

# Saint-Making in Early Iceland

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines briefly the lives of Iceland's earliest candidates for canonization—the Norwegian king, Óláfr Tryggvason, and, more particularly, the Icelandic bishops, Þorlákr Þórhallsson, Jón Ögmundarson and Guðmundr Arason—and discusses some of the facts that led to their acceptance or rejection as saints of the Roman Catholic Church.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Dans cet article, nous passons en revue la vie des saints et des saints aspirants de l'Islande médiévale, et notamment celle du roi de Norvège, Óláfr Tryggvason, et surtout celles des évêques islandais, Þorlákr Þórhallsson, Jón Ögmundarson et Guðmundr Arason. Nous considérons également les courants politiques et religieux qui ont fait que leur candidature soit acceptée ou refusée.

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Iceland was settled in the late ninth and early tenth centuries by mainly Norwegian Vikings, with a fair number of Irish wives, slaves and servants. For a good two hundred years after that, Icelanders still seem to have felt that they were part of Norway; for example, around 1030, a treaty was signed establishing an affiliation between the Icelandic people and the Kingdom of Norway, giving Icelanders privileges in Norway and vice versa (Hastrup 1984 243). Up and coming young men—at least those in the sagas—would pay a visit to the court of Norway and hope to be well received. Most of the skalds at the Norwegian courts seem to have been Icelandic too. Norway was Iceland's main trading partner, and, when Icelanders first started to write history, they recorded the history of Norwegian kings.

By the twelfth century, however, relations had started to deteriorate. In fact, they had deteriorated so much that in 1173-74 the bishop elect could not go to Norway to be consecrated because of open hostility between the two countries (BS I 52).<sup>1</sup> But even before that, Icelanders had started to look upon themselves as distinct from Norwegians. This feeling of separateness manifested itself in the writings of the time (Karlsson 64): in the *First Grammatical Treatise*, a discussion of how to adapt the Latin alphabet to the Icelandic language; in the *Íslendingabók* and the *Landnámabók*, accounts of the settlement of Iceland; in *Hungrváka* ["Hunger-Waker" or "Appetizer"], a little book containing short biographies of the first five Bishops of the See of Skálholt, the first diocese to be created in Iceland (BS I 1-31). Gunnarr Karlsson even suggests that the accounts in the Sagas of Icelanders of men going to Iceland to escape the tyranny of the king of Norway might be related to this new sense of national identity (65).

With national identity came a desire for a national saint. Since the monks Oddr and Gunnlaugr from the monastery of Þingeyrar both wrote Latin biographies of King Óláfr Tryggvason in the middle of the twelfth century, Lars Lönnroth has suggested that they may have been trying to promote the king responsible for the conversion of their country to Christianity to compete with Norway's St. Óláfr (17). E.O.G. Turville-Petre, on the other hand, believes "the need for a patron saint could not be satisfied by this Norwegian Viking, however intimate his relations with the Icelanders" (196). Jón Johannesson suggests more mercenary reasons: "But sooner or later the bishops were bound to realize how advantageous it would be for their Sees to have native saints to whom people could make their offerings" (190).

Óláfr Tryggvason did, however, have one advantage over Icelandic-born saints: he was an *Adelheilige*, a member of a royal family who used his or her wealth and power in the service of religion, and *Adelheiligen* were the most popular type of saint in Europe in the late twelfth century.<sup>2</sup> However, there was one great disadvantage, besides his nationality, to having Óláfr Tryggvason as the patron of Iceland: he had disappeared after the Battle of Svold and his body had never

been found, making it impossible to translate his bones and difficult to do any of the other things necessary for the establishment of a cult, such as constructing a shrine for the body, or providing primary relics, such as bones, for the faithful. It is not altogether surprising that the cult of Óláfr Tryggvason failed to produce any miracles.

Although Adelheiligen remained popular on the continent of Europe, a different type of saint had started to emerge in twelfth-century England: the bishop whose function was that of a critic rather than an upholder of royal power; the murdered Thomas Becket, a staunch defender of the rights of the church, would be an example (Wilson 34-35). Then, as the twelfth century gave way to the thirteenth and more saints' lives came to be written in the vernacular, there was less interest in royal and high-born saints and more in familiar and contemporary figures.

Iceland's three saints—or saints aspirant—reflect these three tendencies. Þorlákr Þórhallsson, since 1984 the official patron of Iceland, is a type of the bishop who defended the Church against the encroachments of the secular authorities—only in this case it was the Church that was doing the encroaching. Jón Ögmundarson (Bishop of Hólar from 1106 to 1121), whose canonization by the Althing has not been ratified by Rome, is portrayed to a certain extent as an Adelheilige. Guðmundr Árason (Bishop of Hólar from 1203 to 1237), who has not been canonized at all, was very much the “people's saint.”

Þorlákr Þórhallsson, who was Bishop of Skálholt from 1176 to 1193, was both a likely and an unlikely candidate for canonization. From the Church's point of view, he was an excellent choice, for he had insisted on high moral standards and defended the Church's rights against secular encroachment. On the other hand, such attitudes were not likely to have endeared him to lay chieftains (*goðar*), who made up the bulk of those who voted at the Althing.

Þorlákr came from a well-born but impoverished family. His personal life was beyond reproach. Unlike most Icelandic bishops, he neither married nor produced illegitimate children.<sup>3</sup> In fact, according to his biographer, he turned away from the widow he had been contemplating because of a dream he had in which a heavenly messenger promised him a more worthy bride (*BS I* 42-43).<sup>4</sup> He seems to have been very intelligent; he reputedly memorized the psalter as a young child, and he was ordained at the early age of eighteen. He must have been careful with money: according to his biographer, after serving as a parish priest for a few years, he managed to save up enough to go abroad to study in Paris and Lincoln for six years.<sup>5</sup> After he returned to Iceland, he became an abbot, and it was only with great reluctance that he agreed to leave the cloister when Bishop Klængr chose him as his successor. As a bishop, he managed his income wisely, putting the diocese back on its feet after Klængr's extravagance, and his choice of administrators was judicious. He was not afraid to stand up to powerful chieftains in matters of jurisdiction over churches or sexual morality. He

discouraged divorce and used money from fines levied for immorality to try to keep poor couples together, inspired perhaps by his own parents' separation after they got into debt. From the *Oddaverja þáttr*, we know that he tried to dissolve marriages contracted within forbidden degrees of kindred, and he even tried to separate his sister Ragnheiðr from her long-time lover, the powerful chieftain Jón Loptsson.

Þorlákr and Jón Loptsson came into conflict first over the jurisdiction of churches. Jón refused to give up his rights to the church on his land and incited other landowners to do the same. This was actually a case of ecclesiastical encroachment. Until 1190 there had been little separation between church and state in Iceland. Secular chieftains (*goðar*) were educated in Church schools, and most of them were ordained. They also owned the churches which stood on their lands, and either officiated in them themselves, or appointed a priest as chaplain. As a result, a large part of the tithes paid to the Church came back to them. Then a law was passed in 1190, forbidding chieftains to be in holy orders. At the same time, Archbishop Eysteinn in Norway claimed that the Church should have jurisdiction over churches no matter whose land they were on, a claim which Þorlákr sought to uphold, successfully at first but unsuccessfully later, after Jón Loptsson refused to relinquish his claims to the church on his land.

Shortly after Þorlákr's death, people started having dreams about him. For example, Gizurr Hallsson, who had pronounced his funeral oration, dreamed that he saw him sitting in the church in Skálaholt in bishop's vestments and blessing the people; to Gizurr, this was a confirmation of the former bishop's sanctity and high place in heaven (*BS* I 75). Four years later, Þorlákr appeared in a dream to a priest called Þorvaldr living in the northern diocese of Hólar, informing him that the bad weather would improve if his bones were moved. The priest went to see his own bishop, Brandr, who then sent the priest Ormr to the Althing to report on the miraculous dream. On the way, another miracle took place: Ormr's horse was too tired to move, but after the priest called on Þorlákr the animal got a new lease of life (*BS* I 76). Þorlákr's bones were moved, and more miracles took place; for example, although there were great floods all over the country at that time, men were still not prevented from going to the *translatio*—although it did have to be delayed for a day so that Guðmundr Arason could get there (*BS* II 240).

One reason why the impetus for Þorlákr's canonization came from the northern diocese of Hólar rather than from Þorlákr's own diocese of Skálaholt was presumably that memories of conflict were still strong in Skálaholt; in fact, it was only after Jón Loptsson's death that the canonization process got under way. On the other hand, putting Þorlákr forward as a saint probably helped to some extent to heal the rift between the Church and the Oddaverjar: even if Jón's family did not like the saint himself, they presumably would not object to the honour that accrued from such a prestigious connection.<sup>6</sup>

Þorlákr's successor in the diocese of Skálaholt was his nephew Páll, the son of Jón Loptsson and Ragnheiðr; he held the see from 1193 to 1213. He was a surprising choice for the position, for, although well educated, he was illegitimate and only a deacon when elected and so had to be first ordained and then consecrated bishop in Norway. His election may, however, have been seen as a way of reconciling the church and Skálaholt's leading family. In addition, Páll was a family man with four children, and none of the married bishops in the early history of the Icelandic Church were ardent defenders of the Faith who created problems for local chieftains. Páll also seems to have been something of a diplomat, managing to remain on good terms with both his father and his uncle, if the details in his saga are to be trusted. His father presumably provided the money which enabled him to study in England and to acquire a *goðorð*, and his uncle bequeathed his bishop's ring to him on his deathbed, an indication that he would like him to be his successor (BS I 69). Despite being on good terms with his uncle, Páll appears to have been a little reluctant to press for Þorlákr's canonization. Jón Jóhannesson calls this "a logical reaction from the son of Jón Loftsson" (191). Jørgen Højgaard Jørgensen, in a similar vein, thinks that Páll (must have felt the rise of Þorlákr's sanctity as a potentially dangerous development) since he had been elected by and represented Þorlákr's political opponents (8). Margaret Cormack, on the other hand, suggests that "the Lincoln-educated Páll might well have been dubious about the rapidity with which his uncle's sanctity had been proclaimed" (2005 31).

No doubt encouraged by the success of Þorlákr's canonization and cult, Bishop Brandr of Hólar decided to look for a saint for his own diocese. He therefore had the bones of two bishops of Hólar, Jón Ögmundarson and Björn Gilsson (reigned 1147-62), exhumed and washed. It was only after Jón appeared in a dream stating that the weather would improve if his bones were moved, and also after a sick girl was cured by the water used for washing his bones, that the problem of which of the two bishops was the more saintly was resolved (BS II 61-62; 70-73). The bones were put in a shrine and miracles wrought through Jón's intercession started. Jón's *vita*, written by Brother Gunnlaugr in Latin and extant only in translations, is obviously written to substantiate his claim to sainthood.

Jón was well connected. His forbears on his mother's side went back to one of the first baptized Icelanders in the eastern part of the country, and his father's side of the family traced their ancestry to the Settlement. Details of his childhood seem to have been scarce, and so Gunnlaugr filled in the gaps with stories set in Scandinavia but based on incidents from the life of Christ. In an almost certainly apocryphal scene, Jón's mother is taken by her parents at eight years of age to the court of the King of Norway, where St. Olaf says of her: "Hon verðr mikill lykkumaðr ok sá mun göfgastr ættbogi á Íslandi, er frá henni kemr" [She will be a very fortunate person, and the noblest family in Iceland will descend from her] (BS II 6). Later, when Jón is a child and the family is staying at the court of the

King of Denmark, Astrid the queen mother tells Jón's mother not to slap the child's hands when he tries to take food before the feast has started because "hendr þessar...eru byskups hendr" [those hands...are bishop's hands] (BS II 5).<sup>7</sup> The scenes have Biblical overtones of the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1: 26-35) and Mary's visitation to her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1: 39-56). They also link Jón with the royal families of Scandinavia, almost making him into an Adelheilige.

As a young man, Jón studied in Norway and Denmark. He is also said to have gone to Rome for a papal dispensation after being chosen as bishop because he had remarried after the death of his first wife (BS II 30-31).<sup>8</sup> Back in Iceland as the first Bishop of Hólar, he tried to eradicate all traces of paganism, even going so far as to change the names of the days of the week (BS II 37).<sup>9</sup> He also attempted to put an end to the composing of licentious love-poetry, and he improved the state of knowledge of the local clergy (BS II 38). His greatest achievement was the founding of the school in Hólar, which became the training-ground for all the future high-born clerics in the northern part of the country (BS II 41-47). In spite of these achievements, Jón Jóhannesson comments: "It is noteworthy that in no other sources contemporaneous with or older than Bishop Jón's *life*...is it maintained that the bishop excelled among the early leaders of the Church of Iceland" (155). In the meantime, even before Þorlákr and Jón were declared saints at the Althing by the leading men of Iceland, the common people in the northern part of the country were convinced that a simple priest, Guðmundr Arason, was a miracle-worker and presumably a saint.

Guðmundr, like Páll, was born out of wedlock, for his mother, after being married against her will, left her husband and went to live with Guðmundr's father, Ari, by whom she had four children. Ari was killed while Guðmundr was still young, and, since illegitimate children could not inherit, his family decided to make a priest of the boy, although he was not studiously inclined. It was only when he was in his twenties that he suddenly became very devout and started devoting himself to the poor (BS II 203-04). Two incidents seem to have contributed to the flowering of his vocation: first, his leg was seriously injured in a shipwreck; second, his good friend, the son of Bishop Björn, died unexpectedly after a short illness.

It was also around this time that Guðmundr began to gain a reputation as a miracle worker. Miracles had already been attributed to some of the earlier Icelandic bishops and to Saint Cecilia. Ísleifr, the first Bishop of Skálholt, is said to have cured madness and made drink contaminated with darnel safe (BS I 6). Gizurr, his son and the second bishop, was reputed to have been the noblest man who ever lived in Iceland; after his death the country drooped as Rome had done after the death of Gregory the Great, which could be interpreted as a sign from heaven (BS I 14). The next bishop was Þorlákr Runólfsson; as he lay dying a priest heard the Latin *cantilena* of Bishop Lambert being sung in the heavens although

there was no other human being around (BS I 18-19). These miracles seem, however, to have been isolated incidents, and there is no indication that they were connected with a canonization process.

By comparison, the miracles of St. Cecilia were more “popular” than those of the bishops mentioned above: in one case, she cured a poisoned foot and in other deafness (*Heilagra Manna Sögur I* 294-97). These miracles apparently took place before the establishment of St. Cecilia’s feast-day in 1179 (Cormack 1994 88-89), which suggests that by the second half of the twelfth century the idea that miracles could take place in Iceland was accepted by the common people. For this reason when Guðmundr cured a madwoman with holy water people were prepared to believe that a miracle had taken place, especially as other priests had already tried to cure her, also with holy water, but with no success. According to *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, the Virgin Mary appeared to a woman in a dream, telling her to use water blessed by Guðmundr on the afflicted woman (BS II 211-12). When the water proved to be effective, stories about Guðmundr spread throughout Iceland, and people started inviting him so that he could bless the water on their farms.<sup>10</sup> From then on, the saga is full of miracles.

Guðmundr’s miracle-working and popularity may also have contributed to Þorlák’s and Jón’s canonization. In the minds of Guðmundr’s followers, there already was a saint in Iceland, and the more Guðmundr’s reputation as a miracle-worker grew, the less likely people were to put their trust in any new saints proposed by the clergy. Bishop Brandr of Hólar and other members of the clergy were already perturbed by Guðmundr’s almsgiving which they considered excessive. Bishop Brandr may not have been altogether happy with the turn things were taking in his diocese and might have been glad when one of his priests, Þorvaldr, came to tell him about his dreams of Þorlák; here was a new source of interest to distract people from Guðmundr.

Guðmundr himself was in favour of Þorlák’s canonization. His saga states that he and Ormr Eyjolfsson, Þorlák’s chaplain, had already talked about Þorlák’s sanctity, and Guðmundr had maintained that he was the holiest of men (BS II 229). Guðmundr probably encouraged the common people to pray to Þorlák, perhaps to distract them from his own growing notoriety as a miracle-worker, since there is nowhere any indication that he used his abilities for personal aggrandisement.<sup>11</sup>

An interesting feature of Guðmundr’s miracles is the extent to which some of them resemble pre-Christian magic. Practically all the abilities ascribed to pagan witches are attributed to Guðmundr: foretelling the future (BS II 315), making out-of-body journeys (BS II 246-7), altering the weather (BS II 242; 249-50), diverting rivers (BS II 253), creating optical illusions (BS II 309). He is, in fact, a “superwitch” (McCreesh). This agrees with what Keith Thomas says about the relationship between Christian and pagan magic in the Middle Ages:

Conversions to the new religion ... have frequently been assisted by the belief of converts that they are acquiring not just a means of other-worldly salvation, but a new and more powerful magic.  
(25)

The use of these motifs in *Guðmundar saga* becomes all the more striking when this saga is compared with the *vitae* of Jón and Þorlákr. In neither of these are there any unambiguous examples of the pagan supernatural. Although both sagas have some incidents with pagan overtones, there is always another possible source for them in religious writings. As an example, let us take an incident in the *Oddaverja þáttur*. After pursuing and catching Bishop Þorlákr, Þorsteinn Jónsson is unable to deliver the fatal blow because his arm stiffens. There are two possible sources for this lack of movement: the *herfjöturr* of Germanic mythology and the story of Sanctulus in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, in which the executioner's arm stiffens so that he cannot behead Sanctulus (Book III Chapter 37). Has the author taken the motif from pagan mythology, or is his source the *Dialogues*?

The question then arises: why does *Guðmundar saga* have so much more of the pagan supernatural than the *vitae* of the other bishops? According to Turville-Petre and Stefán Einarsson, it is "because of lingering respect for the critical tradition of Sæmundr and Ari" that the sagas of Thorlákr and the other bishops of Skálholt are "saner" [their expression] than those from Hólar (Turville-Petre 202; Einarsson 101). Turville-Petre's and Stefán Einarsson's reasoning does not, however, take into account the fact that *Guðmundar saga* preserves more of the *pagan* supernatural than the *vitae* of Jón and later on Laurentius, the other two bishops of Hólar whose lives we possess.

Now, if we look at Heffernan's theory of the origins and development of "sacred biography," a reason for the strong presence of the pagan supernatural in *Guðmundar saga* emerges:

The author for sacred biography is the community, and consequently the experience presented by the narrative voice is collective...The author is not the expert; rather the community is a collection of experts, and the narrative reflects this state of collective authority.  
(19-20)

Jón and Þorlákr were "establishment" saints. The community which pushed for Þorlákr's canonization would have been composed for the most part of educated and aristocratic members of Icelandic society, churchmen and statesmen in search of a national saint. The community supporting Jón's cause was similar, consisting of representatives of the diocese of Hólar who felt that they too needed a patron saint. It is for this reason that most of Jón's and Þorlákr's early miracles



were witnessed by members of the Church. Guðmundr's miracles, on the other hand, were from the very beginning performed for and reported by the laity.

Because Guðmundr's followers were drawn in large part from the poor and dispossessed, they were more likely than educated chieftains and churchmen to believe in magic, monsters, fortune-telling and out-of-body journeys. The miracles in *Guðmundar saga* illustrate the confusion that reigned in many people's minds between Christian and pagan magic.<sup>12</sup> It would have been Guðmundr's followers who integrated elements from pagan folklore into Christian tradition, transferring attributes of Odin and pagan witches to God and his saintly bishop. By the time *Guðmundar saga* was set down in writing, these tales of holy magic were doubtless already anchored in popular tradition, and could be removed from his *vita* only with difficulty.<sup>13</sup> The high incidence of the pagan supernatural in this saga is a reflection of the credulous audience by whom and for whom *Guðmundar saga* was composed.

That Guðmundr was never canonized is not a reflection of his ministry to the poor. The irritant he had been during his lifetime to wealthy farmers and ecclesiastical authorities was forgotten in the course of time, and money was collected and another *vita* written by Abbot Arngrímr in the fourteenth century, changing or glossing over certain less desirable features of his life, such as his illegitimacy and his obstreperous childhood, with a view to making a case for his canonization. That the cause went nowhere was due to a change in policy at the Vatican. In 1234, due partly to abuses of the system of episcopal canonization, partly to the proliferation of local saints, and partly to Vatican politics, Pope Gregory IX decided to restrict the power of canonization to the Holy See (Beaudoin 20-33). Guðmundr was caught by this change in policy and so has remained forever Guðmundr the Good.

#### NOTES

1. The versions of the bishops' lives used in this study are taken from the Guðni Jónsson's three volume 1953 edition, *Byskupa Sögur*, referred to henceforward in citations as *BS*. The sagas on which I will focus my attention are *Guðmundar saga Arasonar* (*BS* II 167-389), *Jóns saga helga (eldri gerð)* (*BS* II 1-74), *Páls saga byskups* (*BS* I 251-283), and *Þorláks saga byskups* (*BS* I 33-129).
2. St. Olaf of Norway would be an example of an Adelheilige. For a discussion of the topic, see Vauchez 353.
3. Theoretically, bishops had been required to be celibate from the late seventh century onwards, but this stricture does not seem to have applied in Iceland. See Frances and Joseph Gies 59.
4. Since the sixth century, men who were married twice or married widows were supposed to be barred from the priesthood. See Frances and Joseph Gies 58.

5. Orri Vésteinsson (204) suggests that Þorlákr's studies abroad were financed by the Oddaverjar family. Whether or not this was so, Þorlákr was definitely not the family's puppet.
6. According to Michael Lapidge (23), "the social harmony displayed in such civic rituals [i.e. saints' cults] reduced intra-group or familial violence and emphasized the treasury of common values and history to which all citizens were heir, thereby strengthening social integration."
7. Could these court visits have been inspired by Jón's historical visits to the courts of Norway and Denmark when he was a young man?
8. Stephan Kuttner argues that this was not the purpose of his papal visit, if the visit was indeed real and not a hagiographical *topos*. At the start of the twelfth century, Icelanders presumably did not know the stricture against second marriages for the clergy and therefore saw no obstacle to Jón's ordination or later consecration as bishop. It was only in the thirteenth century that they realised there was a problem, and so Gunnlaugr "invented" a papal dispensation to regularise Jón's case.
9. Kirsten Hastrup (1985 187) suggests that Jón was canonized because he "dedicated much energy to fighting against heathen relics." One must remember, however, that Gunnlaugr may have taken an observed fact and attributed it to Jón because he was a little short of hard facts about his life.
10. According to *Guðmundar saga*, Guðmundr had actually been blessing wells and springs before this. However, the chapter in which this is stated—the chapter describing the priest's twenty-sixth year—is one in which incidents are not in their correct chronological order. For example, Guðmundr had been giving away too much to the poor, and so Bishop Brandr took away the books and vestments that Guðmundr had received from his uncle Ingimundr on the grounds that the See of Hólar and not Guðmundr was Ingimundr's heir. Ingimundr did not perish on Greenland for another two years, and his body was not found for eighteen years after that, so that it seems improbable that Brandr confiscated the books and vestments that year.
11. In *Guðmundar saga*, Guðmundr is depicted as being forced into the role of bishop by his family. Although the reluctant bishop is a common *topos* in hagiography, the general assumption is that the incident here is based on facts.
12. "Supernatural power dominated the life stories of peasant saints just as magic, miracle, and sorcery pervaded the everyday lives of rural people...Only supernatural intervention explained why one child died and another survived, why crops flourished one year and withered the next two or three. Receptive to miracle and magic, peasants sought wonder-workers" (Weinstein and Bell 208).
13. Similarly, the tale of Odin appearing to King Óláfr in the guise of an old man with one eye (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* II 86-88, ch. 198) seems to have been so popular that Snorri could not leave it out of the *Heimskringla* even though it contradicted his theory of euhemerism.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

BS: *Byskupa Sögur*.

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