

Siân Grønlie. 2017. *The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. 304 pages. ISBN: 978-1-84384-481-5.

The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature explores a connection that has been pointed to for quite some time but until now largely unexplored: the multi-faceted interactions between saints' lives and saga literature of several genres. Grønlie argues that "rather than two genres developing in isolation, or one genre developing out of the other, we find a shifting and dynamic balance of power between saint's life and saga, which ranges from thoughtful adaptation to active struggle and competition, from 'interference' to interaction and interdependence" (36).

The introduction begins by stating that although hagiography as a genre is not terribly popular in today's scholarship, it was the *most* popular of genres in the Middle Ages. While in the recent past, the genre has been repudiated as "monotonous," it should instead be seen as a multitude of genres—"homilies, miracle collections, martyrologies, dialogues, inventions and translations of relics" (2), all of which should be considered as having a meaningful impact upon literary production in the medieval north.

The first twenty-four pages of the introduction would function wonderfully as an introductory teaching text for hagiography in the Nordic region, as it gives much information about the development of saints' lives in Iceland and Scandinavia, including information on manuscripts and illuminations. An undergraduate-friendly, up-to-date, non-specialist introduction to the genre such as this did not, until now, exist. The latter part of the introduction elucidates Grønlie's theoretical approach using polysystem theory. She rejects the idea of a "linear development from saints' life to saga" (31), instead asserting that influence goes both ways, resulting in a "dynamic interaction with each other" (36). The goal of her study, then, is to "look at the ways in which sagas engaged creatively with saints' lives over the medieval period" (36).

The second chapter, "The Failed Saint: Oddr Snorrason's Óláfr Tryggvason," focuses on *Óláfs saga Odds*. Several parts of the chapter are expansions of Grønlie's earlier article, "Translating (and Translocating) Miracles: Gregory's Dialogues and the Icelandic Sagas," in which she discusses the interplay between Óláfs saga Odds and a chapter of the Dialogues. The chapter overall is a close reading of several parts of the saga, highlighting how different elements creatively play with hagiographic themes. Grønlie presents Óláfs saga Odds as the earliest example of the blending of saints' life and saga, leaving us with "a radically hybrid saga, in which secular heroics and penitential practices are awkwardly combined" (77).

The following three chapters are, similarly, close readings of scenes and characters in various *Íslendingasögur*. Chapter 3, "The Confessor, The Martyr and

the Convert” evaluates *Egils saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*, both of which present their characters as a “conscious opposition to the Christian saint” (80). Chapter 4, “The Noble Heathen and the Missionary Saint,” explores conversion narratives—the themes of eternal life and salvation—in *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Njáls saga*, and *Eyrbyggja saga*. Chapter 5, “The Outlaw, the Exile and the Desert Saint” analyzes the interplay between the lives of the desert saints and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Flóamanna saga*, and *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. These chapters make clear the wide variety of interactions between saints’ life and saga, furthering the usefulness of Grønlie’s polysystematic approach. By focusing on the *Íslendingasögur*, she shows that even the most “Icelandic” of genres was not exempt from foreign literary influence.

Overall, this work is a much-needed and thorough treatment of different ways hagiographic narratives and saga storylines interact. The only downside to the study is that the main chapters (2-5) are quite dense and require a great deal of background knowledge both of the sagas and hagiography, making the text (again, with the exception of the introduction) only usable in the classroom for teaching a very specific group of advanced students. Nevertheless, this treasure-trove of ideas is a staple for any scholar working on hagiography and/or the sagas. *The Saint and the Saga Hero* lays a strong foundation for what Grønlie’s fellow hagiography enthusiasts hope will be further research, a foundation that has been needed for quite some time.

Tiffany Nicole White
University of California, Berkeley

REFERENCES

- Grønlie, Siân. 2009. “Translating (and Translocating) Miracles: Gregory’s Dialogues and the Icelandic Sagas.” *The Medieval Translator / Traduire au Moyen Age* 12: 45–56.