

Recent Translations of the Medieval Icelandic Bishops' Sagas

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ABSTRACT: This article reviews two recent English-language translations of medieval Icelandic bishops' sagas, and contextualizes them in the history of translations from this genre. Margaret Cormack's *The Saga of St. Jón of Hólar* and Theodore M. Andersson's *Bishops in Early Iceland* were both published in 2021, and make important contributions to the growing interest in medieval Icelandic ecclesiastical history and religious literature. Cormack's book provides a more precise translation and is accompanied by a thorough study of the saga and its themes, while Andersson provides a more accessible and approachable if somewhat more limited work. These publications are part of a body of new translations in the genre, which has flourished since 2000, after a long period of neglect.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article examine deux récentes traductions en anglais de sagas sur des évêques islandais médiévaux, et les place dans le contexte de l'histoire des traductions de ce genre littéraire. Publiés en 2021, *The Saga of St. Jón of Hólar* de Margaret Cormack et *Bishops in Early Iceland* de Theodore M. Andersson contribuent fortement à l'intérêt grandissant pour l'histoire ecclésiastique et la littérature religieuse de l'Islande médiévale. Le livre de Cormack offre une traduction plus précise et est accompagné d'une étude minutieuse de la saga et ses thèmes, tandis que Anderson fournit un travail plus accessible et abordable, bien qu'un peu plus limité. Ces publications font partie d'un corpus de nouvelles traductions de ce genre littéraire qui prospère depuis l'an 2000 après une longue période d'oubli.

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The Icelandic *biskupasögur* [bishops' sagas] are a small corpus of narrative texts, written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, that tell the stories of Icelandic bishops and some of the history of the Icelandic church. There are six core texts written about six different bishops who collectively lived from around the end of the eleventh century until the middle of the fourteenth. These six bishops were distinct but significant figures, and the biographies written about them represent an a surprisingly diverse corpus, as well as an important body of sources for Icelandic history during this period.

Three of them were saints. Jón Ögmundarson, the protagonist of *Jóns saga helga* [The Saga of St. Jón] was the first bishop of the Hólar diocese of Northern Iceland, 1106–1121. Jón was canonized and his saga written around the same time as Þorlákr Þórhallsson, bishop of the southern diocese of Skálholt, 1178–1193, about whom *Þorláks saga helga* [The Saga of St. Þorlákr] was written. The third saint was never formally canonized and was an extremely controversial figure: Guðmundr Arason, bishop of Hólar 1203–1237, was involved in promoting the sanctity of Jón and Þorlákr, but he was also a charismatic spiritual leader in constant conflict with secular and ecclesiastical authorities. The sagas about him differ widely, some being more secular and some more hagiographic, and they are often referenced collectively as *Guðmundar sögur góða* [The Sagas of Guðmundr the Good].

The other three bishops were never treated as saints and as such had secular biographies written about them, though still of course influenced by hagiographic conventions. St. Þorlákr's nephew, Páll Jónsson, succeeded his uncle as bishop of Skálholt, from 1194 to his death in 1211. He was from an extremely powerful and wealthy family and was the son of the famous chieftain Jón Loptsson, but his *Páls saga* [The Saga of Páll] is very short and doesn't cover the same kind of sweeping historical events as many other bishops' sagas. In contrast, Árni Þorláksson, bishop of Skálholt 1269–1298, oversaw the shift of Iceland from an independent society to a vassal state of the Norwegian crown, and he helped to shape the major changes in church structure and ecclesiastical law that accompanied that shift. His *Árna saga* [The Saga of Árni] is thus one of the most important sources for legal and political history in medieval Iceland. Finally, Lárentíus Kálfsson was the last medieval Icelander to have a biography written about him; he was bishop of Hólar 1324–1331. While he, like Bishop Páll, does not seem to have overseen any particularly major historical events, his saga is a unique and vital source for fourteenth-century Icelandic and Norwegian history.

In addition, there are several narratives not centered around particular bishops: *Kristni saga* [The Saga of Christianity] tells the story of the conversion of Iceland in 999, adapting and expanding upon an earlier version of the story in *Íslendingabók* [The Book of Icelanders]. *Hungrvaka* is a collection of brief

accounts of the first five bishops of Skálholt, from roughly the middle of the eleventh century until just before the beginning of St. Þorlákr's tenure in 1178. Finally, there are numerous *þættir* [short stories] about other figures and events involved with the Icelandic church, usually closely related to the bishops' sagas. The *þættir* are often treated as separated texts but are transmitted with and often embedded in these larger narratives.

2021 was a landmark year in the study and dissemination of these important sagas, with the publication of two new translations from the corpus. Margaret Cormack published *The Saga of St. Jón of Hólar* with the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS), including with it both her own translation and notes to the saga as well as an additional introduction by the late Peter Foote. Theodore M. Andersson in turn published *Bishops in Early Iceland* with the Viking Society for Northern Research, a collection that includes four short texts concerning twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Icelandic bishops: *Hungrvaka*, which he translates as *Foretaste*; *The Saga of Bishop Páll Jónsson*; *An Account of the People at Oddi (Oddaverja þáttur)*, a *þáttur* transmitted in versions of *Þorláks saga*, which deals with Bishop Þorlákr's struggles to establish greater ecclesiastical control over major Icelandic churches in the late twelfth century; and finally *The Priesthood of Bishop Guðmundr Góði*, a version of Guðmundr Arason's saga that takes the story up until his consecration as bishop in 1203.

Both these translations are set to become valuable tools for students and scholars, as well as influential contributions to the growing interest in the history of Christianity and the Church in medieval Iceland. At the same time, they represent significantly different approaches to the craft of translation and may in the end be used and approached in different ways. It is thus worthwhile to consider both new books in the context of the history of English translations of the bishops' saga corpus.

Translations of the Bishops' Sagas

The great bounty of 2021 should perhaps not be surprising. The twenty-first century has brought renewed interest in the bishops' sagas and their value both as historical sources and as literary works. Translations are valuable tools for such work, but for nearly a century between 1905 and 2000 there was a major lull in translation activity.¹

In fact, what appears to have been the first published English translation of a bishop's saga still has not been replaced: Oliver Elton published *The Life of Laurence Bishop of Hólar in Iceland* in 1890, and this remains the only English translation of *Lárentius saga* available. This is a surprising and unfortunate gap: as noted above, this saga is the only narrative source that deals with fourteenth-

century Iceland, and thus provides a unique glimpse into this poorly understood era in Icelandic history.

In 1895 and 1905, most of the rest of the corpus was translated in two major collections. The first collection, Mary C.J. Leith's *Stories of the Bishops of Iceland* in 1895, contains *Hungrvaka* and *Þorláks saga* as well as two short stories: *The Story of Thorwald the Far-Farer* (*Þorvalds þátr víðförla*) and *The Story of Bishop Isleif* (*Ísleifs þátr byskups*). The materials are presented chronologically, as a sort of narrative of the early Icelandic church, and Leith begins with a note about the neglect and importance of the medieval Icelandic ecclesiastical texts.²

The two-volume dual-language edition and translation *Origines Islandicae*, by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F. York Powell, was finally published in 1905, a full sixteen years after Guðbrandur Vigfússon's death in 1889. The ambition of this work is clear in its subtitle: *A Collection of the More Important Sagas and Other Native Writings Relating to the Settlement and Early History of Iceland*. Book 3 of the first volume of the *Origines* deals with ecclesiastical material. It begins with *Kristni saga*, followed by *Þorvalds þátr víðförla*, and then a series of other short *þættir* titled *Early Church Legends*. A longer section, *The Lives of the First Seven Bishops of Scalholt*, encompasses *Hungrvaka*, *Þorláks saga*, and *Páls saga*. After this comes *Jóns saga*, *Oddaverja þátr*, and some further fragments identified as having been drawn from the Gunnlaugr Leifsson version of *Jóns saga*. Ignoring *Árna saga* and *Lárentíus saga*, the collection compiles more *þættir* and other miscellaneous material into a *Biographica Minora*. The Christian law section of a collection of early Icelandic laws known as *Grágás* caps off the section as a *Law Ecclesiastic*, as well as a few church charters (*máldagar*) at the very end.

Needless to say, this seminal work represented a huge contribution to the dissemination of bishops' sagas to an anglophone audience. Yet the influence of Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Powell goes beyond even the *Origines*; in the preface to his translation of *Lárentíus saga*, Elton acknowledges his debt to Guðbrandur for his English-Icelandic dictionary and his edition of the saga, and he also states that Powell had both suggested the translation and assisted in editing it (Elton, viii). Thus, because of Guðbrandur and Powell's work, by 1905 at least one version of every saga in the corpus had been translated, except for *Árna saga*, which remains to this day shockingly inaccessible to an English-reading audience.

After the sweeping progress of the *Origines*, new translations were few and far between for the rest of the twentieth century. The most important contribution, however, was from the Viking Society for Northern Research. Founded in 1892 in London, the Viking Society has become a leading publisher of saga translations, and its massive contribution to the dissemination of bishops' sagas began in 1942 with *The Life of Gudmund the Good, Bishop of Holar* by

G. Turville-Petre and E.S. Olszewska. This work translated the A version of *Guðmundar sögur*, finally making the full narrative of his time as bishop available in English.

However, this is the only English translations of a specific bishop's saga between *Origines Islandicae* in 1905 and Cormack's first translation of *Jóns saga* in 2000. A few texts did appear in compilations, however. Jacqueline Simpson's *The Northmen Talk: A Choice of Tales from Iceland* (1965) includes excerpts from *Jóns saga*, *Oddaverjar þáttur*, *Þórláks saga*, and *Páls saga*. Julia H. McGrew's two volumes of *Sturlunga saga* in 1970 and 1974 include the same saga of Guðmundr's pre-episcopal years as Andersson translates.

A century is not an insignificant gap. People still read *Origines Islandicae*—I myself made use of it during my PhD, particularly for *Páls saga*—despite its extremely archaic language. It is a frustrating and rather elitist academic myth that only students and non-specialist scholars use translations. There are many degrees of skill in the Old Norse language, like all languages, and many of the professional scholars who work in Old Norse still benefit from the use of a translation, not least to be able to read through a text quickly when a close philological analysis is not necessary. I would speculate that academic pride, or perhaps shame, keeps many scholars from discussing or acknowledging this practice too openly. Translations also determine what students decide to research early in their career, and thus can shape the course and focus of their work even after the point where they might be able to comfortably read sagas in the original Old Norse. In this way, translations can and often do shape the future path of scholarly inquiry as a whole.

It is thus frustrating that the twenty-first century has not brought an English translation of *Árna saga*, but still welcome that we have better and arguably more accessible translations of texts like *Jóns saga* and *Þórláks saga*. The first text of this new wave, Cormack's *The Saga of Bishop Jón of Hólar*, included in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, edited by Thomas Head in 2000, was clearly aimed at sharing the saga with a new audience: one interested in hagiography but unfamiliar with Old Norse studies. Such readers are unlikely to have come across the only other English translation existing at that time, in *Origines*, or the excerpts in *The Northmen Talk*. Cormack's translation of the S version of the text is very short, with no miracles, and the brief five-page introduction is clearly directed at an audience with little or no experience with Icelandic history or language.

While in this case the appearance of a saga in a collected volume was clearly a tool for reaching a wider audience, the use of collections can be a limiting factor for many readers. This is particularly true for students, who can easily have knowledge of a saga but be unaware of the obscurely titled collection containing it. Up until the twenty-first century, apart from Turville-Peter and Olszewska's Viking Society translation of the A version of *Guðmundar sögur* and

Elton's early translation of *Lárentíus saga*, English translations of the bishops' sagas had all appeared as part of collections.

The Viking Society has done much to alleviate this issue. In 2006, they published Siân Grønlie's translations of *Íslendingabók* and *Kristni saga*, finally replacing the *Origines* version of the latter text. Ármann Jakobsson and David Clark's 2013 *The Saga of Bishop Þorlak* further helped establish the Society's particular dedication to improving accessibility of the less widely read sagas. The translators state that theirs is the first English version of the saga since Leith's in 1895, oddly ignoring both the *Origines* version and the excerpts in *The Northmen Talk*, but this may just further exemplify the problems in finding and using such collections. In any case, the readability, accessibility, and up-to-date introduction and commentary on the saga in *The Saga of Bishop Þorlak* provide a useful model for future work. Andersson's *Bishops in Early Iceland* is a direct successor to this volume, and Cormack's *The Saga of St. Jón of Hólar* is based on a similar model, one entirely divorced from the collected volumes of the late nineteenth century.³

The Newest Translations

Cormack's most recent translation takes perhaps the most scholarly approach conceivable for a translation, lacking only the full facing-page edition of the Old Norse text. The double introductions by both Cormack herself and Peter Foote address historical, linguistic, and literary aspects of the saga in detail; the footnotes to the saga itself are extensive and serve as a very useful aid for readers hoping to better understand the narrative and its context. There is nothing to criticize in the translation itself: Cormack skillfully balances a fairly literal approach with idiomatic and readable English, producing a text useful to scholars concerned with close accuracy, but in no way a burden to more casual readers.

Cormack's decades of experience in Icelandic hagiography and church history are also on display in the breadth and detail of her introduction. From ecclesiastical politics and the cult of saints to folklore motifs and the characteristics of miracle stories, a reader can find valuable details of all the different approaches that can be taken to *Jóns saga*, and all the fields of study it can inform. One tiny misrepresentation of the law code *Grágás* does sneak in: Cormack contrasts a non-Icelandic example of a medieval contract to become an apprentice priest with a comparable passage in *Grágás*, but argues that they differ in how the *Grágás* example stipulates that the father of the apprentice be the one to make the agreement, as opposed to the over-18 student in the contrasting contract (Cormack 2021, 3 footnote 7). However, the referenced

passage in *Grágás* does in fact allow the apprentice to make the agreement himself, if he is over 16 (Finsen, 17). Nonetheless, the fact that such a minor oversight stands out is indicative of the overall quality of Cormack's work.

The addition of Foote's introduction, the English original of his Icelandic introduction included in *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of *Jóns saga*, is valuable in some of the same ways the translation of the saga itself is. Unlike the multilingual *Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ* series, the introductions of *Íslenzk fornrit* are always written in Icelandic, and they represent standard reference points for scholars for the dating of sagas, manuscript variants, literary characteristics, and other basic fruits of philological and historical analysis. The inaccessibility of these introductions, particularly to graduate students looking to begin a deep study of a particular saga, can be a major barrier. Foote's introduction thus makes this book highly valuable as a reference work, and as the editor of both the *Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ* and *Íslenzk fornrit* editions of *Jóns saga*, his insight is unparalleled.

On the other hand, Foote's text is decades old at this point. Cormack herself makes note of places where she disagrees with him, and specialist scholars of the saga will likely find other places where work feels dated. The occasional tendency for somewhat old-fashioned and jarring stylistic analysis can be a distraction: a passage in the L version of the saga expands "astroniam" [astronomy] to "astroniam, þat er stjörnuíþrótt" [astronomy, that is star-art] and is referred to by Foote in separate passages as a "pedantic intrusion" and more forcefully as a "witless intrusion" (Cormack 2021, 120, 149). This is, of course, a relatively straightforward linguistic gloss, and the critique seems misplaced. The decision to leave long Old Norse quotations untranslated throughout most of Foote's introduction can also be a barrier to readers, and the change to including full translations in the final section on the cult of St. Jón, while appreciated, reads as a strange inconsistency (Cormack 2021, 176–90).

Andersson's approach in *Bishops in Early Iceland* is very different. There are very few footnotes to the text, and the introduction is relatively minimal and focused on the authorship, dating, and literary features of the texts. There is no discussion of previous translations, issues, and techniques of translations, and so on. This is useful and perhaps necessary in producing a short and readable book, as providing a thorough scholarly introduction to four separate texts would be a lengthy undertaking. But a little more apparatus might have been helpful—there are no maps, and the minimal bibliography may feel like a limiting factor for those curious readers trying to decide where to go next after reading the translation. Nonetheless, Andersson's unparalleled expertise in the history and development of the Icelandic saga as a form remains an advantage, even as the analysis of each text is relatively brief and straightforward.

For the texts themselves, Andersson's experience with translating texts like the kings' saga compilation *Morkinskinna* and Oddr Snorrason's version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* [The Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason] is a benefit to readers and adds to the approachability of the material in *Bishops in Early Iceland*. His translation has a clear sense of style and a consistent approach that feels very much like reading the classic, minimalist saga-style. However, Andersson himself admits in the preface that he has "not previously dealt with the bishops' sagas" (Andersson, vi) and this lack of familiarity shows in places. The most clear and problematic example is in *Hungrvaka*, where the text introduces the division of the tithe in Iceland into four portions, one each for the bishop, the churches, the clergy, and the poor. Here, Andersson translates the term used for the clergy, *kennimenn*, as "clerical teachers" (Andersson, 13; Egilsdóttir, 17).⁴ This is perhaps an understandable mistake, as *að kenna* is a verb commonly used for "to teach," and both the Cleasby-Vigfússon and Fritzner dictionaries include "teacher" among their definitions (Cleasby and Vigfússon, 336; Fritzner, Vol. 2, 275–76). Using the term to refer to a teacher is, however, fairly rare in practice, and elsewhere in *Hungrvaka* Andersson correctly translates *kennimenn* as clerics (Andersson, 19; Egilsdóttir, 24). In light of such correct usage, "clerical teachers" comes off as a ghost from an early draft that was simply skipped over in the editing process. Nonetheless, in such a historically important passage, describing a foundational legal moment in the development of Christian Iceland, it is an impactful mistranslation.

Other issues with the translation include less significant examples of imprecise or misleading language. Andersson chooses to render *biskupsefni* in *The Priesthood of Bishop Guðmundr Góði* with the surprisingly clunky "candidate for bishop" rather than the conventional "bishop-elect" (Andersson, 144–54; Jóhannesson et al., 153–59).⁵ Guðmundr has already been elected as bishop in Iceland at this point and is only awaiting consecration by the archbishop; thus, while something could theoretically have happened to prevent his final appointment, "candidate" is arguably an inaccurate description. Guðmundr Arason also at one point recites a list of saints to a dying woman, asking her to greet them for him, and calls Saint Ambrose "vinr minn" [my friend], which Anderson rephrases as "to whom I am particularly devoted," flattening out the impact of the saga's presentation of a holy friendship between Guðmundr and Ambrose (Andersson, 138; Jóhannesson et al., 149). On the death of Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson, Guðmundr immediately arranges for a commemoration: first a requiem, and then "um daginn eftir allar sálutíðir ok líksöng" [on the day after all the Offices of the dead and the burial liturgy] (Jóhannesson et al., 149). Andersson translates "allar sálutíðir ok líksöng" simple as "funeral dirge," using the translation for *líksöng* in Cleasby-Vigfússon while ignoring the distinctly

precise meaning of *sálutíðir*. He also skips entirely over the statement that these rituals happened on the day after the requiem (Andersson, 139).

Some passages can seem imprecise but are not particularly misleading or problematic. In *Páls saga* the priest Atli, who paints the interior of Bishop Páll's new bell tower, is called a "skrifari" [writer/scribe], which Andersson extrapolates to "book illuminator," erasing the evidence the text provides that many or even all Icelandic scribes could have trained painting and illuminating skills (Andersson, 44; Egilsdóttir, 306). "Devils and damnation" for a Norwegian sailor's *hviss, piss* [hiss, piss] obscures a rather delightful and unique example of a non-religious curse (Andersson, 105; Jóhannesson, 126).

While numerous small mistakes and quibbles may seem significant when enumerated together like this, they do not detract from the generally positive experience of reading Andersson's translations.

Conclusions

These two publications have greatly enhanced the accessibility of the bishops' sagas corpus for an English-reading audience. The language of both translations will be a welcome relief to anyone who has had to slog through the *Origines* or other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century translations. The insights of some of the most experienced and respected scholars in medieval Icelandic studies provide critical introductions that support the inherent value of these under-read works of medieval literature. If *Árna saga*, and ideally a new translation of *Lárentíus saga*, can be so effectively brought to a wider audience, it will be a powerful aid to continuing to grow interest in this corpus and medieval Icelandic religious and ecclesiastical history as a while.

These two books are also a fascinating case study of the diversity of possible approaches to translation, even within such a small corpus of texts as the bishops' sagas. Cormack, particularly through including both full introduction by Peter Foote and her own distinct commentary, shows how a translation can provide a valuable centerpiece and reference point for an extensive historical, cultural, and philology study of a text. Andersson, while his introduction assumes readers come to his book with some experience of the Old Norse literary corpus and saga writing, presents a translation gracefully written with minimal notes or commentary. It is cheap and accessible for a casual reader (if it is not too optimistic to hope that casual readers of bishops' sagas could exist), but still functional for students and scholars to use, particularly in conjunction with other scholarship.

The multi-faceted accessibility of *Bishops in Early Iceland* is one of its greatest strengths. The Viking Society website and publication list is one of the easiest online resources in Old Norse studies to find and navigate, and publications of

the society are available for open access on their online archives after two years. While pdfs of an old collection like the *Origines* can be obtained online through sites like Archive.org, it is not necessarily easy to run across it in a search for bishops' sagas if one doesn't know what one is looking for. While not yet available in open access format, *Bishops in Early Iceland* is currently priced at £12, and £6 for Viking Society members. It is thus well within the means of most students and potential casual readers to find and obtain a copy. On the other hand, *The Saga of Jón of Hólar* does not benefit from this accessibility. The \$80 US price tag might seem comparably reasonable by the exorbitant standards of academic monographs and edited collections, but for a short paperback translation, it feels excessive and a potentially serious detriment to the prospect of the book's impact and dissemination. With any luck, ACMRS will soon make an e-book available for a more reasonable sum.

Both of these books represent extremely valuable contributions to the study of Icelandic history, religion, culture, and literature. Viewed together, they represent a major step forward in making the bishops' saga corpus a better understood and appreciated part of medieval studies as a whole.

NOTES

1. There is a very useful bibliography of saga translations compiled by the National Library of Iceland (<https://sagas.landsbokasafn.is/>). Several publications are listed there that contain short translated excerpts from *Þorláks saga*, *Jóns saga*, and *Guðmundar sögur*, which for expediency are not addressed here.
2. "It is a curious fact that, while the heroic or historical Sagas of the North have found skilled translators and appreciative readers amongst us, the ecclesiastical Sagas have been left hitherto almost entirely unregarded. Yet they are no less remarkable, and no less interesting—to Churchmen possibly more—than the secular branch of Saga: since they present a quaint, vivid, homely and realistic picture of the infant Church of Iceland, its struggles and successes." (Leith, 3–4). Leith's preface further characterizes the medieval Icelandic church with an almost nostalgic attitude, drawing connections to her Anglican church and even to Jón Arason as martyr bishop.
3. It should also not be ignored that unpublished dissertations often contain translations and are used by both scholars and students—likely more frequently in recent decades with the greater availability of pdf copies and online university dissertation archives. Philip Roughton's 2002 PhD dissertation from the University of Chicago contains a full translation of the miracle book of St. Þorlákr from AM 645 4to; this dissertation is an extremely important piece of scholarship that has still not been satisfactorily replaced by published work. Camilla Basset wrote a translation of *Hungrvaka* for her

2013 MA dissertation at the University of Iceland, which I made use of during my own PhD work, being unaware of both the *Origines* version and Leith's *Stories of the Bishops of Iceland*.

4. Cormack notes in her introduction that *kennimenn* “can be etymologized as ‘teachers’” but translates the term as “clergy” (Cormack 2021, 27).
5. “Bishop-elect” is the translation currently provided by the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (<https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o12812>).

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