

**The Icelandic Sagas and the Real:
Realism in *Þorláks saga***

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***Þorláks saga*: Historical reliability?**

Þorláks saga (written in the first decade of the thirteenth century)¹ has been described as 'historically reliable' (Jan de Vries, 1967, 187; Bekker-Nielsen, 1965, 119. Cf. Højgaard Jørgensen, 1978, 36-37). Its status as a contemporary saga (Jón Helgason, 1934, 108 and 192; Sigurður Nordal, 1953, 181 and 214) may be part of the reason that *Þorláks saga* is judged as historically reliable. Jónas Kristjánsson, at least, writes that *Þorláks saga* is a 'true contemporary saga, written perhaps ten years after the bishop's death' (Jónas Kristjánsson, 1997, 181), and the proximity of the anonymous author of *Þorláks saga* to the events leads Jónas Kristjánsson to say that *Þorláks saga* 'can be counted a comparatively reliable historical source' (181).

In this paper I wish to discuss some premises upon which *Þorláks saga* can be considered a historically reliable saga. I shall pay special attention to its hagiographical aspects and its relation to a widespread Latin literary genre, the *vita*. I will touch only briefly upon questions that could easily be elaborated on, and which are of relevance to other sagas besides *Þorláks saga*, since they relate to a general discussion concerning the sagas' truth-value and a dichotomy between history and fiction.²

Firstly, I will point to *Þorláks saga*'s hagiographical aspects. Secondly, I will modify the terms according to which we can speak of it as a realistic saga. Thirdly, I will pose the question of whether a 'realistic' saga can be expected to be a true representation. In the concluding remarks I will reflect upon a generally-received opinion that a saga's truth-value and its historical reliability can be measured according to the distance in time from which the events are seen.

***Þorláks saga*: A hagiographical saga**

Þorláks saga belongs to 'the sagas of bishops', a sub-class that was introduced with Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Jón Sigurðsson's edition, *Biskupa sögur* I-II (1856-78).³

¹ For the dating of *Þorláks saga* see Højgaard Jørgensen, 1978, 16-17 and 29; Sverrir Tómasson, 1992, 474; Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 2002, xxxii.

² Traditionally the dichotomy between history and fiction has been a central issue in saga studies. It seems, however, as if rough distinctions between history and fiction are not as essential to saga studies today as they were earlier. Now scholars are inclined to perceive history and fiction as complementary entities, and thus they approach the individual sagas as integral texts that are in principle both history and fiction, historical sources and literary artefacts; e.g. Meulengracht Sørensen, 1993, 22-32; Clunies Ross, 1998, 18; Tulinius, 2002, 186 and 217.

³ There seems to be no disagreement among editors that *Þorláks saga* belongs to this sub-class (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Jón Sigurðsson, 1856-78; Guðni Jónsson, 1948; Jón

The sagas of bishops have been further divided into two groups (cf. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 2003, xxiv): hagiography and ecclesiastical history.⁴ Being a story about the first Icelandic saint, Þorlákr Þórhallsson, *Þorláks saga* is considered a hagiography. *Þorláks saga* resembles the Latin *vita*, the life story of a saint, which is probably one of the most widespread genres of the Middle Ages. The hagiographical aspect of *Þorláks saga* has not exactly been neglected by saga scholars, but many commentators have been inclined to be more interested in elaborating on the question of the historical reliability of *Þorláks saga* than in investigating the saga's hagiographical aspects.⁵ *Þorláks saga* has mainly been compared to and contrasted with other sagas of bishops, not to Latin or translated *vitae*, and has been treated mostly as part of the saga genre rather than in the context of a Latin hagiographical genre.⁶ A closer investigation of the implications of *Þorláks saga*'s hagiographical aspects could, by way of contrast to this, give a fuller understanding of the specific historicity of this saga. As a hagiographical text, *Þorláks saga* participates in a Christian – that is, a non-native and non-autonomous – literary tradition (if any tradition at all), and it would seem appropriate to understand this saga as an example not only of a saga sub-class, but also of a medieval hagiographical genre, the saints' lives, which existed all over the Christian world.

Looking at the composition of *Þorláks saga* is one way by which to recognise its relationship to the saints' lives. The composition follows a typical scheme in six steps (Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 2003, xviii-xxiii and 2002, lvi), covering the life of Þorlákr from the presentation of his parents, birth and childhood, through adulthood and death, to the post-mortem miracles which provide the decisive proof of his sanctity.

Moreover, Þorlákr is an incarnation of Christian deeds: faith, hope, love wisdom, moderation, etc., and he is typical inasmuch as he exemplifies the perfect ethical behaviour of a Christian throughout his life.

Citations from the Bible are inserted in the saga, and the narrative voice makes explicit that Þorlákr throughout his life acts in agreement with these citations, e.g. when it comes to his reading and writing habits:

Jafnan var hann at riti ok ritaði ávallt helgar bœkr eptir dæmum Páls postola er hann sagði í sínum pistola: 'Eigi ritum vér yðr aðra hluti en þá er yðr er mest þorf at lesa ok at vita'. (*Þorláks saga*, 2002, 70).

Furthermore, the narrator explicitly compares Þorlákr to biblical characters: he acts like Christ, e.g., when it is told that he takes care of the poor:

Helgason, 1938–1978; Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 2002). The subclass, however, is not clearly defined, and there is no general agreement as to the exact number of sagas and *þættir* to be included in the editions; see also the discussion in Højgaard Jørgensen, 1978, 6–11.

⁴ *Þorláks saga* and *Hungurvaka* are representatives of hagiography and ecclesiastical history respectively. Ásdís Egilsdóttir however points out that the division is problematic (2003, xxv).

⁵ A recent exception is Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 2002 and 2003.

⁶ In treatments of Icelandic medieval literature the sagas of Icelandic saints have generally been kept separate from the non-native saints' lives, e.g. Finnur Jónsson, 1920–24 and Jónas Kristjánsson, 1997. An exception is Sverrir Tómasson, 1992.

Ok gerði hann heldr svá at Guðs doemum en manna, er fyrr þó fœtr postola sinna ok lét síðan þínask til lausnar ǫllu mannkyni; (*Þorláks saga*, 2002, 71)

and the manner of his death resembles the death of Christ, e.g., when it is told that he thirsts before he dies:

ok veitti Guð honum þá dýrð at hann þyrsti við andlét sitt, sem sjálfan Guðs son, ok skyldi hvárgi stoðvask fyrr en í andligu lífi því er Guðs vinir eru jafnan þyrstir til. (*Þorláks saga*, 2002, 82).

Thus the actions of Þorlákr are grounded on the *imitatio Christi*.

In participating in a literary tradition where the main character is an imitation of Christ, *Þorláks saga* re-actualises past models in the present and re-constitutes a biblical paradigm in a new temporal and spatial setting. In repeating this paradigm, *Þorláks saga* maintains a tradition that links real events and persons to biblical events and persons. Thereby the saga exemplifies that events which took place in Iceland in the twelfth century are incorporated in a widespread pattern that imposes a repetitive view on history – which in turn implies that the reported events are subordinated to an interpretation that places them in a context of salvation (see, e.g., Heffernan 1988, 20). In *Þorláks saga* persons and events are interpreted figuratively, and placed in a pattern where history is structured from one significant event, Christ and the resurrection, and consequently is divided into a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ this event. Within this pattern what happened before the resurrection is a potential pre-figuration of Christ, and what happens after the resurrection is a potential imitation of Christ. The figurative repetitions are both interrelated and also unitedly pointed towards salvation. In participating in such a tradition, *Þorláks saga* cannot be expected to transmit information about an extrinsic referent in a neutral fashion; instead, it produces an identifiable overlay of meaning which is related to this specific act of interpretation – and a recognition of this should be incorporated into any discussion of the historical reliability of *Þorláks saga*.

***Þorláks saga*: A realistic saga?**

Þorláks saga has been labelled as realistic. E.g. Hallvard Magerøy writes that *Þorláks saga* and *Jóns saga* ‘er skrivne av fólk som stod hendingane etter måten nær. Her er ikkje berre det hist. grunnlaget sikrare enn í storparten av dei framande legendene [the saints’ lives], men og skildringa ǫreiare, med større rikdom på detaljar, og difor med ein meir realistisk dâm’ (1961, 351).

Once more *Þorláks saga* is thought to be historically reliable, and again as a consequence of being a contemporary saga. Both the reliability of the saga and its realistic appearance are emphasised as distinct features contrasting the Icelandic sagas of bishops (*Þorláks saga* and *Jóns saga*) and the Latin saints’ lives.

But what actually makes *Þorláks saga* realistic, and what is understood by the term? Magerøy mentions the richness of detail in *Þorláks saga* as an argument for his statement that *Þorláks saga* has a realistic tone. The details concerning the world in which Þorlákr lives establish a picture of a recognisable social and political reality and they meet the expectations of what is commonly accepted to be known about the circumstances and environment of a man with Þorlákr’s background and career. The

quotation seems to rest upon a notion that historical reliability can be deduced from such a realistic setting. If I have understood the passage just quoted correctly, realism in *Þorláks saga* is bound up with a notion of referentiality, which demonstrates that Magerøy means that the saga – to a relatively high degree – refers to an extra-textual reality. In this sense his assumption that *Þorláks saga* is realistic seems to imply an understanding of *Þorláks saga* as a (relatively) true representation.

The hagiographical aspects of *Þorláks saga* have already been emphasised in this paper, and I have mentioned that this saga repeats a biblical pattern in its representation of the main character. It is relevant to reflect upon the hagiographical aspect in this short discussion of *Þorláks saga*'s status as a realistic text. It tells us that this saga does not represent historical events by referring only to a social or political context, but also by referring to a spiritual context. When Magerøy emphasised *Þorláks saga* as being realistic, he was judging the saga from outside the tradition to which it belongs, making a social and political reality his point of comparison. But there is another point of comparison at stake when *Þorláks saga*'s status as a realistic text is discussed, namely a divine reality. What I am arguing here is that *Þorláks saga*, because of its figural view of history, also operates with another, spiritual, notion of reality, which from within the hagiographical literary tradition would probably be upheld as a deeper and more truthful point of comparison. Thus two points of comparison are in play if *Þorláks saga*'s truth-value is to be determined.

According to Magerøy the realistic appearance was meant to be a distinctive feature separating *Þorláks saga* from Latin saints' lives. This might be the case if a social reality is decisive, but in taking the figurative interpretation seriously, the notion of reality, what is thought to be real, is exactly one of the essential features which both *Þorláks saga* and non-native *vitae* have in common. In *Þorláks saga* the main character is transformed from being a historical person to be a pre-figuration of the Redemption. The understanding of Þorlákr as a pre-figuration implies that the future salvation pointed at is even more 'real' than the present historical person. Understood as a pre-figuration, the historical Þorlákr is in a certain way incomplete, as he points to something in the future, which will be the actual, real and definitive event.⁷ Accordingly, in hagiographical literature reality and spirituality are mixed entities, making it difficult to limit the notion of reality solely to a social and political reality.

As regards the background upon which saints' lives are to be understood T. Heffernan writes: 'The 'real' was always unapparent, hidden beneath some surface. Such a fideistic attitude is nowhere more pronounced than in the lives of the saints, where human flesh and blood have become the dwelling place of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. The saint is the medieval symbol for this interplay between the known and the unknown' (Heffernan, 1988, 38). The saints' lives then point to intersections where the historical and the meta-historical meet, e.g. to individuals that exist in an earthly context, but whose spiritual essence is fulfilled in another world.

Let me illustrate how the historical and the meta-historical are juxtaposed in *Þorláks saga*. Þorlákr is enrolled in a political and social environment, which becomes most obvious in the B and C versions of the saga, which include *Oddaverja þáttur* (Ásdís Egilsdóttir, 2002, 163-81) and tell about the political conflicts between Þorlákr

⁷ For a thorough exposition of 'figura' and 'figural realism', cf. Auerbach, 1959.

and Icelandic chieftains. Þorlákr acts in an environment which incorporates specific social institutions. But it is evident that his main function is not to participate in those institutions. One example of this is the marriage scene (*Þorláks saga*, 2002, 54–55), which relates that Þorlákr is about to marry a widow. The narrative voice mentions church political restrictions as regards clerics and marriage, but such restrictions are not given as the main reason why the marriage is never fulfilled. Þorlákr is obviously portrayed as belonging to a reality in which marriage has the function of being a social institution, but at the same time he is not fully obliged to participate in this institution, which in this scene becomes evident when he eventually escapes the relationship. He has a dream in which it becomes evident that his real bride is not physical, but spiritual.

Þorlákr's spiritual essence manifests itself especially after his death, at which point he is lifted out of the social and political environment, and at which point physical signs are given of his real, spiritual essence: when dead, the pupils of his eyes are clear and wounds on his body are healed (*Þorláks saga*, 2002, 82). His real essence is never forgotten by the narrative voice, which retrospectively links the actions of Þorlákr with biblical models. But while Þorlákr's supernatural powers are only sporadically manifest during his lifetime (*Þorláks saga*, 2002, 60–61), they are clearly demonstrated after his death, when a series of miracles is ascribed to him (*Þorláks saga*, 2002, 84–99). Thus the earthly Þorlákr is a pre-figuration of a deeper reality which after his death is proved to be true.

In the context of the spiritual reality upheld by the tradition, the supernatural elements (the account of what happened to Þorlákr's body after his death and the miracles ascribed to him) are considered 'realistic', in the sense of being true representations of a spiritual reality.

These few comments concerning spiritual reality as relevant for understanding the specific literary tradition to which *Þorláks saga* belongs may be helpful as an additional point of comparison if the historical reliability of this saga is to be qualified further.

***Þorláks saga*: Mediation of reality**

Considerations as to the historical reliability of *Þorláks saga* can take external points of comparison into account, which is, of course, reasonable if the intention is to judge the truth-value of the saga. But speaking of a saga as 'realistic' raises more questions.³ For example, it could be asked, does recognition of what might be a commonly accepted social reality imply that the saga is a true representation of this reality? Or is the impression that a saga represents a recognisable and commonly accepted reality tantamount to correspondence with such extra-textual reality?

³ An exhaustive discussion of the term 'realistic' cannot of course be made in this brief paper. It should however be suggested that a realistic text is not automatically true, in the sense that it corresponds to real events. A realistic text merely approaches its subject by using a realistic mode of representation. The discrepancy between literary mode and extra-textual correspondence is evident as regards modern fiction, but less clear as regards historical representation in general and medieval literature specifically.

Instead of linking *Þorláks saga*'s realistic appearance to historical reliability it could be argued that *Þorláks saga* exhibits a literary mode, the realistic, which refers to a recognizable reality, but which is a literary phenomenon, a certain mode of representation, which is not imitating, but rather elaborating upon a reality and in doing so feels free to generalise, omit, exaggerate, etc. If the realism of *Þorláks saga* is first and foremost looked upon as a literary mode, two different levels – the mode of representation, which is a literary phenomenon, and the referentiality of the text, which has to do with extra-textual correspondence, are kept apart.⁹

If the truth-value of the text is deduced, for example, from the circumstance that the main character Þorlákr Þórhallsson was a real person, then *Þorláks saga* is true representation. But still we cannot expect *Þorláks saga*'s articulation of this real person and his life to be 'realistic' in the sense of being a true representation of a reality. Let me try to illustrate this point: I have already mentioned that the composition of *Þorláks saga* follows six steps, covering a presentation of his parents, his childhood, and so on. These steps constitute a general frame in which the events of Þorlákr's life are organised chronologically. But chronology is not the only organising principle in the saga: the saga is not sequentially undefined, it has culminations and resolutions, and consequently some basic narrative principles are inherent in the saga, such as a beginning, middle and end. The events are not merely sequential units on a chronological line, but also have an important function as story elements. In *Þorláks saga* specific events in the main character's life are chosen and some are highlighted, such as Þorlákr's time in a monastery, his consecration as a bishop and his death. What I am getting at here is that the establishment of both a chronology and a narrative represent processes of selection and arrangement.

We can expect more to have happened during Þorlákr's life than what is included in this saga. The processes of selection and arrangement are seen, for example, when the A version of *Þorláks saga* is compared to the B and C versions. The B and C versions select other events (especially the controversies between Þorlákr and Icelandic chieftains) and add other highlights to the story, new story elements, which consequently, by changing the story-line, ascribe a new meaning to the events.

These considerations about chronology and narrative can be labelled as respectively the 'chronicle' and 'story' levels of *Þorláks saga*.¹⁰ Other levels of the saga must also be mentioned if we wish to figure out to what degree *Þorláks saga* is true representation. Apart from being mediated through narrative, the events in Þorlákr's life are explained through a specific story form – they are, as I have mentioned, articulated in the specific form of the *vita* (the textual level which Hayden White calls 'explanation by emplotment'). Furthermore, events are explained with

⁹ The realistic and fantastic modes are sometimes related to the dichotomy between history and fiction when it is concluded that a realistic text is historical and that a fantastic text is fictive. Such claims are in danger of mixing up different levels, and the possibility of deducing historical veracity from textual realism presupposes that the realistic mode leads to the essence of the world, a conclusion that can be questioned.

¹⁰ These levels are introduced by Hayden White, who emphasises different levels of conceptualisation in the historical text: apart from the level of 'chronicle' and 'story' White mentions three other levels: 'explanation by emplotment', 'explanation by argument' and 'explanation by ideological implication' (White, 1975, 5–29).

reference to specific historical laws ('explanation by argument'). The events in Þorlákr's life follow each other chronologically. But the narrative voice does not connect the events as secular causal relations (horizontally), but merely as spiritual relations (vertically), and as a result the events are placed within a matrix of spiritual relations guided by the laws of God. It is told in the very beginning of the saga (*Þorláks saga*, 2002, 47) that an earlier Icelandic bishop, also named Þorlákr (Þorlákr Runólfsson) died in the same year, 1133, as Bishop Þorlákr (Þorlákr Þórhallsson) was born; this coincidence is explained as a result of God's governing of the world, and with reference to a larger discussion of medieval sign theory and the relationship between name and person. In other words, two events are linked to each other and are ascribed a specific significance. Furthermore, Þorlákr's actions are related to specific ethical positions ('explanation by ideological implication'), for example, as already mentioned, to Christian deeds, and his actions have a spiritual base of authority as they are grounded upon biblical prescriptions. Taken all together, events are explained by association with the resurrection of Christ and the main character's liberation from this world.

It is inherent in the understanding of the processes of selection and arrangement mentioned earlier, taken here to be essential to an understanding of historical representation, that the events to be reported are chosen by the author depending upon the narrative he wishes to relate. The real events, as they stand in their historical setting, cannot be expected to constitute a narrative – nor can they be intrinsically bound to one particular story form – as one and same event can be narrated and explained in different ways. This means, in principle, that every time a narrative is constructed, another kind of narrative could have been told, another explanation could have been chosen, and another basis of authority could have been imposed on the events.

It seems to be relevant for a discussion about the historical reliability of *Þorláks saga* to emphasise that this saga mediates reality through narrative and explanation. I have tried to illustrate this with reference to conceptual levels inherent in the saga which do not have equivalent reference to an extra-textual reality. *Þorláks saga* may refer to an extra-textual reality if we are discussing the level of 'chronicle', and it may even be reasonable to consider this level as being a relatively true representation. But the other levels are non-referential and artificial, as these levels subordinate the events to a specific story form and to specific culturally and time-bound explanations, presumed not to be intrinsically bound to the real events (cf. White, 1987, 37). Strictly speaking, at the levels of narrative and explanation, *Þorláks saga* cannot be considered to be realistic, in the sense of being true representation. The realism can be considered merely as a mode of representation which focuses upon a well known reality, and the recognition of this, in telling the story of Þorlákr Þórhallsson.

Concluding remarks: Contemporary audience as witness?

One of the premises for considering contemporary sagas as being in principle more historically reliable than sagas of the past is that a contemporary audience by virtue of its common pool of recently reported and witnessed information would act as a form of control on the saga in terms of the truthfulness of its representation. In contrast to

contemporary sagas, which could be controlled by an audience, sagas of the past are often meant to be beyond such documentary control and as regards sagas of the past audiences are not expected to function as witnesses, a circumstance that is meant to leave more room for the productive fantasy of an author.

Historical reliability however cannot solely be judged according to the lapse of time between the events and the time of writing.¹¹ Þorlákr Þórhallsson died in 1193, and *Þorláks saga* (the A version) is dated to the first decade of the thirteenth century. Jónas Kristjánsson dates the saga to the very beginning of thirteenth century, which means that the first version of the saga was written about ten years after Þorlákr's death. The B version, which includes *Oddaverja þáttur*, was written later in the thirteenth century, some time after 1222 (Sverrir Tómasson, 1992, 474). But in spite of this short space of time between events and the time of writing, in *Þorláks saga*, as in most other historical writings, the productive fantasy of the author is an important functional element. *Þorláks saga* is just one example of the way in which contemporary real events in their representation are transformed into story elements and eventually into a coherent configuration. Furthermore, it is an example of how in such transmission, contemporary events are coloured by available forms of interpretation.

My point here is that communication between author and audience is not to be reduced to a common acceptance of facts.¹² It is also based on the author's endeavour to construct a narrative which is comprehensible to his audiences, and on the audiences' expectation concerning the particular kind of narrative they are listening to. The author does not freely construct a narrative, he merely participates in a literary tradition that was known by his audience, and he makes the events conform to story patterns and conventional models of explanation with which his audience is familiar. This includes, in the case of *Þorláks saga*, a realistic mode of representation, and the placing of the main character in a setting that is recognised by the audience as being close to their own world. If we accept that the author constructs a narrative, and by doing so, amongst other things, explains and interprets the events, and that this construction is carried out in terms of a hagiographical literary heritage, the saga cannot be presumed to have the intention of upholding real facts. Neither can the audience be considered as a reliable witness, since the definite expectations with which it meets the hagiographical saga may not first and foremost be related to the historical correctness of the saga. It might have expected to hear that this bishop, who lived amongst them in their immediate environment, was significant to salvation history.

¹¹ See e.g. Ólafía Einarisdóttir, who discusses the source value and historical reliability of the contemporary sagas paying special interest to kings' sagas (Ólafía Einarisdóttir 1995).

¹² Literature is considered as an object of communication between author and audience in different ways; cf. Tulinius, 2002, 35-36; White, 1987, 40. On the specific relationship between the author of a *vita*, by Heffernan called the sacred biographer, and his audience, see Heffernan, 1988, 18-22.

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