

Miracles in the *Biskupa sögur* : Icelandic variations on an international theme

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INTRODUCTORY

The narratives of miracles attributed to Þorlákr Þorhallsson, bishop of Skálaholt, and to Jón Ögmundarson and Guðmundr Arason, bishops of Hólar, constitute a large corpus whose appeal derives especially from their combination of apparent opposites. Like the many thousands of miracle stories recorded from continental Europe, they represent religious experiences which are recorded and encouraged, even orchestrated, by the ecclesiastical bureaucracy,¹ and yet which often take us closer to the everyday concerns of the sick and the disadvantaged than any other genre of medieval literature.² Some medical symptoms, for example, are described with a precision that permits tentative attempts at retrospective diagnosis to be made.³ At the same time, they embody in extreme form the dichotomy of otherness and familiarity with which medieval texts customarily challenge the twentieth-century reader. On the one hand, they demand the understanding of a world-view embracing direct supernatural intervention in human affairs which many nowadays would not accept; on the other, they delight us with the recognition of universal human experiences - the plight of a seven-year old boy caught in the midst of a paternity dispute (ÞJ ch. 36),⁴ the guilt feelings of a man whose carelessness has caused the maiming of his horse,⁵ the despair which leads to attempted suicide (ÞC ch. 110), or the tender concern of a father nursing his daughter through a debilitating and malodorous disease, and his joy at her healing (JA ch. 24).

A third kind of dualism, shared with all medieval Icelandic writings, but particularly strong in the miracle accounts and a major focus of the present paper, is that between native and foreign influences. Located squarely within the hagiographic traditions of Western Christendom, there is nevertheless a strongly Icelandic flavour to many of the miracle stories, whose domestic dramas are played against the background of Iceland's landscape and culture. We see a heedless rider charging into a geothermal area (ÞA ch. 39); a child is almost drowned in a *syruker* (ÞA ch. 57); a maid doing a load of washing at the hot springs has her shoes carried off by raven (JC ch. 10); a man narrowly escapes death while bird-catching on the cliffs.⁶ There is much fishing, fording of rivers, trouble with horses and horse-bridles, but no roads or villages, and no cart-wheels to cause the kind of injuries healed by European saints.

¹ The spiritual and economic benefits of encouraging miracle-based cults were considerable. A certain amount of clerical ambivalence towards miracles is, however, detectable, for example in *Jóns saga helga B* (JB) ch. 27.

² Cf., for instance, Anne Holtsmark's comment on the accounts of St Þorlákr's miracles in AM 645 4^o (1938, 19; see Bibliography B) and Einar Ól. Sveinsson's article of 1936.

³ See, e.g., Whaley and Elliott 1993.

⁴ For explanation of source references, please see note on p. 15.

⁵ The miracle of Þorkr Alason, whose remorse is explicit in GD ch. 86, implicit in GB ch. 36.

⁶ Three versions of this miracle, one hitherto unpublished, are printed by Stefán Karlsson, 1985, 1004-5. The published versions are GB ch. 29, GD ch. 54.

EUROPEAN SAINTS AS MODELS

The two centuries after Iceland's official adoption of Christianity in or around 1000 A.D. allowed time enough for the standard institutions of European Christendom to be established, including an ecclesiastical hierarchy centring on the two dioceses of Skálholt (founded 1056) and Hólar (in 1106), and the veneration of foreign saints through the liturgy and through the reading and writing of their lives in Latin or the vernacular (on which, see Jørgensen 1982). The indebtedness to Latin hagiography shines through the *Biskupa sögur* in multifarious ways, from the ostinato of scriptural allusions in *Þrláks saga B* to the extremely Latinate style of Arngrím's life of Guðmundr góði. Relics of saints were held at Skálholt (PA ch. 16), and the writer of *Guðmundar saga prests* is sufficiently interested in the subject of relics to note the acquisition of a phial of Christ's blood by Niðaróss cathedral (GP ch. 3) and to report the efficacy of saint Sunnifa's relics, newly removed from Selja to Bergen, in quenching a fire (ch. 5). Guðmundr góði, according to his biographers, was an enthusiastic user of relics in healings.¹ Like other Icelandic bishops, he read the lives of holy men,² and adopted some as role-models and patrons. This is seen in the engagingly naive moment when Guðmundr, bidding farewell to an old lady close to death, asks her to give his regards to the Blessed Virgin, St Michael, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, King Óláfr, St Ambrose, 'vin mínum' and all the saints (GA ch. 38). Guðmundr's special devotion to St Ambrose is emphasised in various passages,³ and one of his most spectacular *in vita* miracles mimics one of St Ambrose's acts (GA ch. 34; GD ch. 16). Here as elsewhere it is difficult to disentangle the actuality of the bishop's lives from the patterns imposed by their biographers. Certainly the comparison of the beleaguered Guðmundr with Thomas à Becket (d. 1170) seems especially to have been encouraged by brother Arngrím, although not unique to his (originally Latin) saga of Guðmundr.⁴ 'Hverr mun sá maðr', he writes, 'er svá opt líkist gimsteininum Thome Kantuarensis, sem þessi Guðmundr með sínum mannaunum', and he sees Kolbein Tumason as playing Henry II to Guðmundr's Becket. Insofar as the life of St Martin of Tours (d. 397) by Sulpicius Severus was a standard hagiographical paradigm, it is not surprising that the saga-Lives of all three Icelandic saint-bishops contain allusions to St Martin. Þorlákr, for instance, has a dream implying he is to be a second St Martin (PA p. 109), while Guðmundr gives instructions for his interment in imitation of him (GD ch. 72), and performs a miracle of a wondrous catch of fish much like his (GB ch. 23). This last example also provides a reminder that the ultimate paradigm for miracle-working is that of Christ in the gospel narratives, and according to the saga accounts, Guðmundr's lengthy justification of his consecrations of water to Archbishop Þorir of Niðaróss rested especially on biblical precedents (GB ch. 11, GD ch. 50). However, although the influence of the New Testament may have encouraged the incidence of certain types of miracles, e.g. calming of storms, it is seldom evident in the detail of particular miracle accounts. The incident at Skálholt during the translation of Þorlákr, in which the crippled man Jón, unable to

¹ E.g. GP ch. 19, GA chs. 20 and 26.

² As when on his deathbed, he has *ymsar skýringar eða Vitas patrum* read to him, GD ch. 72.

³ E.g. a v. l. to GA ch. 20 from AM 395 4^o, printed in *Biskupa sögur* 1858-78 I 440 n. 2.

⁴ The 'Rannveigarleiðsla' in GA ch. 28/60 contains a comparison with St Thomas.

reach the sanctuary because of the crush, is launched over the heads of the crowd and healed by touching the drapes of the coffin may be a rare exception.¹

The cults of foreign saints were, then, the precondition for the appearance of native saints with thaumaturgic powers, and their example continued to shape the lives of Icelandic bishops, in actuality and in literature. It is notable that the earliest and best vernacular source for miracles of Icelandic bishops, the *Jartegnabók Þorláks byskups in forna* (P), forms the first part of AM 645 4^o, a codex containing the *Acta* and *Passiones* of saints including Clement, Peter, Paul, Matthew and Martin. After a long period of dearth, Iceland had begun to produce a harvest of holy men who, though never formally canonised through papal consent, were long and widely venerated throughout Iceland.² As the demons in the 'Rannveigarleidsala' put it, 'eigi eru á þórum þndum at jafnmiklum mannfjöldi fleiri heilagir menn en á Íslandi' (GA ch. 28/58).

THREE ICELANDIC SAINT-BISHOPS

Þorlákur Þorhallsson (1133-1193) was the first of these miracle-working bishops. After a period as abbot of the newly-founded Augustinian monastery of Þykkvabær he presided over the see of Skálaholt from 1178 until his death. The attributes emphasised in sagas of Þorlákur are his monkish piety and asceticism, coupled, in the later versions, with stout defence of moral standards and of the proprietorial rights of the church which brought him into conflict with the temporal leaders of his time, most famously with Jón Loftsson of Oddi. His nephew and successor, Páll Jónsson, was persuaded by indications of sanctity in northern Iceland to authorise invocations to Þorlákur at the Alþing in early summer 1198, and his relics were translated in July that year, to the accompaniment of many miracles. Some of the now-fragmentary Latin miracle accounts are thought to have been written about the time of the translation, and a lost version of the 'A' or 'Oldest' saga is considered not much younger. A catalogue of miracles not unlike the extant P was read out by bishop Páll at the Alþing in 1199, and his feast established in law, so completing the process of national recognition of him as a saint. The focus for the cult was the magnificent shrine erected at Páll's behest to house Þorlákur's relics at Skálaholt, but veneration was widespread, as is shown, for example, by the fifty-six known church dedications - a number only exceeded by dedications to the Blessed Virgin, St Peter and St Olaf (Jakob Benediktsson 1976, 387-88). Miracle accounts relating to this 'senior saint' number some 184 (counted according to the criteria explained below, p. 6), and hence are almost twice as numerous as those of Guðmundr (86) and Jón (60). They are also of particular interest since many of them are preserved in texts composed close to the saint's own lifetime.

The cult of Jón Ögmundarson (1052-1121), first bishop of Hólar, differs from that of Þorlákur in that it sprang up nearly eighty years after the bishop's death, doubtless inspired by the veneration of his southern counterpart. The Jón of the *Biskupa sögur* is an attractive, conventional and relatively non-controversial figure, whose fifteen-year episcopacy was marked by good management of the diocese, encouragement of education, personal piety and charity. His elevation to sainthood began with the cautious step of moving his remains to a new tomb, along with those of his fellow-bishop Björn Gilsson. After suitably encouraging signs, he was formally translated in 1200 and his

¹ PC ch. 61; PA ch. 82 and PE ch. 1 lack the motif of lifting.

² Guðmundr's enduring popular repute, especially through his consecration of springs, is explored by Ólafur Lárusson, 1942.

sanctity formally recognised at the Alþing by the institution of *Jónsmessa* on the anniversary of his death.¹ It is clear that written sagas of Jón were produced early in the thirteenth century, although the authorship and textual relations of the extant writings are much disputed.²

The keynote in the Lives of Guðmundr Arason (1161-1237) is instability. Guðmundr already gained the nickname *inn góði* while a priest, thanks to his religious zeal, concern for the poor and especially his reputation for miracle-working through the consecration of springs and other waters and intercessions (GP ch. 11). The period of his episcopacy, however, which began formally in 1203, has a darker tone.³ Guðmundr emerges from the saga narratives as an almost tragi-heroic figure, a clerical *ógaðfumaðr* whose charismatic qualities hold the loyalty of his devotees but alienate chieftains such as Kolbeinn Tumason and Sigvatr Sturluson, especially when compounded by his perceived lack of managerial skills, and by the economic burden his huge following, many of them destitute, placed on the Northern quarter. His time as bishop was turbulent in the extreme. He suffered many indignities (e.g. GA ch. 68/162), was involved at some of the most violent events of the period, including the battles at Viðines and Helgastaðir and the desperate defence of Grímsey, and spent half of his episcopacy exiled from Hólar, leading an itinerant life in the rest of Iceland and in Norway. His life, in some ways reminiscent of that of the outlaw Grettir, is at the same time tinged with a sense of martyrdom, as emphasised in the comparison with Thomas Becket quoted on p. 2 above. Had he died a violent death, canonisation would have been assured, but as it was, it was not until a new cathedral was built at Hólar in 1272 that the body of Guðmundr, who had played a significant role in the translations of Þorlákr and Jón, was moved to a new grave, and it was only in 1315, when the relics were rehoused within the cathedral, that veneration of Guðmundr, and attendant miracles, gained momentum and official recognition in a bid - unsuccessful - for canonisation.⁴ The slow progress to sainthood is reflected in the extant lives, of which only the *Prestissaga* is thought to have been composed shortly after his death and by a close follower (so Stefán Karlsson 1985, 986). The four sagas covering the career of Guðmundr as bishop are all thought to date from the first half of the fourteenth century, probably after 1315 (ibid, 989) and the skaldic panegyrics in his honour, three by Einarr Gilsson and one by Arni Jónsson, are also from the fourteenth century; before that date the main source is the *Íslendinga saga* of Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1284). The 'B' version of the bishop's saga explicitly notes that plans to complete his biography had not been carried out and that in the meantime important documents had been lost by fire (GB ch. 6).

APPEALS TO THE SAINTS - DISTRIBUTIONAL PATTERNS

As studies of European hagiography have shown, cults of saints tend to follow certain common patterns in respect of the geographical and chronological distribution of appeals to the saint.⁵ As would be expected, the earliest

¹ For the subsequent history of Jón's cult, see Magnus Már Lárusson, 1962.

² See, e.g., the discussions in Koppenberg 1980, esp. part 4, and, summarily, in Foote 1993.

³ This contrast is, for example, explicitly underlined in the epilogue to the first part of GB, ch. 5.

⁴ On Guðmundr's cult, see further Magnús Már Lárusson 1960, 540-41; cf. also p. below.

⁵ E.g. Finucane's study of English and French cults of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, 1977, ch. 9.

posthumous wonders are signs of sanctity which inspire moves to translate the body, at which point cures and other practical miracles take place in close proximity to the relics, drawing in folk from the town in which the shrine is housed or from nearby villages and farms. While the word spreads more widely, momentum is lost from the centre, so that the later miracles typically occur less frequently and among an increasingly dispersed pool of beneficiaries, who often journey long distances to the shrine in quest of healing or in order to report a miracle and fulfil a vow of pilgrimage made as part of their appeal to the saint.

This radiating pattern is observable among the miracles of St Þorlákr, although the locale for the recognition of sanctity, and for several of the earliest miracles, is here the Alþing rather than a cathedral or monastic centre. Several of the earliest beneficiaries have some close connection with the saint or his main sponsor, bishop Páll Jónsson. Ormr breiðbœlingr, brother of Páll and nephew of Þorlákr, stanches the bleeding from a self-inflicted wound by calling on his uncle (PA ch. 33); a priest, and former protégé of Þorlákr, is relieved of his problems with a boorish servant (PJ ch. 19); and Þorlákr's *fóstri* Magnús Gizurason, later bishop of Skálaholt, is assisted in finding some lost sheep (PA ch. 36). Páll himself on episcopal visits repeatedly finds his way smoothed by his uncle's mediation. He gets a timely wind to the Vestmannaeyjar (PB ch. 67), women washing clothes in his honour get a good drying wind (PB ch. 68), and two unpromising brews of ale ferment nicely (PJ chs. 13 and 17) - all after invocation of Þorlákr. A great many of the Þorlákr miracles take place in or around Skálaholt, and many of the beneficiaries have links with the episcopal estate. The woman only introduced as *kona* in PA ch. 50, for instance, is identified as the wife of the smith at Skálaholt in PB ch. 70. Among the early experiencers of cures at the Alþing are men from the east and the north (PA chs. 27 and 29 resp.), and a foreigner suffering from fortnightly haemorrhaging is healed by a linen belt which has come into contact with Þorlákr's coffin at Skálaholt (PJ ch. 8); but most of the miracles which actually take place far from Skálaholt belong to the later stages of cult. Within a collection of miracles believed to date from c. 1300 or later, Ambjörn Jónsson of Akranes and Karl bóndi from Höfðaströnd in Skagafjörður receive healing, then fulfil their vows to make a pilgrimage to Skálaholt (PC chs. 121 and 129). Concurrent with the diffusion away from the shrine is a slight shift in the balance between various groups of petitioners. Þorlákr's later miracles, especially those in PC, show women and children better represented than usual, almost approaching parity with men, normally the largest group.

The miracle-collection PJ2 explicitly announces a group of miracles reported from the northern diocese (ch. 149), and includes the most far-flung of all. Two involve Hávarðr, *leggsgumaðr* in Shetland, who successfully recovers treasure buried in anticipation of a raid, and is healed of eye-trouble (chs. 144-45). His thank-offering of a gold ring for Skálaholt was presumably accompanied by an account of the St Þorlákr's efficacy. In a further miracle story, a wealthy Norwegian is protected against pirates (ch. 146), and in another, set in Miklagarðr, the Væringjar defeat a besieging army of heathens. With the joyful cooperation of the king, 'Philippus af Flæmingjalandi', they then carry out their vow to erect a church dedicated to Þorlákr, from which, the compiler notes, further miracles were reported (ch. 147). The striking thing about this most exotic of miracles is that, if the identification of 'Philippus' with Baldwin of Flanders (elected emperor 1204) or his brother Henry (emperor 1206-16) is correct,¹ this suggests the rapid diffusion of Þorlákr's veneration by Norse speakers to the other side of the known world. On the other hand, a

¹ So *Biskupa sögur* 1858-78, I 363 n. 1.

further 'foreign' miracle in the same collection, set in 'Kynn' (a likely error for (King's) Lynn)¹ turns the necessity of admitting that Þorlákr was little known outside Iceland into a virtue by showing the punishment of an English priest who jeers at a statue of the saint with rude remarks about sausages. He is struck by paralysis, from which he is only freed through public repentance and prayer to the saint (ch. 133).

The case of Jón Ögmundarson is not dissimilar from that of Þorlákr. Here concentration on the episcopal seat, this time Hólar, is especially marked, and when Oddný of Skálmaholt in the *Sunnlendingaþjóðr* appeals to Jón for help in finding a lost church key, we are explicitly told that she has heard of his miracles (JA ch. 40). Jón's activity does spread wider - the supplementary miracles in AM 392 4^o include one where storm-tossed seafarers bound for Iceland from Orkney are persuaded by an Icelander on board to invoke Jón (JC ch. 9) - but on the whole his arena of activity is rather modest. The miracles of Guðmundr Arason, on the other hand, reflect the unusually disorderly nature of his life and cult. Here we have a substantial group of *in vita* miracles which reflect his wanderings as priest and bishop, including some set in Norway, as well as the usual posthumous corpus, yet insofar as many of the Guðmundr miracles, both *in vita* and posthumous, involve water consecrated by him, the distinction between the two is blurred. The geographical spread of the posthumous miracles is as lacking in neatness as the progress of the cult, and the popular nature of both is evident, perhaps nowhere more than in the healing of the young man Þorvaldr Jónsson who dislocates his hand in playing sport and is healed by water procured with difficulty from Keldnabrunnr, consecrated by Guðmundr but closed off on the orders of bishop Árni [Helgason, of Skálaholt] (GB ch. 42). Once veneration of Guðmundr receives official sanction under the Norwegian Auðunn, bishop of Hólar, there is a sense of Hólar as a focus, in that some of the petitioners in the miracle accounts vow pilgrimages and gifts of wax or wadmal to the episcopal see (GD chs 80, 83).

THE CORPUS UNDER EXAMINATION : PRACTICAL MIRACLES

In the following two sections of this paper I will be taking a slightly more statistical approach, so that some explanation of my methodology is necessary.² The field surveyed in the present paper consists of accounts in the *Biskupa sögur* and related texts of what might be termed 'practical' or 'problem-solving' miracles - those in which a saint's intervention in a human or natural situation materially affects the course of events. Normally the intervention is in response to a human plea and remedies the plight of the suppliant, who thus becomes beneficiary. Narratives not included in the present discussion are these: a) Supernatural phenomena of a more spontaneous but less practical kind - for instance routine signs of sanctity such as the incorrupt body, the 'odour of sanctity', supernatural lights, apparitions and prophetic utterances. These are excluded since their sole purpose is the generic one of identifying the saint as one favoured by God; they do not have practical effects for human suppliants.³ b) Incidents in which the three Icelandic saint-bishops figure as

¹ So Jón Helgason 1978, 385, textual note.

² Space does not permit consideration of the concept of miracle. See, e.g., Hardon 1954, Ward 1982, or the discussions including those of Aquinas, Hume and Tillich edited by Swinburne, 1989.

³ Cf. Sigal's distinction between 'le miracle pratique' and 'le miracle de transgression de l'expérience' (1985, 15); the latter type are reviewed under the heading of 'Miracles destinés à glorifier un saint', pp. 273-76.

beneficiaries, themselves obtaining relief after an appeal to God or other saints.¹ c) Narratives of remarkable events which exceptionally do not conform to the structural pattern outlined below. In *Guðmundar saga prests* ch. 20, for example, a horse at Langdalr dies after its owner has refused to lend it for Guðmundr's use. But since this lacks the usual appeal to God or the saints at its centre, it can be regarded as a potential, but not actualised, miracle account. d) Also excluded are broad summary references to miracle-working in which individual events are not narrated. By applying the criteria outlined here, I arrive at a corpus of some 330 accounts of miracles attributed to Þorlákr (184), Jón (60) and Guðmundr (86), counting each miraculous 'event' as one item, however many versions of it survive.² The principal textual sources for the miracles under discussion here are listed on p. 15 below. The 'Guðmundr' corpus is unusual in including over 40 *in vita* miracles.³ The biographers of Þorlákr and Jón were more cautious and vague about the *in vita* wonders of their subjects. A handful of healings, exorcisms and weather-improving miracles are credited to Jón during his lifetime, but they are not sufficiently numerous to be treated as a separate category.

THE STRUCTURE OF MIRACLE ACCOUNTS

Practical miracles have a characteristic tripartite structure, comprising (1) the exposition of a problematic situation (medical condition, danger or need), (2) intervention of the saint and (3) resolution of the problem, which acts as a template for thousands of European miracle accounts. It is, for example, extrapolated by Sigal from a corpus of nearly four thousand practical miracles recorded from eleventh- and twelfth-century France.⁴ Each of the three main stages of the narrative contains several motifs or information-bearing slots, of which some must be filled (however summarily and vaguely), and are marked * below, while others are only optionally realised. The main focus of the remainder of this paper will be the first stage, the exposition, but in order to place this in context, a brief review of the typical components of the other stages is included here. Space does not permit a running comparison of the somewhat different templates for narrating posthumous and *in vita* miracles, and the following is based on the majority case, the posthumous miracle.

1. Exposition: the problem

¹ Guðmundr Arason is notable for his veneration of the saints of relics and his appeals to saints, e.g. in the rescue miracle in GP ch. 5.

² The sagas of Þorlákr differ as to whether a miracle at Mosfell is primarily one of recovery (of stolen goods, PC ch. 59) or of provisioning (a remarkably good haul of salmon at a time of famine, PA ch. 53), or both (PB ch. 79); but differences over essentials are rare, despite the wide variety of length and style among different miracle texts.

³ *In vita* miracles are relatively rare in the records of European cults. St Bernard of Clairvaux's *in vita* miracles are a spectacular exception (see, e.g., Ward 1982, 175-84).

⁴ Sigal describes the three stages as: 'Présentation d'un état de déséquilibre et de difficulté, présence et action du saint, rétablissement de l'équilibre bénéfique' (1985, 15). Gad 1961, 134, by treating the introduction of the beneficiary and description of his/her plight as two separate stages, arrives at a quadripartite analysis. The repetitive structure of the miracles in *Jóns saga helga* is also emphasised in Koppenberg's discussion (1980, 139-42).

* *Identity of the suppliant* : At the very least the suppliant is identified as male or female; a name and information about social or moral standing may also be given. This is the subject of the discussion on pp. 9-12 below.

* *Problem* : The reasons for appeal to the saint, medical and otherwise, are analysed on pp. 12-13 below.

Place : This may be specified precisely, often by a farm-name, more generally (e.g. *þar í eyjunum* i.e. Vestmannaeyjar), or not at all.

Time : Datings may be absolute, especially by reference to church festivals, relative, e.g. *á inu sama hausti eptir þetta* , or entirely absent.

Last resort : In a few cases it is stated that doctors have already been consulted or all solutions tried.

Other circumstances : Information not strictly essential to the miraculous event may be given, e.g. genealogical or topographical detail.

2. Interaction with the saint

* *Invocation* : The suppliant or someone acting on his/her behalf, appeals to the saint (this is normally expressed by the phrase *heita á*).

Vow / accompanying action : Psalms, paternosters or other prayers are uttered or promised, normally in multiples of five, sometimes explicitly for departed souls (e.g. for the mother and father of Guðmundr). Gifts, especially of money, valuables or wax, the latter by weight, shaped to resemble the afflicted part of the body, or in the form of candles measured against the suppliant, are promised for the honour of the saint and/or his shrine. Pilgrimage is another popular option.

Apparition : The saint may appear, normally in a dream, offering words of comfort or reproach, or touching the afflicted part. Waking apparitions, for instance of Þorlákr as a black-cowled figure in the prow of a boat, were also experienced.

Contact with relics or consecrated substances : Healing is often facilitated by water or oil consecrated by the saint, water or cloths used in the washing of his bones, earth or other substances that have come in contact with the coffin etc.

Other action : More recognisably medical procedures may accompany the appeal to the saint, e.g. bathing or binding of wounds or swellings.

3. Resolution

* *Removal of problem* by healing/rescue etc. Healings are frequently instantaneous (*þegar (al)heill*), but they often follow a healing sleep or take place after three nights or still more gradually.

Fulfilment of vow : A vow previously made is fulfilled.

Joy : The rejoicing of beneficiary and family or friends is frequently noted.

Praise/thanksgiving : Where present this is usually expressed by a formula such as *lofðu allir guð ok sælan Þrálák*. A *Te Deum* may be sung, and/or bells rung.

Announcement : News of the miracle spreads, or is formally reported, as when Þorlákr's interventions are notified to bishop Páll.

Oath : The beneficiary and/or witnesses swear to the truth of the report, or offer to do so.

Deposit of commemorative object : This is rare in the *Byskupa sögur*. An example is the stone passed by Þorsteinn and deposited with bishop Páll, who sets it in a gold ring.¹

Authorial comment on the event : E. g. it is remarked that it is *móti náttúru*.

¹ ÞB ch. 81; ÞC ch. 60, Latin fragment III; ÞA ch. 82 lacks the detail about the stone.

Not all the potential motifs are actualised in particular narratives, and the amount of information in those which are actualised varies, so that the miracle stories, including versions of the same story, range from minimalist to extremely expansive, depending on the writer's purpose, literary taste, sources of information and so on. A random example of a minimal realisation of the above pattern would be the following:

'Hústrú ein góð tók enn augnaverð mikinn ok hét á Þorlák byskup, ok varð hon þegar heil.' (GA ch. 35).

As will be observed, only the essential slots are filled - Identification of the suppliant, Problem, Invocation and Removal of problem - and that with the sparsest of elaboration (the epithet *góð* and the adverb *þegar*). On the other hand we have accounts in which most of the slots are filled, so that for instance the story of Hallr, injured in the face by a scythe while hauling a boat ashore on return from haymaking on an islet off Barðarströnd, is told in the fulsome, novelistic style characteristic of *ÞC* (ch. 114).

I would now like to narrow the focus down to the first stage of the miracle accounts in the *Biskupa sögur*, in order to examine the kinds of suppliant who appeal to the saint-bishops, and their reasons for doing so, taking the latter first.

PROBLEMS SOLVED

Miracles and accounts of miracles arise from all kinds of needs - social and political as well as spiritual, medical and material - but within the cameo presentations which most specific miracles receive, physical or material need is uppermost. The 'practical' or 'problem-solving' miracles of the Icelandic saints are fairly readily classifiable according to those needs, and to facilitate comparisons with the large corpus of eleventh- and twelfth-century French miracle accounts analysed by Sigal (1985, chs. 5 and 6), I have modelled my system of classification on his, making only minor changes which are allowed for in the calculations on which the comparative statements below rest. There are naturally some problems of classification among the medical conditions described in the miracle accounts - where to place frostbite, for instance -¹ and the Icelandic corpus is too small to allow of sweeping conclusions on some points, but I think the classification illuminates some features of this aspect of Icelandic hagiography, at the very least by giving definition to impressions gained in reading.

At the outset, a major binary divide can be made into miracles of healing and 'non-healing' miracles (notably miracles of rescue or protection, finding and provisioning), and Tables I and II below are based on this initial division, with further sub-groupings. Within the category of healings, the sub-groups, placed in order of frequency, are:

- A. Accidental wounds, fractures, burns, swallowing of objects; haemorrhage
- B. Tumors, ulcers, swelling of whole body or part thereof
- C. Neurological disorders (incl. epilepsy, crippled limbs, paralysis)
- D. Eye disease & blindness
- E. Miscellaneous: toothache, skin diseases, urinary or digestive obstructions

1. GB ch. 52, the healing of Ívarr Benteinsson. The non-healing miracles also occasionally elude categorisation. When a small boy sent out in mist to round up the cattle who returns with them swiftly and safely the story combines the attributes of a protection miracle and a recovery (of valuable objects or animals); PB ch. 61.

- F. Unspecific serious illnesses
- G. Mental disorders (insanity, acute depression or anxiety)
- H. Resurrections or resuscitations (esp. after drowning or concussion)
- I. Difficult confinements
- J. Fevers and infectious diseases
- K. Deafness & other ear conditions, muteness.

Tables I and II show the results of analysing the miracles attached to Saints Þorlákr, Jón and Guðmundr, according to the problems (medical in Table I, non-medical in Table II) which prompt invocations to them. The *in vita* and posthumous miracles of Guðmundr are presented in separate columns. The numbers all represent actual incidences, except for the final column in each table, which expresses the total number of cases in each sub-group as a percentage of the number in the overall category (healing or non-healing).

Table I: Healing miracles, by condition cured

| | Þlkr | Jón | G(V) | G(P) | TOTAL | % |
|-----------------|------------------|-----|------|------|-------|-------------------|
| A. Accident | 32 | 7 | 1 | 3 | 43 | 24.0 |
| B. Tumors | 11 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 24 | 13.4 |
| C. Neurolog. | 11 | 6 | 6 | 0 | 23 | 12.8 |
| D. Eye | 14 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 21 | 11.7 |
| E. Miscell. | 9 | 8 | 1 | 3 | 21 | 11.7 |
| F. Unspec. | 12 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 18 | 10.1 |
| G. Mental | 8 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 12 | 6.7 |
| H. Resurr. | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 3.9 |
| I. Confinemt | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 5 | 1.7 |
| J. Fevers | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 1.7 |
| K. Deafness | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1.0 |
| <hr/> | | | | | | |
| TOTAL (Healing) | 104 ¹ | 35 | 19 | 21 | 179 | 100% ² |

The headings in the Table II are, I hope, self-explanatory. Concerning the chastisements', miraculous events which punish rather than benefit those who experience them, it should be explained that most of these can be accommodated within the 'healing' category, since the chastisement of a sceptic or sluggard frequently takes the form of a short-term affliction which is soon healed once a more acceptable attitude has been adopted. In that sense the 'cure' is a double one - of the temporary affliction and of the malaise of scepticism. I have therefore only included in this table miracles in which no physical cure is involved and chastisement is the sole point of the story.

¹ Two miracles of Þorlákr are told in *Jóns saga helga A* ch. 44, where a young mother's safe return from a perilous mountain journey is flanked by two healings by Þorlákr, who in a dream appearance explains that it was bishop Jón, *bróðir minn*, who saved her in the mountains. The trio of Icelandic saint-bishops is completed by Þorlákr's command to the woman to report her experiences to his friend Guðmundr (and the woman at first mistakes the *draummaðr* for St Martin).

² The percentages as presented do not precisely add up to 100% since they are rounded up to the nearest decimal point.

Table II: Non-healing miracles, by problem solved

| | Þlkr | Jón | G(V) | G(P) | TOTAL | % |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-------------|
| A. <u>Miscellaneous benefits:</u> | | | | | | |
| Provisioning | 13 | 5 | 9 | 2 | 39 | 25.8 |
| Animals recovered/cured | 18 | 6 | 5 | 8 | 37 | 24.5 |
| Objects (incl. boats) recovered | 19 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 26 | 17.2 |
| Weather | 7 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 11 | 7.3 |
| Solution of other difficulties | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 5.3 |
| TOTAL A | 60 | 20 | 18 | 13 | 111 | 73.5 |
| B. <u>Protection/rescue from:</u> | | | | | | |
| Storm | 8 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 11 | 7.3 |
| Demons ¹ | 0 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 7 | 4.6 |
| Overland journey | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 3.3 |
| River crossing | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 2.6 |
| Enemies | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 3.3 |
| Fire | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2.0 |
| Other | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1.3 |
| TOTAL B | 19 | 5 | 10 | 3 | 37 | 24.4 |
| C. <u>Chastisements</u> | | | | | | |
| | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2.0 |
| TOTAL Non-healing | 80 | 25 | 30 | 16 | 151 | 100% |

As a comparison of Tables I and II shows, the miracles of the three Icelandic saints are quite evenly distributed between the two main categories: 46% of the total are of the non-healing kind, as compared with only 30% in Sigal's corpus (i.e. 1052 out of a total of 3760),² and 10% in Finucane's corpus of 3000 miracles recorded at English and French shrines in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.³ The differences are doubtless partly conditioned by the nature of the record,⁴ but whatever the reason, the numerous miracles of provision and protection, including the saving of animals, occasion some of the most detailed and characteristically Icelandic narratives of incident. Similarly, within the 'healing' category, the extremely high proportion of 'first-aid' miracles occasioned by accidental wounding or burns (A in Table I above, 24% of all healings, compared with only 3.6% in Sigal's corpus) tallies with fact that so many of the Icelandic cures are not shrine-based but are spontaneous appeals from the

¹ These are cases where exorcism - usually of a whole neighbourhood - is an independent activity. Cases where it is linked with a cure of mental illness are included in category IG.

² This is based on Sigal's corpus minus the visions, prophecies and signs of sanctity, which are excluded by my terms of reference (p. 6 above).

³ Finucane 1977, esp. 59 and 111-12. His corpus includes a small number of visions.

⁴ Sigal points out that the predominance of healings over other beneficial miracles is much stronger in *Miracula* than in *Vitae*, and produces figures adjusted accordingly (1985, 290-1).

domestic scene of crisis. Of the routine illnesses, as opposed to accidental injuries, those involving swelling or ulceration are particularly numerous in the Icelandic corpus (13.4% compared with 4.5% in Sigal), as are those in the 'unspecific serious' and 'miscellaneous' categories. Mental conditions and fevers are only slightly less well represented than in the French material; and it is worth noting that mental illness is frequently depicted without reference to demon-possession. I have not found Icelandic examples of saintly assistance to infertile couples (cf. 28 instances in Sigal's material). Especially striking is the fact that the Icelandic sources contain fewer than their continental counterparts of the classic, gospel-inspired, cures: the restoring of sight (11.7% cp. Sigal's 17.5%), of hearing or speech (1.0% cp. 11.1%), and of mobility to the paralysed and crippled (12.8% cp. 36.1%). Finucane's study of the miracles recorded from seven major English shrines (nearly 2000 in number) also shows a high incidence of the traditional miracles: the four most numerous categories involve 'unqualified illness', 'crippling ailments', 'non-healing' and 'blindness', which together comprise over half the reported miracles (1977, 146). Thus the actual healings performed within the *Biskupa sögur* are notable for the degree to which they fail to match the traditional summaries attached to them, e.g., 'Þar fá blindir sýn, daufir heyrn, kryplingar réttask, líkþráir hreinsask, haltir ganga, vitstolnir ok djöfulóðir fá fulla bót, herteknir frjalsask ... in ÞA ch. 83.¹ In fact, the last-mentioned miracle-type, deliverance of captives is conspicuous by its absence (cf. 159 cases in the French material analysed by Sigal).

Although the proportions of particular cures are unique to the Icelandic corpus (as they no doubt would be in any corpus examined), the healings attributed to Icelandic bishops share the generally unsensational quality of their European analogues. The conditions cured are frequently of the kind subject to spontaneous healing or remission, or liable to be pathogenic (cf. Finucane 1977, 79). In the few cases of adults or children brought to life (3.9 % in the Icelandic material, 2.2% in Sigal) the circumstances are often suggestive of coma or concussion, and the Icelandic compilers occasionally use some signal such as the verb *þykkja* to suggest that the death was only apparent.²

Within the Icelandic non-healing miracles, the group of 'miscellaneous benefits' in which, typically, fish or seals are caught at moments of need, or valuable objects or animals are retrieved, is spectacularly large - 74%, compare Sigal's 'interventions favorables' which comprise 33% of his non-healing corpus of 1052 items. Protection or rescue miracles represent 34% of the Icelandic corpus, compared with 22.3% of the French. The situation is very much the reverse in the group of miraculous 'chastisements', which constitute 44.7% of the French non-healing corpus, but a mere 2% of the Icelandic. The latter figure may be artificially low insofar as I have, as explained above, only counted as 'chastisement' miracles those in which reproaching the slothful or irreverent is the main point of the story, and is not merely incidental to a cure or other benefit; but even allowing for this, the overwhelming impression is that medieval Icelanders - even hagiographers - created images of native saints who, despite the occasional rebuke for staying up late at night (JA ch. 44), or failing to keep a vow to the saint (Þj ch. 28), or failing to cross oneself before drinking,³ were rather benign, prepared not only to cure a quinsy, or provide fish for the deserving poor, but also to recover lost fishing tackle whose owner

¹ For a second-century example of such a catalogue, see Ward 1982 p. 35.

² The heading 'Lífjgudust born .ij.' to ÞJ2 ch. 148 is more optimistic than accurate, for the story actually involves the healing of a woman's crippled hand after she has been held responsible for the accidental death of two children; they - we presume - remain firmly dead.

³ GD ch 83, and two examples in ch. 87.

had neglected to secure one end of the line, to help with a brew of ale when the yeast threatens to go flat (PJ chs. 13 and 17) or to permit consecrated water to work like oil so that a game of backgammon could continue into the night (GB ch. 25).

The quantity of Icelandic miracles recorded is perhaps insufficient to sustain extended comparisons between the activities of the three saints, but some points of difference emerge from the above tables, for instance the unusually high incidence of eye cures and healings of accidental injuries performed by Þorlákr. Clearly the most distinctive of the three is Guðmundr Arason, whose *in vita* miracles, especially of those of provisioning and the exorcisms of Selkolla and other fiends, reflect his itinerant life.

THE SUPPLIANTS

Since all miracle accounts identify the suppliant(s), whether specifically (*Hallr Gizurarson, góðr prestur ok gófufr*, PJ ch. 34) or vaguely (e.g. *maðr, ungr maðr fátæk, ein kona*, passim), a basic categorisation by sex and age is possible, and the results of this are shown in tabular form below, with the large corpus of Þorlákr's miracles sub-divided into healing and non-healing. The category 'communal' is by definition only relevant to non-healing miracles, where an appeal to a saint is made by a group of people, typically those who are beset by storms or demons or in other difficulties.

Table III: Analysis of suppliants

| | Þ(heal) | Þ(non-h.) | Jón | Guðm | TOTAL | % |
|----------|---------|-----------|-----|------|-------|------|
| Men | 57 | 38 | 32 | 44 | 170 | 51.6 |
| Women | 25 | 11 | 17 | 22 | 75 | 22.7 |
| Children | 24 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 42 | 12.7 |
| Communal | 0 | 26 | 5 | 12 | 43 | 13.0 |
| <hr/> | | | | | | |
| TOTAL | 105 | 79 | 60 | 86 | 330 | 100% |

The figures speak for themselves, and are consistent with the profile of suppliants elsewhere in Europe. Finucane's study of over two thousand pilgrims in the records of seven English shrines and two French found the pilgrims on both sides of the Channel to be 61% male (1977, 143). The relatively large number of children and groups who benefit from the Icelandic miracles is at least partly explained by the nature of the sources - mainly sagas rather than closely shrine-centred *Miracula*. None of the Icelandic saints shows the specialisation characteristic of some major figures in European hagiography. St Cuthbert of Durham, for instance, was envisaged as a misogynist in the twelfth century, and his shrine barred to women, which perhaps explains the exceptionally high proportion of women who turned to St Godric at nearby Finchale (69% of pilgrims there).¹

More difficult to examine statistically are the economic and professional status of petitioners, although there is a great deal of evidence on this point, direct (e.g. *húsfreyja ein virðilig ok vel fjáreigandi*, PJ ch. 20) or indirect (e.g. the loss of a gold brooch in PJ ch. 35). These are two examples among several

¹ Finucane, who also calculates that 87% of Godric's suppliants were lower-class and most local (1977, 87, 126-7 and 142); cf. Ward 1982, 63-4.

where the petitioner is wealthy, but the poor are, unsurprisingly, very well represented in the miracles of the *Biskupa sögur*, as they are elsewhere.¹ Also within the same miracle book, a destitute man and woman in two separate incidents find food in the form of seals transfixed as if glued to rocks (chs. 5 and 22), a young pauper dependent on alms catches fifty fish after promising fifty paternosters to the honour of St Þorlákr (ch. 37), and so on. Clerics and their families are relatively well represented among the beneficiaries - Abbot Jón [Ljótsson] (PA ch. 25), Kolperna, mother of the hermit Björn of Þingeyrar (PJ2 ch. 151), numerous priests and others, but the concentration of clerical beneficiaries is not particularly intense among the miracles of Þorlákr or Guðmundr. The cults of the three saints are not strikingly different in respect of the status of the petitioners, although as would be expected, the poor are slightly more in evidence, the clerical establishment less so, in Guðmundr Arason's miraculous interventions than in those of his two colleagues.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The present study focusses on some 330 accounts of 'practical' miracles attributed in the *Biskupa sögur* and related texts to saints Þorlákr, Jón and Guðmundr. The spacial and temporal distribution of miraculous events, the structure of the individual narratives, the profile of the suppliants and their reasons for appealing to the saints quite closely resemble the patterns of international hagiography, but in all of these areas there are individual features which doubtless reflect both the cultural uniqueness of medieval Iceland and the generic diversity of the *Biskupa sögur*, embracing historiography and saga as well as hagiography.² Comparison with large collections of French and English miracles shows the Icelandic material to contain a very high proportion of non-healing miracles, and within that category a predominance of miracles of provisioning, finding and the healing or recovery of animals. Sainly 'first-aid' in response to domestic accidents (often involving women and children) is also particularly frequent within the 'healing' category, suggesting that the native saints were perceived as being far from shrine-bound, but instead ready to respond to any urgent appeal. Traditional healings (of blindness, deafness or of crippled limbs) are correspondingly less common than in the comparative material, as are the miracles of 'chastisement' which reveal a censorious and even vindictive streak in some European saints. The overall impression is that the native saints of medieval Iceland were viewed as beneficent and approachable, lacking any strong preference for clerical or privileged suppliants, and sensitive to the ailments, needs and perils of everyday life in the harsh environment of medieval Iceland.

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Note : Souce references to miracles are all by initial letter of the saint's name - Þ(orlákr), J(ón) or G(uðmundr) - and a letter referring to the particular saga

¹ Of the 1,933 English pilgrims studied by Finucane, one third are 'men from the lower classes', one third lower class women, and the remainder, men of other social groups, especially the lower clergy. In both France and England, he finds, the women belong overwhelmingly to the lowest social levels. Higher-class men are somewhat over-represented in relation to their share of the English population at large (1977, 143-46).

² The diversity is emphasised, e.g., by Paul 1979 and Asdis Egilssdóttir 1992.

version or miracle collection, e.g. *PA* is the 'Oldest' saga of *Þorlákr*. The '*Þorlákr*' texts are all cited from Jón Helgason's edition of 1978, and the versions of *Jóns saga helga* from BS (*Biskupa sögur 1858-1878*) I. GP (*Guðmundar saga prests*) is cited from *Sturlunga saga* I, 1946, and GA, the 'Oldest' saga of *Guðmundr*, both from BS I and from Stefán Karlsson's edition of 1983, in that order; the remaining sagas of *Guðmundr* are cited from BS. The dates of MSS given below follow the *RegistresÍndices* volume of *Ordbog over de norrøne prosasprog / A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, Copenhagen 1989.

Þorlákr (P)

PJ: *Jartegnabók Þorláks biskups en forna* : AM 645 4^o, c. 1220. BS I 333-356; JH pp. 120-57.

PA: *Þorláks saga A / Saga Þorláks biskups hin elzta*: Holm perg. 5 fol., c. 1350-65. BS I 89-124; JH pp. 177-244.

PB: *Þorláks saga B / Þorláks saga helga hin yngri* : AM 382 4^o, c. 1350. BS I 263-332; JH pp. 247-339 and in apparatus to 'A'.

PC *Þorláks saga C / Saga Þorláks biskups hin yngsta* : AM 379 4^o, 17th century, in BS I 375-394 and in apparatus to 'A' and 'B'; AM 380 4^o, 17th century, in JH pp. 343-373 and in apparatus to 'A' and 'B'.

PE: *Jartegnir Þorláks biskups*, Fragment E: AM 383 4^o II, c. 1300. JH pp. 377-381.

PJ2: *Jartegnabók Þorláks biskups önnur* : AM 379 4^o, 17th century. ¹. BS I 357-374; JH 385-406.

Latin fragments: AM 386 4^o, I & II, and AM 670e 4^o; fragment in Þjóðskjalasafn, Reykjavík; and *Breviarum Nidrosiense*, 1519, ff. v-vi. JH pp. 161-74.

Jón (J) ²

JA: *Jóns saga helga A / Jóns saga helga hin elzta* : AM 234 fol., c. 1340. BS I 151-202.

JB: *Jóns saga helga B / Jóns saga helga eptir Gunnlaug múnk* : Holm perg. 5 fol., c. 1350-65. BS I 215-60.

JC: *Jóns saga helga C / Viðbætur* : AM 392 4^o, 17th century. BS I 203-12 and apparatus to 'A'.

Guðmundr :

GP: *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* : Króksfjarðarbók, AM 122 fol., c. 1350-70.

GA:³ *Guðmundar saga A / Saga Guðmundar Arasonar hin elzta* : AM 399 4^o, c. 1330-50. BS I 407-558; Ed. Stefán Karlsson 1983.

GB: *Guðmundar saga B / Miðsaga Guðmundar biskups* : AM 657 c 4^o. BS I 559-618 and in apparatus to 'A'.

GC: *Guðmundar saga C* : In two 17th century MSS, as yet unpublished.

GD: *Guðmundar saga D / Saga Guðmundar Arasonar eptir Arngrím* : Holm perg. 5 fol., c. 1350-65.

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A Book of Miracles MS no. 645 4^{to} of the Arnarnagnæan Collection. 1938. Ed. & intr. Anne Holtsmark. *Corpus Codicorum Islandicorum Medii Ævi XII*. Copenhagen.

¹ Otherwise a MS of the 'C' redaction.

² An edition of *Jóns saga helga* is in preparation by Peter Foote for publication as *Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ A*, 14.

³ The designations A-D follow those of Stefán Karlsson 1983 and 1985. As he points out, they do not necessarily reflect the actual chronology of composition, but 'imply an assessment of how far the respective versions are removed from the principal common sources from which they are sprung' (1985, 989).

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