

The Latin Fragments of *Þorláks saga helga* and their Classical Context

The fragments of the Latin *Vita sancti Thorlacii*, dated to around 1200, constitute a rare specimen of Latin narrative composed in medieval Iceland. In this paper I shall try to place these fragments in context with Latin letters elsewhere in Europe, ancient and medieval. From the context of the *Vita sancti Thorlacii* the discussion will range to the extent and importance of original Latin compositions and scholarship in the history of Icelandic medieval literature, and an attempt will be made to estimate the different implications, pragmatic and cultural, of the use of Latin (and Latin terms) in various genres of writing.

Around 1200 two Icelandic bishops, one from each diocese, were sanctified by popular vote at Alþingi. Their corpses were exhumed and placed in new sepulchres during a ritual attended by the highest ranking prelates in Iceland, and their feasts were entered in the calendar of local feasts. There is no indication that official approval was sought from Rome.¹ Indeed, in the 12th century no approval from Rome was needed for such an act since the recognition of sanctity still rested on the public cult rendered an individual and had not yet become the exclusive right of the Roman hierarchy (Partick Geary, *DMA* III, 69). By the 14th century, however, such recognition was needed, as is shown by the failed attempts to beatify, with the pope's approval, a third Icelandic bishop, Guðmundur Arason. Though no approval from Rome was necessary, the two new holy men, Þorlákr Þórhallsson (1133-1193) of Skálholt and Jón égmundarson (1106-1121) of Hólar, nevertheless had their *vitae* composed, not in the vernacular, but in Latin, the language of the Roman church.

Very little, apart from the short fragments of *Vita sancti Thorlacii*, is preserved of original Icelandic texts written in Latin from before the Reformation. This has given support to the thesis that medieval Icelandic culture was radically exceptional with respect to the use of Latin. Characteristically, A. G. Rigg begins thus his entry on Latin literature in the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*: "In all countries of western and central Europe (except Iceland), from the time of the conversion to Christianity to the end of the Middle Ages, the language of education – and thus of "literature" – was Latin" (*DMA* VII, 359). It is a common assumption that if Latin was used in Iceland at all, this was merely to enable the reading of scriptural texts (some of which were translated into the vernacular as early as the 12th century), or to communicate directly with Rome on rare occasions.

I wish to make the picture of medieval Icelandic literature a little less homogenous by simply cataloging the surprising amount of original Latin writings known to have been produced in Iceland before the reformation. If we leave out the first Icelandic author, Sæmundur Sigfússon (1056-1133), who most likely wrote in Latin on Norwegian kings, Latin literature in medieval Iceland peaks, not unpredictably during the so-called 12th century Renaissance, i.e. at the same time that Saxo Grammaticus and Sven Aggesen were writing in Denmark and Theodricus in Norway. From this time, we know the names of three authors, Gizurr Hallsson, Oddr Snorrason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson. The last two were monks at the Benedictine monastery of Þingeyrar. Gizurr Hallsson (d. 1206) is quickly dealt with in his capacity as a Latin author. He wrote a now lost guidebook for pilgrims called *Flos peregrinationis* (The Flower of Pilgrimage). Oddr Snorrason (fl. 1150-1200), however, wrote two quasi historical works. One was a Latin narrative about Ólafur Tryggvason, the king who

¹ In fact Þorlákr was not recognized as a saint by Rome until as recently as 14 January 1984, when Pope John-Paul II declared him principal patron of Iceland. He is celebrated on 20 July, the day of the translation of his relics.

Christianized Norway and Iceland. This work may have been called *Vita Olai Tryggvini*. The text is now lost, apart from a single Latin poem, but the contents of the narrative are preserved in some form in vernacular versions (published by Groth, Munch and Finnur Jónsson), 78 chapters in all. Oddur also wrote in Latin the first fornaldar saga, *Yngvars saga víðfjóra*, if that is the right generic term for this narrative, which likewise is only extant in vernacular version (14 chapters). A possible original title for this work would be *Historia Ingvari late perigrinantis*. The saga is attributed to Oddur in the colophon of the main manuscripts, and, although this attribution has long been doubted, Dietrich Hofmann has argued that the scepticism is groundless, since what little evidence there is supports the authenticity of the colophon.² Gunnlaugur Leifsson (died 1218/19) was the most productive of the three. His main achievement was to compile a separate Latin *vita* of the same king that Oddur had written about, Ólafur Tryggvason, perhaps called *Vita Olai regis Tryggvini*. This text is now lost, but chunks of it are found, again in vernacular version, in the great *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*. In the conservative estimate of Finnur Jónsson this was an extensive text. As Finnur explains, "after Oddur had written his work, Gunnlaugur had to have something else and more to say."³

If Gunnlaugur was not its sole author, he seems at least to have been involved in writing the *vita* of the first of our Icelandic holy men, Saint Þorlákr (more on this problem below). His authorship of the *vita* of the second Icelandic saint, Jón Þegmundarsson, is however well attested.⁴ This text, which is divided into 52 chapters, is again only extant in Icelandic versions. Finally, a century and a half later, in the middle of the 14th century, Abbot Arngrímur Brandsson (fl. ca. 1345) wrote the third Icelandic episcopal life in Latin, the *Vita of blessed Guðmundr*. Again, we only have this substantial text preserved, 92 relatively long chapters and yet incomplete, in an Icelandic version.

The following is a list of eight Latin works composed in medieval Iceland:

- Sæmundur Sigfússon (1056-1133), most likely wrote in Latin on Norwegian kings
 Gizur Hallsson (d. 1206), a guide book for pilgrims, *Flos peregrinationis*.
 Oddr Snorrason (fl. 1150-1200), *Vita Olai Tryggvini* (Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar)
 -----, *Historia Ingvari late perigrinantis* (*Yngvars saga víðfjóra*)
 Gunnlaugr Leifsson, (d. 1218:19) *Vita Olai regis Tryggvini* (Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar)
 -----, *Vita beati Johannis*
 Anonymous, *Vita sancti Thorlaci*
 Arngrímur Brandsson (fl. ca. 1345), *Vita Guðmundi boni* (Guðmundar saga góða)

It goes without saying that if these Latin texts, one guide for pilgrims, two long royal biographies, one legendary saga, and three full lives of Icelandic bishops were all still extant today, the thesis of Iceland's exceptionality with regard to the use of Latin in the middle ages would not be persuasive. Yet the contents are preserved of all but the first two items.

As we can see from this list, Latin compositions seem to be of fundamental importance for the origins of at least three of the major genres of vernacular literature in Iceland, *konunga sögur* (kings' sagas), *biskupa sögur* (bishops' lives), and *fornaldar sögur* (legendary sagas).⁵ The question must be raised, although it is impossible to answer it to any

²Hofmann 1981 og 1984.

³Finnur Jónsson 1923, 401.

⁴In the prologue of the B redaction of the vernacular translation; in the prologue of the vernacular translation of the now lost Latin *vita* of Guðmundr Arason by Arngrímur Brandsson. As Peter Foot has drawn my attention to, the existence of two Jóns sagas, one in Latin and one in Icelandic, is proven by an inventory of Munkaþverárklostur from 1429 (*DI* 4, 374).

⁵I have not even mentioned letters, a few of which survive, original rhymed offices (to celebrate Þorlákr, Jón and Ambrosius), experimental occasional poetry, e.g. the two extant Latin stanzas in *dróttkvætt*, one Latin-

degree of satisfaction, what the implications of Latin are for these genres of writing, e.g. what did it mean to write a Norwegian king's saga in Latin as opposed to the vernacular? How did the Latin language and literary context determine the form and subject-matter of these texts? The only way we can hope to get any answers to such questions is by comparing Latin and vernacular texts. However, the comparison of Danish Latin and Icelandic texts (e.g. Saxo with e.g. *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, *Gautreks saga*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*) or Norwegian Latin with Icelandic and Norwegian vernacular texts (e.g. Theodricus with *Agrip af Noregskonunga sögum*, the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* by Oddr Snorrason, or the so-called 'Oldest saga of St Óláfr') tends to focus on sources, not the language and the cultural fabric woven into it. It is for this reason that the fragments of the Latin *Vita s. Thorlaci* are of crucial importance.

The authors, Sæmundr, Gizurr, Oddr, Gunnlaugr and Arngrímr did not write their texts to become stepping-stones to vernacular literature, but because they believed in using Latin for its own sake as the most obvious medium of Christian literature. The Latin texts were necessarily of a different order as Christian literature than the vernacular texts. What happened to these Latin texts is another matter. Some must have been destroyed in unique and uncopied manuscripts, some perhaps by fanatical ecclesiastical reformers. There is no question that most Icelandic scribes from very early on preferred to write in the vernacular, but just because the production of Icelandic literature was so vast does not allow us to assume that in Iceland Latin was, unlike in all other countries of western and central Europe, not used or necessarily played an insignificant role. The exceptionality of Icelandic medieval literature lies rather in how much was written in the vernacular, not in how little was written in Latin.

Possibly even more texts than the ones I have mentioned were written in Latin during this period of Icelandic history. Most editors of the fragments related to Saint Þorlákr have for example speculated that there existed a Latin work of the type we have in *Hungrvaka*, i.e. the history of the bishops in a whole diocese, in this case Skálholt diocese. This conjecture is based on the first of the four fragments, three vellum leaves palæographically dated to around 1200. Ever since Árni Magnússon acquired the short text of the first fragment (AM 386 4to), editors have noted that the first book of this otherwise lost work may have been something more than a simple *vita*, and possibly a text of the sort we know in Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* or the Icelandic *Hungrvaka*, i.e. the history of the bishops of a whole diocese. The fragment itself seems to state as much. In the middle of the first leaf, where a narrative of Bishop Klængr has come to an end with his death (d. 1176), a new Latin book begins with the following heading: *De sancto Thorlaco episcopo et aliis episcopis nostris* ("On Bishop St. Þorlákr and our other bishops"). We should keep in mind that a Latin book, *liber*, is a fairly long text. For example, what is preserved of the *Historia Norvegiae* is only one book, while Adam's *Gesta* is divided into 4 books, and Saxo's exceptionally long text into no more than 16 books. We are therefore dealing with a fragment of a substantial life of Þorlákr, if the first book only brought us as far as Klængr's death, i.e. to the beginning of Þorlákr's term in office. Therefore it is possible that a brief history of the whole diocese preceded the *Life of St. Þorlákr*.⁶ The idea of two works about St. Thorlacr is

Icelandic glossary, and last but not least the many translations from Latin, poetry, history, philosophy and hagiography, the earliest from the 12. century.

⁶ The beginning of book two reads thus (in Wolf's translation [see bibliography]): "We told enough in the previous book of this work [*superiore huius operis libro*] of how St. Þorlákr was promoted to the highest ecclesiastical rank. Thus the Church of Skálholt flourished under these bishops and excellent leaders of the people committed to their charge, and up to St. Þorlákr's time, as is now shown, it grew more and more strong, extended in its state and worthily reinforced. These are the distinguished shepherds of the Lord's flock and the wholly true fathers of their native land, who, well providing for their own and their people's need [exhorted] their followers with repeated admonitions and the ex[ample] of good works."

supported by the curious detail that Bishop Klængr dies both in the first and the second fragment with a completely different formulation.

Let us now look a bit closer at the Latin fragments of the *Vita sancti Thorlaci*. There is, unfortunately, no room here to introduce these fragments properly, although they each have an interesting codicological history. For a proper introduction I must refer you to Kirsten Wolf's (1989) introduction and Ásdís Egilsdóttir's (2002) recent Icelandic discussion in the new edition of the Fornritafélag. The fragments were printed as early as 1776 by Langebek and Suhm in volume 4 of *Scriptores Rerum Danicarum*.⁷ There were however no available translations of the text for the Latinless reader until Kirsten Wolf's English translation was published in 1989.⁸ And my own translation, the first Icelandic one, came out as late as last year. Until recently serious editors printed the fragments without translation as if all their readers were fluent Latinists, while popular editors such as Guðni Jónsson simply did not print them. While as we have seen the first fragment (LatI) is tantalizing, the second fragment (LatII) is, to my mind, the truly interesting one. The third (LatIII) and the fourth fragments (LatIV), on the other hand, are liturgical *lectiones*, although they contain text from the original *vita*. It is not unfair to say that little interest has been shown in medieval Latin texts by Icelanders for their own sake.⁹ As we shall see this is certainly the case with this the only continuous Latin narrative, such as it is, still preserved from the period.

The relative age of the Latin *vita* and the Icelandic saga has been the bone of contention ever since the great Finnur Jónsson simply assumed that the Latin *vita* was based on the text of the vernacular saga (*Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litteraturs Historie*, II, 2. ed., 566). Bjarni Aðalbjarnason and Jakob Benediktsson thought that it was the other way around, but they lacked hard evidence to support their views.¹⁰ Jón Helgason, however, perhaps attempting a compromise, claimed that the Latin *vita* was written contemporaneously with the Icelandic saga, and expressly intended for non-Icelandic readers (KLN^M XX, 389). In dating the fragments, scholars usually only refer to Fragment I (AM 386 4to), which is believed to be oldest, and has been palaeographically dated to ca. 1200.¹¹

Since I have very little new to say about this fragment, I shall concentrate my attentions on the second fragment, especially on a previously unnoticed Sallust citation I discovered when translating it into Icelandic. The second fragment (also in AM 386 4to), containing the most extensive and continuous text of these fragments, six leaves in all, has so far been dated to the first half of the 13th century. It looks like a whole text and even has a heading, *De sancto Thorlaco* (On Saint Þorlákr), but it only covers the transitional period in Þorlákr's life, from 1174, when he was chosen to succeed the frail Bishop Klængr, until 1178, when he returns from Nidaros as bishop of Skalholt and begins to exercise the power of his office. The narrative of this fragment corresponds roughly to chapters 8-12 in the vernacular saga, although there are differences with respect to the order in which the material is presented. Usually, this fragment has been classified with the remaining liturgical fragments LatIII and LatIV containing *lectiones*, most likely because a note by Árni Magnússon informs us that it is taken „Aptan af Legendario frá Vallanesi i Fljotzdals herade“ (from the back of a

⁷ Copenhagen 1776; pp. 623-632. They were then published by Guðbrandur Vigfússon in the first volume of *Biskupa sögur* (Copenhagen 1856; pp. 394-404), and by Jón Helgason in the 2nd volume of *Byskupa sögur* (Editiones Arnemagnæanæ Series A, vol. 13.2), 159-174 (Copenhagen 1978), and most recently by Ásdís Egilsdóttir in the *Biskupa sögur* II (*Íslensk fornrit* XVI:), 339-364 (Reykjavík 2002) with my Icelandic translation.

⁸ Wolf 1989, 264-276.

⁹ For a recent overview of the research on Latin influence on vernacular Icelandic literature, see Gíslí Sigurðsson 2002, 22-33.

¹⁰ Bjarni Aðalbjarnason. 1956. „Bemærkninger om de elste bispesagaer,“ *Studia Islandica* 17, 27-37.

¹¹ Hreinn Benediktsson 1965, 14, n 1.

legendary from Fljótsdalshérað). But the *lectio* numbers added in the margin are in a younger hand than the text of the MS, so we are not dealing with *lectiones* as such, but a fragment of a whole *vita* that has been reused as a liturgical text.

The citation from Sallust comes at a point in the narrative where Bishop Klængr is choosing a successor at Alþingi in the summer of 1174. Þorlákr was at the time Abbot of Iceland's first Augustinian monastery at Þykkvibær. Three men have been nominated and among them Þorlákr. Here the author suspends the narrative of events to cite comments made about the modest reputation enjoyed at the time by this soon to be holy man. His critics objected to his silence, and claimed that because of it they could not judge his prudence or eloquence.

[AM 386 4to]: Ad hec Turkilus uir prudentissimus eleganter respondit dicens: Verum est quod dicitis, magis iste homo satagit, ut quam plurima bona opera operetur, quam ut plurima uerba loquatur. Bene huic testimonio <de> Thorlac<o> conuenire potest, quod olim de quodam probo homine dictum est, esse quam uideri bonus malebat.

[English translation]: Þorkell (Geirason), a man of great wisdom, replied elegantly to such comments, saying: "It is true what you say; this man takes more pains to do as many good deeds as possible than to speak as many words as possible." Words once used of a certain upright man agree well with this comment about Þorlákr, that he preferred to be good than to seem good.

Þorkell Geirason, the co-founder and financial sponsor of Þorlákr's monastery at Þykkvibær, comes to Þorlákr's defence with a nicely constructed Latin *sententia* (see my discussion below) to the effect that Þorlákr is more a man of deeds than words. And then the author of the *vita* adds this: *Bene huic testimonio <de> Thorlac<o> conuenire potest, quod olim de quodam probo homine dictum est, esse quam uideri bonus malebat*" (Words once used of a certain upright man agree well with this comment about Þorlákr, that he preferred to be good than to seem good). The words *esse quam uideri bonus malebat* ("he preferred to be good than to seem good") are among the more famous *sententiae* of ancient historiography. They were applied by the Roman statesman and historian Gaius Sallustius Crispus (86-34 B.C.E.) to his younger contemporary, the uncompromising moralist (Marcus Porcius) Cato Uticensis (95-46 B.C.E.), in the historical narrative variously titled *Catilineae coniuratio*, *De coniuratione Catilinae*, or simply *Bellum Catilinae* (54, 6).

The subtle manner in which the citation is introduced – neither Sallust, nor Cato are named – could only mean two things: Either the author of the *Vita* treated the words *esse quam uideri bonus malebat* as something his readers/hearers would recognize easily, or he was simply writing a learned style and expected his readers/hearers to pick up such allusions, regardless of whether it was realistic or not to do so. But these two possibilities lead to the same conclusion: a learned audience. The only possibility we can exclude is that the author wanted to "hide" the citation for the unlettered, although this is what actually happened. And the way it happened was through simplified vernacular adaptation.

In chapter 9 of all versions, A, B and C, of *Þorláks saga helga*, the citation is clearly translated or at least adapted, but in such a way that it becomes unnoticeable as such:

[Þorláks saga ABC]: Enn þes kendi at vm Thorlaak at hann hafði sik ægi miok vpp hafit j metnadi þeim er sialfvirding heitir. ok Rosadi hann meir goðgemingum sinum j gvds augliti enn manna. ok kostgæfði hann en meir at vera afbragð annara manna. j sinni gæzsku. en synaz sua fyrir augum skynlitilla manna. ok vard sua af þi at morgum þotti ser hann ukunnazstr þeira er þa voru j vali ok var þat af þi vaarkunnlikt at hann hafði morgum monnum verid ægi allnaalægr at herads uistum ok heimili. Thorlakr var faa maalugr aa þeim fundi. enn margir voru adrir flol orðr þeir er þessi stormæli horfðu mldr til hands en honum. Var þa optir leitað við Þorkel Geirason er Reyndr var at Rett yrði. en kunnaz Thorlaks Raad af utrum monnum ok goðgum huer skorungr Thorlákr

være. eða hue mikill orða madr hann være. En Þorkell suaradi. Meir kostgofir Thorlacr segir hann at gera alltt sem bezst. enn mæla sem flest.

The words "ok kostgæfði hann en meir at vera afbragd annara manna. j sinni gæzsku. en synaz sua fyrir augum skynlitilla manna," clearly attempt to render this same Latin citation. The Icelandic text, however, leaves out the indirect reference to Sallust, *quod olim de quodam probo homine dictum est* ("that which once was spoken [i.e. by the historian Sallust] about a certain morally upright man [i.e. Cato Uticensis]"). Whoever translated or adapted the Latin *Vita* seems not to have understood that the *dictum* was a citation. And since he felt that Sallust's notoriously laconic and archaising Latin could not be clearly rendered into Icelandic he added the tags "j sinni gæzsku" and "fyrir augum skynlitilla manna" which only supplement but do not alter the meaning.

Let us look more closely at the Sallust quotation. Not many Roman historians were translated in medieval Iceland, but as is well known there exists an Icelandic version of most of the Latin text of the *Bellum Catilinae* in a compilation called *Rómverja saga*, dated to the latter half of the 12th century.¹² This translation is fairly close to the original Latin text, but it is not complete. It so happens, however, that the passage quoted by the author of the *Vita Sancti Thorlaci* does figure in the text of *Rómverja saga*:

Sallust 54.6: non divitiis cum divite neque factione cum factioso, sed cum strenuo virtute, cum modesto pudore, cum innocente abstinentia certabat; esse quam videri bonus malebat.

Rómverja saga 53.12: æigi keppuz hann auð við auðga menn ok æigi slæð við slægja menn né hraukkvisi við ótryggja menn, helldr keppðiz hann um mannkostina við ena beztu menn, því að helldr villði hann vera sem beztr en hæita að æins svá.

As is immediately clear the translation here bares no relation to the paraphrastic rendering of the same words in the vernacular saga of Þorlákr. Although chronologically the saga-writer seems to have been able to take the citation from this text, he clearly did not, but then again neither does he present Sallust's *dictum* as a citation. It is interesting, however, that the reception of the Sallust text in this medieval Icelandic version is similar to that in the *Vita sancti Thorlaci*, since the translation of the *Catilinae coniuratio* is introduced in the context of *Rómverja saga* by naming Cato and saying: „hann var mestr spekingr í Rómaborg“ (*Rómverjasaga* 41.4), which we can compare to the phrase *quidam probus homo* ("a certain upright man") used about Cato in the *Vita s. Thorlaci*.

The implicit comparison of Þorlákr with Cato Uticensis in Fragment II is an aspect of the emulatory relationship of vernacular literature to Latin letters and Roman culture, or what Lars Boje Mortense calls the formative dialogue of vernacular literature with the Holy Language. In order to valorize a local worthy, he must be compared to a Roman worthy. It is as if greatness or authenticity can only be achieved through a comparison with this model of all models. In chapter 8 of *Hungrvaka* we find this characteristic figure given the following form: "Svá hugðist at hinum vitrustu mönnum, at svá þótti drjúpa Ísland eptir fráfall Gizurrar biskups, sem Rómaborgarríki eptir fall Gregori páfa" ("To the wisest men it seemed that after the demise of Bishop Gizurr Iceland was dejected in the same way that Rome was after the death Pope Gregory). For the whole of western and central Europe Latin letters served as the "software" of intelligent thought until fairly recently, to borrow a turn of phrase from the contemporary Icelandic novelist Pétur Gunnarsson.

¹² There is no easy way to determine the date of *Rómverja saga*. Dietrich Hoffmann (1986) argued that it contributed material to and is therefore older than *Veraldar saga* (written in the reign of Friedrich Barbarossa, 1152-1190). Þorbjörg Helgadóttir (1996), 204-220, hypothesizes a lost common source, older than *Veraldar saga*, and thus dates *Rómverja saga* to the same period as the former.

The Sallust quote in the Latin *vita* and its poor rendering in the text of *Þorláks saga helga* show beyond doubt that the Latin text is the foundation of the vernacular text. This conclusion contradicts Finnur Jónsson's belief that the Latin text is based on the vernacular saga,¹³ but it also makes untenable the hypothesis of Jón Helgason that the Latin *vita* was written at the same time as the Icelandic saga in order to spread the fame of Þorlákur among non-Icelandic readers.¹⁴ The relationship between the two texts is more correctly described as that between a Latin original and a paraphrastic vernacular translation.

Further support that in the Icelandic Þorláks saga we are dealing with some sort of translation of the Latin *vita* is provided by the Icelandic rendering of Þorkell Geirason's defensive praise of Þorlákr as a man of action rather than words: *Verum est quod dicitis, magis iste homo statagit, ut quam plurima bona opera operetur, quam ut plurima uerba loquatur* ("It is true what you say; this man takes more pains to do as many good deeds as possible than to speak as many words as possible"). The Icelandic saga introduces Þorkell's comments about Þorlákr by saying that men sought him and asked him about how much of a *skorungr* and *orda madr* Þorlákr was: "En Þorkell suaradi. Meir kostgöfir Thorlacr segir hann at gera allt sem best. enn mæla sem flest." The comment is neat enough in Icelandic. Although the art of constructing such *sententiae* is preeminently Latin, it was certainly imitated in Icelandic prose, e.g. in the famous words of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir: "Þeim var eg verst er eg unni mest," in chapter 78 of *Laxdæla saga*. But the Icelandic translation of Þorkell's words does not come close to the eloquence of the Latin dictum: *ut quam plurima bona opera operetur, quam ut plurima uerba loquatur*. It is especially the complex assonance and carefully crafted construction, one the one hand of *ut quam plurima* and *quam ut plurima*, and on the other of *opera operetur* and *uerba loquatur*, that show the primacy of the Latin text. Beside such verbal arabesques the Icelandic "gera allt sem best" and "mæla sem flest" must be considered a pale imitation. Again, this shows the Latin text to be the original and the vernacular a translation. Furthermore, it indicates how great the loss is for Icelandic literature that the Latin texts of some many original works are lost. We should rightly be happy that the vernacular versions are still extant, but they clearly do not preserve adequately the richness of the Latin texts.

In light of the established relationship between the Latin and the vernacular Life of St. Þorlákr, we must furthermore conclude that Þorkell Geirason's comment in the Icelandic saga is, like the Sallust quotation, translated from the Latin *vita* and not cited from memory, copied from an Icelandic source, or invented wholesale by whoever put the saga text together. This, moreover, leads us to the important conclusion that certain utterances of Þorlákr in chapter 3 of the vernacular saga, which have been used to show that the author of the saga was a contemporary of Þorlákr, since he claims to have heard them himself, can no longer be used to date the vernacular saga, since the claim is not uttered by the compiler of the Icelandic saga about himself but translated from the Latin *vita* along with the utterances. We can therefore only know for certain that the author of the Latin *vita* was a contemporary of Þorlákr. We obviously cannot use information that the author gives about himself as evidence for the dating of the vernacular saga!

The oldest manuscript of the A version of the saga is SKB Perga. fol. nr. 5 from about 1360, although a small fragment of the story could be, according to Jón Helgason, a century older. There is therefore no compelling codicological reason for believing that the Icelandic saga was written before the middle of the 13th century, since the vernacular saga had been dated on the basis of historical arguments alone, i.e. that it was composed "as a part of the agitation that culminated in the translation [of Þorlákr's remains], i.e. ca. 1200 or shortly

¹³ Finnur Jónsson 1923, II. 566.

¹⁴ Jón Helgason 1976, 389-390.

thereafter.¹⁵ The fact that whoever produced the Icelandic version of Þorláks saga helga seems not to have understood that he was translating a citation indicates that we are dealing with a discontinuity in Latin knowledge, i.e. that the production of the Latin text and its Icelandic adaptation were separated by a considerable time span.¹⁶

We know from the prologue of the so-called *Jóns saga helga*, which is an Icelandic translation of the now lost *Vita beati Johannis*, that shortly after Bishop Jón was sanctified, Gunnlaugr Leifsson was asked to write the *vita* by Guðmundr Arason bishop of Skálholt (1203-1237). This must have been sometime between 1203, since the prologue talks of Guðmundr as bishop, and 1210, when Gunnlaugr and Guðmundr were no longer on friendly terms. Information about the author and circumstances of composition are not so easily come by in the case of the *Vita sancti Thorlaci*, and we get no help from the Icelandic Þorláks saga helga. This is mainly because this paraphrastic translation has wholly dropped the author's prologue, which is, indeed, the case also with the other extant vernacular translation of the *Vita beati Johannis*, where the prologue is likewise dropped and no indication given of the author's name in the text. However, our suspicion that the circumstances of composition were similar in both cases is confirmed by one of the collections of Þorlákr's miracles, the one usually referred to as *émur jarteinabók Þorláks* (The second book of miracles pertaining to Thorlacr), for there it says that the same Guðmundr Arason, then only a priest, i.e. this was before the spring of 1203, sent to Gunnlaugr some revelations (*vitranir*) about Þorlákr for him to write them up in Latin („dikta“ is the word used by the Icelandic text). The circumstances seem identical to those under which the *vita* of Jón helgi was composed, although we cannot be certain that Gunnlaugr authored the whole *vita* and not just the part of the *miracles* he is credited for. There may be another author, but we should keep in mind that there weren't many Icelanders who were in possession of the erudition necessary to write a saint's *vita*, and Þorlákr came first and sources agree that he was the more important of the two.

Similarities between the two *vitae* – they have phrases and whole sentences in common – lend further support to the attribution of both texts to Gunnlaugr Leifson. In chapter 15 of the A version of *Jóns saga helga* a Latin sentence from the original *vita* has survived untranslated. An apparent biblical vers is given like this: *Ne laudaveris hominem in vita sua* (Do not praise a man while still alive). Nowhere in the Vulgate is there a verse such as this one, the closest we get is Ecclesiastes 2 1: *et laudavi magis mortuos quam viventes* (And I praised rather the dead than the living). But the very same sentence, *Ne laudaveris hominem in vita sua*, occurs in Fragment II of the *Vita sancti Thorlaci*. In both cases the context is the same: Although Þorlákr and Jón did cause miracles to happen while still alive, men did not praise them for this, because one should „not praise a man while still alive“. It is no sin to praise them, however, after they were dead, hence their *vitae* could be written. Further similarities are apparent in the description of the ceremonies held during the translation of both saints, but in the case of Þorlákr, this text is only preserved in fragment III, a liturgical text, based on the original *vita*.

Þorlákr Þórhallsson was the first Icelandic bishop to bring to Iceland the Gregorian reformation, i.e. he was the first to use excommunication against those who disobeyed ecclesiastical law, the first bishop to demand strict adherence to ecclesiastical law regarding kinship matters and marriage, and first to claim ecclesiastical patronage over churches until

¹⁵ Jón Helgason 1976, 389.

¹⁶ Older comparative material exists from Norway. The *Translatio sancti Olavi* and the official *vita* of Olaf were written in the middle of the 12th century. The *vita* formed the basis of Archbishop Eysteinn's *Passio et miracula beati Olavi*, which exists in two versions. In the *Old Norwegian Homily Book* we then find a vernacular rendering of the *vita*. By comparison of these texts Else Mundal and Lars Boje Mortensen have established that the Latin text is the basis of the text of the *Old-Norse Homily Book* (Imsen 2003.).

then owned and controlled by laymen. This ambitious ecclesiastical program met with strong opposition from laymen, but Þorlákr was not acting on his own authority alone, he was carrying out orders from the archbishop of Nidaros, who in turn had his orders from Rome and had the further title of ambassador of the holy apostolic see. As long as Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson could exercise his authority in Nidaros, Þorlákr was strong in Iceland, but when Eysteinn was forced to go into exile in England as a result of opposing the rise of Sverrir to the throne of Norway, Þorlákr's whole reformatory program collapsed. It is against the background of this power struggle between ecclesiastical and worldly authority that these two new Icelandic Saints were canonised and got their Latin *vitae* written.

How does this power struggle surface in the Latin fragments relating to St Þorlákr. The author of the *vita* shows keen awareness of proper ecclesiastical etiquette:

AM 386 4to: Protulit quoque episcopus litteras quas sibi, et omnibus huius patrie principibus, dompnus Augustinus Nidrosiensis ecclesie archiepiscopus, et sancte sedis apostolice legatus miserat, in quibus scriptum erat datam esse nostratibus, ab eodem archiepiscopo, licentiam, ut alium uiuente Kloingo episcopo, in eius loco eligerent et subrogarent episcopum.

[English translation]: The bishop also produced a letter, that Dn. Eysteinn archbishop of the church of Niðaróss, and ambassador of the Holy Apostolic See, had sent to him and all the leaders of this land, where in it was written, that permission was granted to our countrimen, by the same archbishop, to elect another bishop, while Bishop Klængr was still alive, and put in his place.

The author of the *Vita* names Eysteinn by his Latin name, *Augustinus* and recites his titles as archbishop of Niðaróss and ambassador of the Holy Apostolic See (*sancte sedis apostolice legatus*). In this way fragment II of the *Vita sancti Thorlaci* is intertextually related to Norwegian texts in Latin, e.g. the extant letter of King Magnus Erlendsson to Archbishop Eysteinn, written in 1176, and Theodricus' *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*, where Archbishop Eysteinn is also addressed in a prefatory letter as *Augustinus*. I should note that *Augustinus* is not simply a Latin translation of Eysteinn, although a certain assonance must have made it more attractive to use, it was the Latin name Eysteinn had chosen for himself in order to symbolize his allegiance to the Augustinian order, the strongest promoter of the Gregorian reform. As for his second title of ambassador, this he was given by Pope Alexander in the years 1172-1173 (Edv. Bull. 1926. *Norsk Biografisk Leksikon* III, 628). This information shows that the author of the *Vita sancti Thorlaci* is not simply writing Latin, he is partaking in the official discourse of Nordic ecclesiastical Latin.

In this paper I have tried to question the thesis of Icelandic exceptionalism with respect to the use of Latin in the Middle Ages, but it remains to say something about how Latin could be and was likely used as a means to enhance the power of Church and clergy in Iceland no differently than in other countries of western and central Europe. I don't pretend to have mastered the complexities of the political struggle of this period. But it is clear that the fragments of the *Vita s. Thorlaci* should be read in the context of this ecclesiastical reform movement, started in Iceland by Þorlákr and continued by his successors, to finally prove victorious at the end of the 13th century under Bishop Árni Þorláksson. The writing of Þorlákr's Latin *vita* may have been a part of this movement. His canonization was at any rate made with full awareness of Eysteinn's successor, Eiríkr Ívarsson skrauthanzka (1189-1205). According to chapter 19 of the vernacular Þorláks saga, Archbishop Eiríkr sent a letter to Bishop Páll of Skálholt (1195-1211), Þorlákr's successor. In the letter, written sometime between 1195 and 1205, the archbishop confirms Þorlákr's sanctity by saying "that he

believes him to have been holy in his life, and now [when dead] a saintly jewel of virtues before god and exercising influence over many things" (Ágætan bróður várn, Þorlák byskup, góðrar minningar, trúm vér helgan verit hafa í lífinu, en nú dýrðligan kraftanna gimstein fyrir guði ok mikils ráðanda). As the phraseology shows, the letter was originally written in Latin. Its text is only preserved in the vernacular, but the text of the vernacular saga is a translation of the actual wording of the letter given in the original *vita*. From its place in the saga, when the issue of Þorlák's sanctity was first raised, it is most likely that the letter was sent before the translation of Þorlák's remains and his canonization by popular vote at Alþingi in the summer of 1199. The *Vita sancti Thorlaci* was therefore written after the archbishop had approved Þorlák's canonisation, and thus not in order to secure it. Besides, there was no need to write it in Latin for Eiríkr to understand, he could perfectly well read Old Norse. Why were the lives of these two new Icelandic saints then written in Latin? The only explanation left to us is the obvious one: By ecclesiastical convention saints of the Roman church have their lives written in Latin. The Roman church in Iceland around 1200 used Latin as its language, in exactly the same manner as this same church used Latin as its language in other countries of western and central Europe. Why would the Roman church in Iceland alone have deprived itself of the use of Latin, a proven medium of authority and power everywhere else? As is the case in Norway a generation before, when the legendary *vita* of St. Olaf was written, vernacular versions were produced some time after the Latin *vita* was written, expressly for the readership of laymen. There is nothing exceptional in the fact that the *vitae* of the saints of the Roman church were written in Latin.

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