the same time and in the same place. And in view of what followed in Icelandic literature in the late Middle Ages and in modern times, books like the *Jarteinabækur* may have been more representative of the age that produced them than the classical sagas. Historians do no longer reconstruct a past civilisation on the works of its greatest writers but on the scraps documenting daily life, and to some extent on the wishes and dreams reflected by trivial literature. Just because the *Jarteinabækur* only marginally conform to literary

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<sup>2</sup> Reykjavík, 1940; Engl. *The Age of the Sturlungs*, Ithaca, 1953.

<sup>3</sup> "... að opna hliðið fyrir oftrúnni, hinum formlausu og hófhatandi óskapnadi" (*Op.cit.* 129)

conventions and expectations, they deserve the attention of the social historian. The French *annalistes*, probably the most influential school of historians in recent times, have done much to vindicate the value of such sources.

The traditional Protestant materialist bias might dismiss these stories as fabrications of a Church eager to exploit to its own advantage the afflictions and the credulity of the uneducated masses. That is, after all, where Luther's initial protest against the sale of indulgences sprang from; he thought that true faith in God's grace could provide more lasting relief at no cost, and such a "special" (if I may use a commercial expression), even though it defied normal human expectations of give and take, was hard to resist. I am not denying that Bishop Þorlákr and other clerics at Skálholt, once a belief in the effectiveness of Þorlákr's help had taken root, were likely to be pleased with gains both tangible and intangible brought to the place where the blessed bishop had lived and worked and where his relics were kept. What I deny is the likelihood of such a belief taking root simply as a result of clerical propaganda. Visions and apparitions, miraculous events and resulting claims of saintliness for the agent of mediator involved, have almost always sprung up spontaneously outside the ranks of the Church, and the Church has normally provided a brake of scepticism. The tortuous judicial process of canonisation, which has been in place since the 13th century, seems designed to place as many delays and obstacles as possible in the path of potential sainthood. Ineed, none of the Icelandic saints ever made the list of officially recognised saints, neither Þorlákr nor the two bishops of Hólar which were venerated in Iceland, Jón Ögmundarson and Guðmundr Arason. Not as if no such attempts had been made. As late as 1526 the Archbishop of Nidaros received a sum of money from Iceland for the purpose of furthering Guðmundr's canonisation; the Reformation sweeping the country soon afterwards must have put paid to that plan. Yet there is no doubt that Þorlákr's cult was firmly established in pre-Reformation Iceland; his Office (text and music) has been preserved in Ms. 241 fol. of the Arnarnagæan Collection.<sup>4</sup>

Nor was it likely that Þorlákr was launched as a miracle-maker by the Icelandic establishment to provide the common people with a handy remedy for their miseries. While he never got into strife with the chieftains to the same extent as Bishop Guðmundr did in the early 13th century, he was anything but popular with the leading men, as evidenced by the record of *Oddaverja þáttur*. His determination to bring the

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<sup>4</sup> It was first published by Séra Bjarni Þorsteinsson on pp. 71-119 of *hislstenzk þjóðtíog* (Kaupmannahöfn 1906-9, repr. 1974) and, in facsimile and with full critical apparatus, by Róbert A. Óttoson (*Sancti Thorlaci Episcopi officia rhythmica et proprium missae*, Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana Suppl. III, København 1959).

numerous private churches under his sway, his ascetic lifestyle and insistence on fasting and confession, and his stand against sexual permissiveness in a society traditionally lax in such matters, must have made him a pain in the neck of an establishment which had not yet learnt to live with the church as a separate power structure.

The value of the Miracle Books is threefold. Firstly, by their lack of literary ambition and their closeness in time to the incidents described, these stories give us a direct insight into life in Iceland around 1200, life not only among the land-owning class but among those categories of people that appear only marginally in the family sagas: children, shepherds, housemaids, beggars and vagrants. The accounts give us an idea of the occupational hazards of farming and fishing and housework, e.g., women being scalded when lifting heavy kettles off the fire, or children being victims of a variety of accidents with cutting tools. We also get an idea of prevalent diseases, many of them probably a result of malnutrition such as children crippled by rickets; afflictions affecting the eyes seem to have been particularly frequent. A scholar knowledgeable in medicine would find valuable information both about health problems and about medical practices as used by laymen. Secondly, we get some insight into people's wishes, beliefs and expectations, and what they felt they could or had to do for the saint in return for his help. Thirdly, we are enabled to some extent to chart the growth and spread of a cult, and how it settled into generally accepted patterns.

In the last chapter of the Second Book the author, probably Bishop Páll, breaks the normal procedure of recording isolated events and looks back on Þorlákr's posthumous history. He regrets that his record is incomplete and adds, with a touch of humour, that God's store of mercy and generosity must exceed human resources of memory and preservation.<sup>5</sup> When miracles first occurred, they were eagerly reported and written down. But gradually they became so frequent that the novelty of it wore off and people no longer bothered to record them. But when God in His goodness extended Þorlákr's activities to foreign lands and reports of miracles and gifts started reaching Iceland from afar, it kindled fresh attention and devotion to their saint in Icelandic hearts - a common enough experience in Australia where excellence is often only appreciated once it has found recognition abroad. For the author, Þorlákr's miracles are mercy traps, set up to catch people and bring them to eternal bliss and salvation, just as the devil baits his traps with "perverse unnatural love and greed, worldly honour and murderous intent,

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<sup>5</sup> "... at almáttkum guði hefir glöggligar enzt mildi ok miskunnsemi til at gefa oss ótallig tákni og jarðeinagerðir fyrir verðleik ok dýrd ins sæla Þorláks byskups en oss geð ok geyming at gera eftir ok varðveita, svá sem oss hæfði." (II,23)

wrath and unrighteousness and all perverse desires"<sup>6</sup> to catch people and send them to eternal damnation. He also contrasts Þorlákr's story with that of other saints and martyrs, which often are filled with the cruelty and depravity of godless people and make us grieve for those lost souls whereas the narration of Þorlákr's deeds is "all full of joy and happiness, nowhere followed by grief or harm".<sup>7</sup>

This is indeed quite an apt description, for while there is no shortage of human misery in the form of illness, injury, destitution and suicidal depression, it only surfaces to be relieved by the saint's intercession. There is none of the sadomasochism of the martyrs' legends, and there are only very few punitive miracles, miracles designed to teach the godless or irreverent a lesson. One such occurs in chapter 16 of the First Book, and it says something about attitudes then current to pain and suffering. A man gets ill in the middle of the haymaking season; he swells to the size of a head of cattle and is in terrible pain. His wife invokes Þorlákr for him, and with good effect; he improves quickly. A young woman on the next farm, who was something of a loudmouth, wonders what the world has come to if a saint's help was invoked for a man as if it was a woman facing childbirth. During the following night she wakes up with her eyes aching awfully. She quickly sends for the woman whose prayers had done so much for her husband. But the latter is aware of the fun the girl had had at their expense and lets her suffer through the night. In the morning she comes across and invokes Þorlákr for her, and that quickly frees her of her pain. - Another example where a mocker is punished occurs at the beginning of the Second Book, where one of the miracles in foreign lands which, according to the epilogue, helped rekindling enthusiasm for Þorlákr in Iceland, is related. A certain Auðunn in England has a likeness of Þorlákr made and put up in a church. An English cleric, with metropolitan scorn for the man from the outback, offers the statue a suet-sausage with the words: "Do you want it, suet-lander? You are a suet-bishop."<sup>8</sup> Punishment is immediate: He cannot move from the spot where he stands, and the hand holding the sausage is crippled. Only after true repentance and much intercession through prayer by his colleagues is he released and healed.

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<sup>6</sup> "En at teygja til þessarar gildru eru þessi ögn: röng ást ókaplig ok ágími, metnaðr ok mannráð, reiði ok ranglæti ok allar rangar fýsnir." (II,23)

<sup>7</sup> "En þessi frásögn, sem hér er nú sögð frá hinum sæla Þorláki byskupi, er öll full fagnaðar ok farsælu, ok fylgir hvergi þó hryggð né hörmung." (II,23)

<sup>8</sup> "Viltu, mörlandi? Þú ert mörbyskup." (II,1)

I do not know how much we should make of these reports of Þorlákr miracles in foreign lands. We know from the sagas how tales get taller the farther their location is removed from Iceland, and there is little in other records to suggest that Þorlákr was venerated outside Iceland. He is said to have had an altar in the Church of the Holy Cross in Bergen, but his feast does not figure in the calendars of the Archbishopric of Nidaros (to which Iceland belonged) until 1519, and then only in the lowest category of saints' feasts. There is no record to support the claim made in II,14 that Norse warriors in the service of the Latin Emperor of Constantinople built a church to Þorlákr after receiving help from him in a seemingly hopeless battle against the heathens. Yet Icelanders, still fairly footloose in the period around 1200, may well have taken their trust in their particular saint to the countries they frequented. There is in II,13 the story of a rich merchant in Norway whose property is the only one to escape the attention of the pirates who otherwise clean out the ship on which he travels - because he invoked Þorlákr. The two preceding chapters record the help a rich lawsayer in the Shetlands by the name of Hávarðr received from Þorlákr. Fleeing a party of raiding Norwegian vikings, he hastily hides his gold and silver in the sand of a beach and promises Þorlákr a gold ring if the vikings miss the treasure and if he finds it again. Both conditions are fulfilled, and he sends the gold ring to Skálholt. Next, he falls victim to an eye disease, and Þorlákr not only restores his sight but makes him see better than before. Hávarðr calls an assembly, tells his *þingmenn* what happened, and asks each farmer who has grain to send a handful of flour to Skálholt - a nice way of spreading around the burden of payment for a favour received. And the author adds that this contribution was made not only once but regularly for a long time. Unlike the case of the Þorlákr church in Constantinople (where the king himself is claimed to have laid the foundation stone), Bishop Páll probably could produce some evidence for the gratitude of the Shetlanders.

These are, however, the only reports of Þorlákr miracles occurring in foreign parts, despite claims in the final chapter of Book II that such stories and gifts reached Skálholt in great numbers.<sup>9</sup> Otherwise he remained very much a local saint, not only Icelandic but diocesan, to judge by the number of churches dedicated to him in the Bishopric of Skálholt (51, as against only 5 in the diocese of Hólar). There is probably nothing extraordinary about that; few of the approximately 13,000 saints of the Catholic church have made it into the international league. In older times canonisation, too, was normally a diocesan affair: it was sufficient that the remains of a prospective saint were

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<sup>9</sup> "... at kom af öðrum löndum ógrynni auðæfa með fjartægri frásögn margra merkilígra atburða hans jarteikna." (II,23)

taken up, washed, and put in a suitable receptacle and that a commemoration day was fixed in the calendar of the diocese with masses being said in the saint's honour.

This happened to Þorlákr on 20 July, 1198, four and a half years after his death. What is typical for Iceland is that it was not an internal matter for the Church but that the *alþingi* was actively involved. It was the *alþingi* that authorised the practice of invoking Þorlákr, after a letter from Bishop Brandr of Hólar reporting miracles attributed to Þorlákr had been read, and after some miraculous healings that occurred during the *alþingi*. As a result, the first collection of miracles was made in writing and read out at the *alþingi* the following year; hence the customary title *Jarteinabók 1199*. This public reading, too, produced a small crop of miracles: An almost deaf old man hears it without difficulty and enjoys from now on perfect hearing, and an almost blind, and hence destitute, young man is so impressed by what he hears that he enters the church, invokes Þorlákr, and regains his sight. Þorlákr's sainthood is then officially declared at the *alþingi*, just as Christianity was adopted by act of parliament, so to say, two centuries earlier.

The three books do allow us some insight how a cult develops from scattered and spontaneous beginnings into something governed by a set of conventions, where the individual seeking help and the clergy, holy places and holy objects, services and payments, all have their accepted place. The Third Book mostly contains miracles of the traditional kind, healings and rescues from deadly dangers; rescues not only of people but also of farm animals, such crucial supports of livelihood in agricultural Iceland. It gives the impression of having been gathered as material to serve an official canonisation process. There is a tangible concern to be correct in doctrine with regard to the nature and position of saints. People do no longer simply call upon the saint but "to God Almighty and to the blessed Bishop Þorlákr for intercession (*árnaðarorð*)". A great deal of trouble is taken to be specific concerning time, place and the names of the persons involved, including the names of witnesses who had sworn, or were prepared to swear, to the truth of the events as described. These were important elements of evidence in the very legalistic process of canonisation. - The Second Book is more of a mixed bag. Its last section, from chapter 16 onwards, lists, rather than describes in detail, miracles that occurred in the diocese of Hólar. It is also stated that Guðmundr, the later controversial bishop, sent a collection of them to the monk Gunnlaugr "at han skyldi dikta", so that he could write them in Latin, and fragments of a Latin collection of Þorlákr miracles have indeed been preserved and are accessible in the second part of Jón Helgason's critical edition of the *Byskupa sögur*, which also contains the first two

*Jarsteinabækr*.<sup>10</sup> - The First Book, which recently has been included in Ásdís Egilsdóttir's edition of *Þorláks saga helga* produced on the occasion of Pope John Paul II's visit to Iceland in 1989, is in some ways the most appealing one. Although it already contains stereotyped elements such as "he (she, they) called upon the blessed Bishop Þorlákr" or "and this event seemed to him (her, them, those who heard it) very remarkable (*mikils verðr*)" or "and they praised God and the blessed Bishop Þorlákr", there is not yet a more or less predictable set of situations, steps and responses.

The 1199 collection also contains the sort of light-hearted, you might even say, trivial, miracles that do not occur - or are not recorded - later. Maybe even the dead Bishop had to learn first when it was appropriate to intervene - or then, the faithful learnt not to trouble him unnecessarily since he was obviously quite a busy man even beyond his grave. In II,22 he appears in a dream to a woman who suffers of a very painful leg, and while he gives it a healing stroke, he says: "It will now be better, but I have to go and help Guðmundr dýri, who I hear has been taken prisoner."<sup>11</sup> In the same night Guðmundr, who has a saga of his own in *Sturlunga saga*, was attacked.

Returning to the light-hearted miracles, in two instances (ch. 3, 4) Þorlákr provides fair weather for the Bishop's party when storm and rain prevail all around, and in two more chapters (13, 17) he saves the local beer-brewing from aborting, which would have been a disaster since Bishop Páll had to be entertained. In these instances it is the hosts that invoke Þorlákr; they may have thought that Þorlákr had his nephew's and successor's welfare and comfort especially at heart. Generally, these are homely miracles, whether it is a matter of pacifying a dangerous bull (ch. 29), or immobilising a seal that seems to be ready to attack (chs. 5, 22), overcoming the pain in a limb dislocated at sport (ch. 28), giving sight to a blind sheep (ch. 2), or saving a rejected child from night and bad weather (ch. 36). The latter incident has, again, a specially Icelandic flavour in its social context. The priest at Ámbarbæli has a wife with an illegitimate child. As he is poor and getting old, it is decided that the boy, seven or eight years old, should be brought to his natural father, who lives on a farm at some distance; on the way two high-flowing rivers with strong currents have to be crossed. The boy is duly delivered at his destination but the farmer's wife is anything but pleased and chases him away. The weather turns foul, and at night the unwilling stepmother is getting worried. A search party goes out to look for the boy and finally

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<sup>10</sup> Editiones Arnæmagæðanæ A, 13/2, København 1978.

<sup>11</sup> "Héðan af mun þér batna, en ek verð at fara at veita lið Guðmundi inum dýra, sem ek nú heyrir bundinn." (II,22)



also comes to his former home. The priest is much distressed by the news, goes to the church, sings the psalter and invokes þorlákr to take care of the boy. And lo and behold, after a short while the boy turns up, dry from his ankles up and happy. He apparently had sought refuge in a sheep shelter, invoked þorlákr, fallen asleep, and when he woke up he saw his former home at a short distance. Far be it from me to call this happening trivial but it definitely has a homely flavour, whereas the bulk of the miracles in the later books seem to be patterned on the types occurring in the New Testament, approved occasions for miracles to happen, you might say.

It may be appropriate to look at the verb I have translated as 'invoke', where English simply has taken over the Latin term used in such cases (*invocare*). The Icelandic expression is *heita á*, which originally may have been a loan translation but acquired a dimension the Latin word did not have because of the second transitive sense of *heita* in Icelandic, 'to promise'. So *heita* takes two complements, one indicating what you want the saint to do (the normal complement of verbs meaning 'to request') and one specifying the engagement undertaken, i.e. one referring to the object and one referring to the subject. I mentioned that the Lutheran doctrine of "by grace alone", which devalues any human contribution to insignificance, must have struck many people as weird, for getting something for nothing is not a normal thing within the experience of people moving in a world of average selfishness. In Icelandic, the very notion of deal or bargain (*kaup*) was fundamental to social relations. So people calling upon þorlákr must have been quite prepared to pay in some way for the help received, but it may not have been immediately apparent to them what sort of payment a dead Bishop expected as there is little evidence of the veneration of particular saints earlier. A certain number of Paternosters - fifty is the most frequent figure used - seems to have been standard payment, at least for poor people. Candles or wax for candles appears to have been the next most frequent gift, often related to the wish, e.g., a candle as long as the aching limb or the wished-for fish. Feeding a certain number of poor people, usually on a feast day, was another way of 'paying back', but all sorts of other things occur in addition.

If it was a matter of lost property, people were inclined to promise part of its value - a finder's reward, so to say - or to make the saint a partner, if the object was indivisible. In I,30 a farmer gelds a good young stallion but the operation goes wrong; first the horse bleeds copiously, then a tumour develops, the wound keeps secreting puss and blood, a fist-size opening appears, the whole foreskin has to be removed and yet the rot

seems to spread inside<sup>12</sup> (I mention these gory details to show how circumstantial these accounts can be). The owner promises Þorlákr half the horse if it survives but has little hope for it; he leaves it to its own devices in the paddock. But Þorlákr, who now has a stake in the matter, looks well after his new property; despite a storm which could finish off a healthier animal, the horse recovers. After half a month it is in top form again and also has a foreskin like other geldings. In spring the owner consults Bishop Páll concerning the fulfilment of his obligation and buys back the saint's half by giving half the value of the gelding to the See. - A similar deal is reported, in chapter 35, of a lady in the neighbourhood of Skálholt. She lost a valuable gold brooch during Þorlákr's lifetime, and invoking the saints led to no result. Fourteen years later, when Þorlákr's fame as a miracle-worker has started spreading, she offers the saint the same terms as the horse-owner. Shortly afterwards, a man on the neighbouring farm carting out manure notices something glittering on the road. It is the long-lost brooch, unharmed and more beautiful than ever, and that in a spot where countless beggars had gone past without noticing it - indeed, one of them trod on it while the manure man watched.

One last example from the lost-property division. A man living near the sea in steep country missed some cattle, and all searches proved fruitless. He then promises one head of cattle if the herd is found. After a new search they all turn up, with the exception of one ox. The farmer says: "I can see now that Bishop Þorlákr wants to keep the ox we have not found, and that shall be a deal if it still turns up."<sup>13</sup> Three weeks later they sight in on an inaccessible ledge on a steep mountain-side, well-fed and lively, and the grass on the ledge is not even touched. They tie ropes around it and lower it to level ground and then bring it to Skálholt.

Sometimes the faithful entering into this sort of bargain are no less specific than if it were a commercial transaction, e.g. by stipulating "if I recover my boat and nothing is missing in it".<sup>14</sup> It also seems to have become increasingly frequent to make such vows or promises not in the intimacy of prayer but in front of witnesses as any legally

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<sup>12</sup> "... en at bestinum kom blóðrás mikil, en eftir þat sultir æsiligr, ok svall allr kviðrinn á bestinum, svá at ekki mátti ganga at mat sér of stöir, ok gerduast at vágföll mikil ok hóf á svá ströð, at maðr mátti stínga í hnefa sínum. Ok þær kom of stöir, at sínaði kviðrinn, ok váru skornar af allar skauðarmir af bestinum, ok þótti ekki ván, at lifa mundi lengi." (II,30)

<sup>13</sup> "Sé ek nú, at Þorlákr byskup vill nú eiga uxann, sem ófundinn er, ok skal svá vera, if hann hittist." (II,7)

<sup>14</sup> Þá hét hann, ... til þess, at bátrinn með öllu því, sem í var, fyndist, at ljá best upp í Skálholt ... " (III,22).

binding act; *fasta heit* 'fasten a promise', i.e., make it legally binding, is often used in the Third Book. But there is also evidence of the saint reminding the faithful of their vows. The sportsman in I,28 with the wrenched arm, who does not get rid of pain, sees Þorlákr in a dream complaining that many people do not fulfil their promises. It occurs to the dreamer that the summer before he had made a vow for his brother's eyes and then forgotten about it. When he has lived up to his obligation the arm hurts no more. In II,5 a man promises prayers and six lengths of *vaðmál* to the saint if his dangerously wounded son recovers. In summer he makes the usual shopping expedition and runs out of material to pay for a kettle he needs. He takes some of the woollen cloth promised to Þorlákr to pay for it and promptly finds the kettle broken when he arrives home, the only broken object in the cargo.

Another aspect which impresses itself upon the reader is the importance of physical presence or proximity of the mortal remains of the saint. This is a form of primitive magic which imposed itself successfully upon the inherited Jewish spiritualism of Christianity, not only in Scandinavian, of course, but throughout medieval Christendom, in the West more so than in the East. There is a spiritual interpretation of the importance of relics, like (in the East) the importance of icons; they are meant to help the believer concentrate his mind on the qualities represented by the saint and thus make them more accessible to his own striving. But there is no doubt that the mass of the faithful ascribed to them an inherent beneficial or protective power. In Scandinavia there must have been an inherited readiness to believe in the potency of a person's remains as evidenced by the importance of the family grave-mound. It has been said that no feature in Christianity was harder to accept for the primitive Scandinavians than the Church's demand that the dead should be buried in churches or churchyards rather than on the family farm. Þorlákr's success as a saint may be ascribed not least to his presence, his proximity - he was within earshot, so to say. If I may recall the lady with the gold brooch: After the first unsuccessful search "there was invoking of saints with promises of fasts, almsgivings, songs [prayers and masses] and candles, and yet the brooch was not found."<sup>15</sup> Maybe half the value of the brooch later promised to Þorlákr was worth more than that and hence was more likely to trigger a supernatural intervention, but I think the rub was rather that with Þorlákr the magic potential was closer. - We have a similar story of the local saint outdoing a remote saint in the last chapter of the Third Book, dated to 1325. The shepherd Hallr of a farmer in the Reykjavík area passed out after he returned to the farm one day, and when he

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<sup>15</sup> Þá var síðan heitit á helga menn bæði föstum ok ölmuþgjöfum, söngum ok kertagerð, ok fannst þó ekki sylgjan." (I,35)

comes to he has lost the power of speech. When his state is still unchanged after three days the farmer invokes St. Blasius with a promise of train-oil if his shepherd is cured. The farmer Snæbjörn must have been knowledgeable in such matters for Bishop Blasius of Sebaste, who was martyred in Cappadocia in 287, was the saint whose specialty was diseases of the throat. When this does not help he tries the local saint, Þorlákr. The shepherd falls asleep and sees two men in black cloaks entering his room and discussing his case. They agree that he deserves to be healed, Þorlákr blesses him, and he wakes up all well. There is no hint of invalidating St. Blasius's position as a throat specialist; the implication rather seems to be that if you have a doctor close at hand with a proven record, try him first rather than the remote specialist who may require time to make his way to Iceland.

Even for Icelanders it would seem to have become more and more important actually to go to Skálholt in order to be successful with their petitions, or else to do so once the saint's help was received, so as to show your gratitude and testify to his power. The expression used at first (it happens only occasionally in the first collection) is *sækja helgan dóm* 'to visit the Holy Relic'; by the time of Book III it seems to have become standard practice, and the most usual term is *ganga í Skálholt* 'to go to Skálholt'. Sometimes the ailing person already notices an improvement as he or she gets closer. You then pray at the shrine or, better, wake at the shrine a whole night or longer; critical cases were bedded down near the alter on which the shrine stood. The best thing is if you can combine the magic of place with the magic of time, i.e., be at Skálholt on one of the two *þorláksmessur*. His proper feast was on 23 December, the day of his death; but because of the difficulties of travelling in Iceland in winter his summer feast, on 20 July (the day of his *translatio*), seems to have become as popular. The meeting of so many people on such days and the swapping of stories about Þorlákr's effective help must have meant a tremendous boost to his cult: Even those who only arrived hopeful must have left convinced. The saint, who often appeared to people in their dreams, did not fail to point out the benefit of such visits. In I,40 we hear of a young woman on the Vestmannaeyjar who had been ailing for years and who had invoked Þorlákr, but without any lasting improvement. In this case he appeared to an acquaintance of hers and indicated that something more was needed: a pilgrimage to Skálholt. This proved successful, and as the *alþingi* was just in session and she was of some standing in society, she went there straightaway to tell the assembly of her miraculous cure. The notion became established that a day's strict fast (*vánfasti* is the verb used) at Þorlákr's shrine before one of his feasts was a particularly beneficial and meritorious exercise.

Connected with this stress on physical presence are the magical qualities ascribed to any object or substance that had been in physical contact with the saint. Here, too, there are only isolated instances in the first collection, whereas by the time of the third collection, *þorláksvatn* and *þorlákssmjör* seem to have become standard remedies. *þorláksvatn* was the water in which his bones had been washed after exhumation, and *þorlákssmjör* seems to have been butter blessed by the bishop. Both were primarily used for treating open wounds, and that there still was a sufficient supply of these substances a century after his death should perhaps not surprise us in view of Þorlákr's well-attested generosity and of biblical precedents. Other substances with healing potential by association were his hair (II,15), his clothes (II,16), soil from his grave (III,1), a linen bandage that had lain on his coffin (III,7). The connection can be as tenuous as in the case of a man who had been the victim of a cauterisation accident. The glowing iron had pierced his belly and left a gaping wound. After invoking Þorlákr he drinks water in which had lain a stone that once had been put on Þorlákr's coffin.<sup>16</sup> While it does not cure him completely, at least it allows him to ride home; when the pain returns, Þorlákr's bone water is applied and does the trick.

Miracles are to some extent international and interchangeable: what many readers will find more absorbing and moving are the circumstances of people experiencing them. One thing striking a reader in Australia is the exacerbation of misery brought to poverty by a harsh climate. And there must have been many poor - all those who did not own land or other property, who had no extended family to support them, or who had no employment. The feeding and sheltering of the destitute was certainly a much needed exercise of charity. Elderly single women were probably among the hardest hit - as they still tend to be in our society. The *Jarteinabekkr* contain some memorable scenes in this respect. As conditions became harder in winter, beggars would seek the relative warmth and security of the Bishop's See at Skálholt. What if the swollen Hvítá was too full of ice floes for the ferry to cross yet there was no solid ice cover over which you could walk? Freezing, shivering and crying, the beggars would gather on the banks of the river waiting for an opportunity to cross, and a good-hearted ferryman on the spot once almost lost his life when the ferry overloaded with these pitiful figures overturned in the middle of the river. On another occasion he admonished them to sing five Paternosters for Þorlákr rather than crying and feeling sorry for themselves, and it works: a quiet passage opens between the ice floes and the boat can be rowed across (I,45-46).

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<sup>16</sup> "Eftir þat drakk hann vatn þat, er í var lagðr steinn sá, er lagðr hafði verit á kistu ins sæla Þorláks byskups." (III,7)

Or there is in III,21 a pauper called *Álfheiðr* with a bad leg that is swollen and looks as if the plague or gangrene (*drep*) had come into it. She still drags herself from farm to farm, coughing and groaning, knowing that she must not outstay her welcome anywhere. In the cold and wet weather the wound gets worse; finally the open area is about a span in each direction and discharges blood and rotting flesh. She finally has to give up at a farm called *Þorvarðsstaðir*, unwelcome as she is, for it has been a bad year and many poor people in the south simply die of deprivation. She, too, expects to die, but as it is the day of the winter *þorláksmessa*, she concentrates all her mental powers on the saint and vows prayers and a pilgrimage to *Skálholt* if she recovers. The rest is predictable. Or there is the woman *Guðfinna* up in *Steingrímsfjörðr*, who sets out one Sunday in December with nothing but tatters on her body, nothing to warm her head or her hands, and only one shoe. The weather turns bad, a biting wind comes up, showers of sleet and finally a mighty snowfall. She has not arrived anywhere by nightfall, and the following few days the weather is so nasty that people cannot even go out to feed their sheep and cattle. Then there is frost and harsh winds again, and finally two days of rain. Everybody is sure that she has perished. On Sunday, a full week later, a shepherd finds her and brings her to *Tunga*, neither cold nor hungry. She said she had invoked *þorlák* "to help her, if he was as much good as she had heard it said, and she would give him four ounces of train-oil".<sup>17</sup>

The point of the *Jarteinabæk* is the miracles brought about by invocation and faith; they do not set out to survey material conditions and social relations in Iceland around 1200, or to entertain far-away latter-day readers with reported incidents of a strongly local flavour such as a boy drowning in a tub of sour whey (I,7), an eagle spoiling the bird-egg harvest for the people of *Viðey* (I,38), or a wife sewing up her husband's badly cut face when he has fallen on his weapon during a trip on a bitingly cold winter's day (I,6). But for us these vignettes, sketched in the deft, realistic strokes of classical saga prose, can provide an invaluable insight into life in medieval Iceland, and it would be a pity if such an opportunity was missed simply because the title 'Miracle Books' seems to locate their contents outside the world of everyday experience, as the apparent lack of attention to these texts suggests.

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<sup>17</sup> "Sagðist hon heitit hafa á þorlák biskup, at hann hjálpaði henni, ef hann væri svá mikils verðleiks sem hon hefði heyrð sagt. Hétt hon at gefa hálfa mökk lýsis ..." (III,10)