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Ecclesiastical Literature and Hagiography

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Students of Old Norse literature and literary culture have long been aware that hagiographical and ecclesiastical literature has a longer written history in the North than the native saga genres. The earliest preserved Norwegian and Icelandic manuscripts, dating from the late twelfth century, primarily contain hagiographic or homiletic texts and other texts with a Latin background.¹ Most of these texts had been edited (some more than once) by 1900, but scholars of this period nevertheless tended to prioritize the native narrative genres and the eddic and skaldic poetry that suited their political, national, and aesthetic sensibilities better than, say, the translated saints' lives. As the Old Norse canon gradually took shape, the ecclesiastical literature and texts written in Latin were left by the wayside. The most comprehensive history of Old Norse literature ever published, Finnur Jónsson's *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie*, is illustrative of this attitude.² In his preface, Finnur Jónsson states that he aims to write a 'fairly complete ... critical description of the literature of both countries [Iceland and Norway]'.³ 'Critical' here should be understood in its most literal sense, and Finnur Jónsson's harsh and frank opinions about the texts he discusses rarely fail to amaze readers of his literary history. He particularly dislikes texts that have a foreign, non-Norse background or prehistory, such as romances and hagiographies. One example is *Barlaams saga ok Josaphats*, whose ornate style makes it 'even less pleasant to work one's way through this already utterly dull

1 See the present author's complete survey in Jonas Wellendorf, 'Lærdomslitteratur.' *Handbok i norrøn filologi*, ed. Odd Einar Haugen, Bergen, Fagbokforlaget, 2013, 302–55, at 305.

2 Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* I–III, 2nd ed. rev. Copenhagen, G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1920–1924.

3 'nogenlunde fuldstændig, ... kritisk skildring af bægge landes litteratur', Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* I, 6. Finnur stresses that he wishes to write about the literature of 'both lands' and criticizes an earlier literary history, Keyser's *Nordmændenes Videnskabelighed og Litteratur* for being unduly patriotic. For Rudolph Keyser's work see, 'Nordmændenes Videnskabelighed og Litteratur i Middelalderen.' *Om Nordens gamle litteratur, en anmeldelse og en indsigelse, Bidrag til den oldnordiske literaturs historie, af N. M. Petersen (Kbh. 1864) samt Nordmændenes Videnskabelighed og Litteratur i Middelalderen, af R. Keyser (Chri. 1866)*, ed. Svend Grundvig, Copenhagen, Gyldendal, 1867.

work'.⁴ Out of the more than 1700 pages that make up this literary history, some twenty are devoted to translated sagas, including hagiographies.

There were of course exceptions to this hostile attitude towards the learned and non-native parts of Old Norse literature. Fredrik Paasche counts among the most pronounced; he wrote with great insight and sensibility about how Old Norse religious poetry was saturated from the beginning by the imagery and ideals of the Church: 'It is not just a soulless transfer ... Everywhere the European symbolism and legend is perceived with clarity and recreated with intense feeling. We not only absorb the narrative shell, we also seize the spirit'.⁵ Yet, in spite of his great appreciation for and understanding of this part of Old Norse literature, Paasche also saw a great divide between ecclesiastical and the non-ecclesiastical literature.⁶

It was not until Gabriel Turville-Petre's groundbreaking study *Origins of Icelandic Literature* that the importance of ecclesiastical literature for the development of the native saga genres entered mainstream scholarly discussion and received wider recognition. Turville-Petre begins with the observation that most prose in twelfth century Iceland was written by clerics 'in the interest of ecclesiastical and secular powers' and 'that these powers could not be sharply distinguished'.⁷ This observation makes it reasonable to surmise that the sagas bear the imprint of their origin. After a substantial treatment of pre-Christian Iceland, the introduction of Christianity and Ari fróði, Turville-Petre finally arrives in his fifth chapter, entitled 'The School of Hólar and Early Religious Prose', to the issue at hand. This chapter concludes with the assertion that 'the learned literature did not teach the Icelanders what to think or what to say, but it taught them how to say it'.⁸ Today, more than sixty years later, it is probably not an exaggeration to say that Turville-Petre's well-turned phrase has become one of the most cited conclusions in saga scholarship. Although no longer generally taken as an axiomatic truth, it is often taken as a point of departure for discussions about hagiography and the sagas – recent examples including Carl

4 '[The style] gör den i forvejen grundkedelige bog ikke morsommere at komme igennem', Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* II, 972.

5 Fredrik Paasche, 'Kristendom og kvad: En studie i norrøn middelalder (1914).' *Hedenskap og kristendom: Studier i norrøn middelalder*, ed. Philip Houm, Oslo, Aschehoug, 1948, 25–218, at 209: 'Og det er ikke en sjelløs overførelse det her er tale om. Overalt er den europæiske symbolikk og legende klart oppfattet og gjendiktet med levende følelse. Det er ikke bare fortellingens skall vi optar. Vi griper også dens ånd'.

6 Paasche, 'Kristendom og kvad,' 35.

7 Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953, v.

8 Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 142.

Phelpstead's chapter 'Saints' lives and saga origins' in his book *Holy Vikings: Saints' Lives in the Old Icelandic Kings' Sagas* and Siân Grønlie's article 'Saint's life and Saga Narrative', which focuses less on origins than on what she calls 'an ongoing creative process of generic interaction and change'.⁹ As a typical example of how Turville-Petre's conclusion is understood, consider this passage from volume 2 of the *New Introduction to Old Norse*:

Turville-Petre and others argue that the realistic mode and use of dialogue of the native Icelandic genres can be traced back to the style of these early translated texts: as he says ... 'the learned literature did not teach the Icelanders what to think or what to say, but it taught them how to say it'.¹⁰

The present chapter will survey the discussion surrounding influences from hagiography and other ecclesiastical literature on the native saga genres from 1953 onwards. While the influence of ecclesiastical and hagiographic literature on early texts with an overtly ecclesiastical agenda, for example, the early sagas about the Óláfrs, is indubitable and uncontroversial, traces of hagiographic and ecclesiastical motifs and modes of thought are harder to identify in the sagas of Icelanders. Attempts to identify such influences have often proven controversial.¹¹

Following Turville-Petre, the discussion will be divided into two sections, one on style (how to say it) and a second on content (what to say). These two aspects are of course so closely intertwined that they can only be kept apart artificially, but the rhetorical tradition inherited from antiquity, which carefully separates the choice of material from its subsequent shaping, provides good company.

Before the reception of Turville-Petre's dictum is discussed, the argument that leads up to it should be reviewed briefly. Turville-Petre first presents *Jóns saga's* references to literary activities at Hólar, then he discusses examples of early ecclesiastical prose literature drawn from the *Icelandic Homily Book*, *Mariu saga*, the translated lives of apostles and saints, *Niðrstigningar saga*, the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, and *Elucidarius* (although few if any of these texts can be securely

9 Carl Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings: Saints' Lives in the Old Icelandic Kings' Sagas*. Tempe, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007, 195–224; Grønlie, 'Saint's Life and Saga Narratives.' *Saga-Book* 36 (2012), 5–26, at 24.

10 See *A New Introduction to Old Norse. Vol. II: Reader*, ed. Anthony Faulkes. London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007, xxiii.

11 For a general discussion on the origins of the sagas see also Chris Callow's chapter in the present volume, for influence from continental Europe see Stefka G. Eriksen chapter in the present volume.

connected with Hólar).¹² He states that these texts represent the earliest examples of vernacular prose. Finally, he concludes that the saints' lives

were the first written biographies which the Icelanders came to know. The Icelanders learned from them how biographies and wonder-tales could be written in books. Thus they helped the Icelanders to develop a literary style in their own language, and gave them means to express their own thoughts through the medium of letters. In a word, the learned literature did not teach the Icelanders what to think or what to say, but it taught them how to say it.¹³

When read in its context, it appears that 'how to say it' refers primarily to the linguistic medium through which the Icelandic saga writers and authors expressed themselves, namely the vernacular. Turville-Petre's statement has generally been taken to refer more broadly to style although he makes no reference to the use of dialogues or a realistic mode (see the quotation from the Old Norse textbook above).¹⁴ Towards the end of his study, in a less often quoted remark,¹⁵ he adds a second piece to his developmental model when he suggests that 'the family sagas originated under the influence of the kings' sagas, just as the kings' sagas originated under the influence of hagiography and other learned writing'.¹⁶ In Turville-Petre's vision of the development of saga writing, we see a unidirectional three-stage model in which hagiographic writings influenced kings' sagas, which in turn shaped the sagas of Icelanders.

Turville-Petre does not really argue the negative part of his conclusion ('not ... what to think or what to say'). Furthermore parts of the material he discusses, the

12 Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 123, accepts *Guðmundar Saga* D's ascription of *Mariu saga* to Kygri-Björn Hjaltason (d. 1237/38), for the ascription see *Guðmundar saga*, in *Biskupa Sögur*, vol 2, eds. Jón Sigurðsson and Guðbrandur Vigfússon. Copenhagen, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1878, 186, and hence dates it to the early thirteenth century; more recent scholarship tends to date the text (at least in its preserved form) to the second half of that century, see e.g., Sverrir Tómasson, 'Kristnar trúarbókmenntir í óbundnu máli.' *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 1, ed. Vésteinn Ólason, Reykjavík, Mál og menning, 1992, 419–79, at 462–63.

13 Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 142.

14 One would also be hard pressed to characterize as examples of literary realism the hagiographic narratives featuring wild animals procuring for a hermit, as in *Blasius saga*, in *Heilagra manna sögur: Fortællinger og legender om hellige mænd og kvinder: Efter gamle haands[k]rifter*, vol I, ed. C. R. Unger. Christiania, B. M. Bentzen, 257, grisly flying dragons, as in *Mattheus saga postula*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson. Reykjavík, Stofnun Arna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1994, 12, a talking hart with a shining crucifix between its antlers, as in *Placidus saga*, in *Heilagra manna sögur: Fortællinger og legender om hellige mænd og kvinder: Efter gamle haands[k]rifter*, vol II, ed. C.R. Unger. Christiania, B. M. Bentzen, 194, and the remaining plethora of miracle tales of the hagiographic sagas.

15 Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings*, 197, does however include this in his overview of the debate concerning saints' lives and saga origins.

16 Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 231.

Dialogues of Gregory the Great in particular, clearly illustrate how the early ecclesiastical literature did have an influence on what is being said in the native saga literature: Turville-Petre argues himself that a passage in the *Legendary Saga* of St. Óláfr (*Óláfs saga helga*) and the accounts of Óláfr Tryggvason's life in *Historia Norwegiae*, *Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum*, and *Heimskringla* are modelled on Gregory's story about an encounter between the Gothic king Totila and St. Benedict.¹⁷ It has also been demonstrated that Flosi's dream in *Njáls saga* is based on Gregory's story about the prophetic dream of a monk named Anastasius.¹⁸ Although Turville-Petre sees a direct connection between the *Dialogues* and the native sagas in these cases, he also suggests that reflections in saga literature of some of Gregory's stories are best accounted for by assuming that these stories entered popular tradition and were told as folktales before eventually inspiring saga writers.¹⁹ Gregory's *Dialogues* have since proven a popular hunting ground for scholars in search of ecclesiastical influences on saga literature, a theme I will return to below.

While Turville-Petre's dictum thus does not necessarily follow logically from the arguments and evidence he presents, his model has been widely accepted. Peter Foote, in an article devoted to the dictum, points to some aspects that he feels need clarification and concludes by rephrasing Turville-Petre's idea: 'the learned literature by no means dictated the Icelanders' choice and treatment of subject matter of what they said; but it taught them something about how to say it – also about how not to say it'.²⁰ Foote adds nuance, but Turville-Petre's core idea remains intact.²¹

Style

Although Turville-Petre mainly referred to the linguistic medium of the vernacular, scholars in his wake have, as stated before, usually taken his statement to refer more

17 Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 136.

18 Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, ed. and trans. Paul Schach. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1971, 12–16, 205–6. Originally published as *Á Njálsbúð: bók um mikið listaverk*. Reykjavík, Bókmenntafélagið, 1943. The dream passage from *Njáls saga* can be found in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk fornrit XII, Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954, 346–48.

19 Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 137.

20 Peter Foote, 'Gabriel Turville-Petre 1908–1978.' *Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies*, eds. Michael Barnes, Hans Bekker-Nielsen, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, Odense, Odense University Press, 1984, 287–301.

21 Peter Foote, 'Saints' Lives and Sagas.' *Saints and Sagas: A Symposium*, eds. Hans Bekker-Nielsen and Birte Carlé, Odense, Odense University Press, 1994, 73–88. Foote admits to having 'engraved his [Turville-Petre's] dictum on my heart', Foote, 'Saints' Lives and Sagas,' 73.

broadly to the style of the sagas.²² In his obituary of Turville-Petre (d. 1978), Peter Foote remarked that ‘the truth of this axiom [Turville-Petre’s dictum] has now been generally accepted – though it remains an article of faith for proof of which wholly satisfactory tests have not yet been devised’.²³ This does not mean that no one has made the attempt. Jónas Kristjánsson, one of the staunchest advocates for this view of saga origins, repeatedly quoted Turville-Petre in a series of articles on saga stylistics and strove to substantiate this view.²⁴ In the first of these studies, published in a memorial volume to Turville-Petre, Jónas Kristjánsson takes issue with Marius Nygaard’s 1896 assertion that there were two basic literary styles used in Old Norse prose. Nygaard stated that a learned (*lærd*) style used when the materials were derived from foreign sources and a popular (*folkelig*) style used in native sagas. Jónas Kristjánsson argued that the oldest saints’ lives in the vernacular were in fact written in a popular rather than a learned style (as defined by Nygaard).²⁵ This popular style, he concludes, ‘was moulded both by the Latin of the originals and by spoken Norse’.²⁶ However, this conclusion does not follow as a matter of course from his more descriptive treatment of style; in fact, his article gives examples of neither the Latin of the originals nor, less surprising perhaps, of spoken Norse. In a second paper, Jónas Kristjánsson sought to incorporate Latin materials by collating the Norse versions of *Páls saga* I and *Jakobs saga* I with their approximate source, the biblical

22 For overviews of Old Norse prose styles, see Þorleifur Hauksson and Þórir Óskarsson, *Íslensk stílfraeði*, vol. 1, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson. Reykjavík, Mál og menning, 1994, 169–337; Reidar Astås, ‘Lærd stíl, høvisk stíl og florissant stíl i norrøn prosa.’ *Maal & minne* (1987), 24–38; Þórir Óskarsson, ‘Rhetoric and Style.’ *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, 354–71.

23 Foote, ‘Gabriel Turville-Petre 1908–1978,’ 295.

24 Jónas Kristjánsson, ‘Learned Style or Saga Style?’ *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, eds. Ursula Dronke et al., Odense, Odense University Press, 1981, 260–92, at 264. Reprinted in *Sagnalíf: Sextán greinar um fornar bókmenntir*, ed. Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson. Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, 2015, 135–70; Jónas Kristjánsson, ‘Sagas and Saints’ Lives.’ *The Sixth International Saga Conference, 28.7–2.8 1985: Workshop Papers*, eds. Jonna Louis-Jensen, Christopher Sanders, and Peter Springborg, Copenhagen, Det arnamagnæanske Institut, 1985, 551–66, at 553, 556; Jónas Kristjánsson, ‘The Roots of the Sagas.’ *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on His 65th Birthday, 26th May 1986*, eds. Rudolf Simek, Jónas Kristjánsson, and Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Wien, Hermann Böhlau, 1986, 183–200, at 192. Reprinted in *Sagnalíf: Sextán greinar um fornar bókmenntir*, ed. Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson. Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, 2015, 181–99.

25 Marius Nygaard, ‘Den lærde stíl i den norrøne prosa.’ *Sproglig-historiske studier tilegnede Professor C. R. Unger*, eds. Sophus Bugge et al., Christiania, H. Aschehoug & co, 1896, 153–70. Jónas Kristjánsson highlights *Clemens saga* and *Páls saga* I, both found in AM 645 4to (c. 1225–1250), as examples, see Jónas Kristjánsson, ‘Learned Style or Saga Style?’, 291.

26 Jónas Kristjánsson, ‘Learned Style or Saga Style?’, 291.

Acts and *BHL* 4057 respectively.²⁷ On the basis of this comparison, he concludes that the Norse saints' lives are faithful to their Latin exemplars while simultaneously adapting 'their material strictly according to the grammatical rules of their [the translators'] mother tongue'.²⁸ The result is a style that is almost identical to that of the earliest vernacular native sagas. In these two studies, Jónas Kristjánsson succeeds in establishing the stylistic resemblance between the earliest vernacular saints' lives and vernacular native sagas. The actual chain of causality, that the style of saints' lives gave rise to the saga style, is on the other hand taken for granted rather than argued, and it thus remains an article of faith.²⁹

The stylistic similarity between the early translated sagas of saints and the earliest vernacular native sagas can be accounted for without assuming that one kind is directly dependent on the other. An alternative model, advanced but not developed by Sverrir Tómasson, proposes that the common style of the two genres developed as a result of the rhetorical schooling of the writers.³⁰ According to this scenario the popular style (or saga style) would be judged a vernacular counterpart to the low style of Latin prose (*sermo humilis*), the style deemed appropriate for instruction.³¹ This low style is also the one that dominated the Latin versions of the lives of the apostles and the martyrs of the early church that were translated into Old Norse in the twelfth century and at the turn of the thirteenth. It is an unpretentious, unadorned style that makes use of everyday language and expressions, 'seemingly easy but requiring true

27 Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Sagas and Saints' Lives'. This paper is available in the form of a preprint from the sixth International Saga Conference. However a handout with examples, to which reference is repeatedly made (on pp. 560–563), is not included in the preprint and has been unavailable to me. For *BHL* see *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina antiquae et mediae aetatis*. Subsidia hagiographica 6 & 70, Brussels, Société des Bollandistes, 1898–1901 & 1986.

28 Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Sagas and Saints' Lives,' 566.

29 In a third study he postulates (rather than argues) that 'this "popular style" [i.e., the saga style of the earliest saints' lives] was the spoken Icelandic language modified to some extent by the Latin sources', Jónas Kristjánsson, 'The Roots of the Sagas,' 195, while acknowledging the difficulty that is involved in determining exactly how Icelanders spoke at the time.

30 Sverrir Tómasson, 'The Hagiography of Snorri Sturluson, Especially in the *Great Saga of St Olaf*.' *Saints and Sagas: A Symposium*, eds. Hans Bekker-Nielsen and Birte Carlé, Odense, Odense University Press, 1994, 49–72, at 49–50; see also Philip Roughton, 'Stylistics and Sources of the *Postula Sögur* in AM 645 4to and AM 652/630 4to.' *Gripla* 16 (2005), 15, n14.

31 In his Christian rhetoric *De doctrina Christiana* (book 4, 17–26), Augustine, following the classical tradition, operated with three layers of style in Latin prose, the low, middle, and high styles, and illustrated each stylistic level with examples drawn from the Bible. In Augustine's view, the appropriate style for a particular piece depended on its intended use. The low style should be used to instruct (*docere*), the middle to please (*delectare*), and the high to persuade to action (*flectere*).

mastery'.³² True mastery of the art of the low style results in a concealment of its artfulness. The early translators used the popular style by choice and not because this was the only style with which they were familiar, as becomes clear when one compares texts in the popular style with contemporary texts written in a loftier register.³³ Sverrir Tómasson's alternative model has the advantage of being more flexible and it allows for mutual and dynamic influences between the two groups of writings while also taking into account the common schooling that all writers at this point in time must have enjoyed. It is therefore unfortunate that proofs seem just as difficult to devise for this model as for Turville-Petre's.

Contents

If the degree to which the learned literature taught Icelanders 'how to say it' is impossible to determine with certainty, it appears that it did in fact teach them quite a lot about what to say. A crown witness may be found in the dossier of Óláfr Tryggvason as it is preserved in Oddr Snorrason's biography of Óláfr Tryggvason.³⁴

32 Erich Auerbach, 'Sermo Humilis.' *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Manheim. New York, Pantheon Books, 1965, 25–81, at 37.

33 One example is *Þorláks saga* A (c. 1200 but only preserved in a fourteenth-century manuscript), which does not seek to hide the artfulness of its language style. The author uses a complex sentence structure, a rich and varied vocabulary, and various rhetorical devices. Alliteration is particularly prominent. See, e.g., the saga's initial description of Þorlákr which combines alliteration with other rhetorical figures: 'Hann var ólíkr flestum ungum mönnum í sinni uppfœðingu, auðráðr ok auðveldr í öllu, hlýðinn ok hugþekkr hverjum manni, fálátr ok fályndr, nýtr ok námgjarn þegar á unga aldri' (He was unlike most other young men when he grew up, pliable and compliant in every way, obedient and well liked by all, silent and reserved, able and eager to learn at an early age), *Þorláks saga byskups in elzta*, in *Biskupa sögur* II, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir. Íslenzk fornrit XVI, Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2002, 48.

34 The earlier writings about Norwegian kings by Sæmundr fróði and Ari fróði are not preserved (and they were not, as far as we can tell, sagas as such), and certainty about the scope, outlook, and general nature of Eiríkr Oddsson's *Hryggjarstykki* is unattainable. Bjarni Guðnason has argued that *Hryggjarstykki* was conceived as a hagiography of Sigurðr slembir (Bjarni Guðnason, *Fyrsta sagan*. Reykjavík, Bókaútgáfa menningarsjóðs, 1978), but more recent scholarship disagrees (see Jonas Wellendorf, 'Letters from Kings: Epistolary Communication in the Kings' Sagas (until c. 1150),' (*in spe*, with references)). The priority of the material concerning Óláfr Tryggvason over that of St. Óláfr Haraldsson, as reflected in *Oldest Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson* and *Legendary saga* is however still being debated. The case was argued by Theodore M. Andersson, 'The First Icelandic King's Saga: Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs Saga Tryggvasonar* or *The Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf?*' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 103 (2004), 139–55; and Andersson, *The Partisan Muse in the Early Icelandic Sagas (1200–1250)*. Ithaca, Cornell University Library, 2012, 45–65, although he admits that the evidence is inconclusive (see p. 64). Lars Lönnroth, who earlier argued for the priority of the material concerning St. Óláfr Haraldsson, Lönnroth, 'Studier i *Olaf Tryggvasons saga*.' *Samlaren* 84 (1963), 54–94, has since reversed his view, Lönnroth, 'The Baptist and the Saint.' *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, eds. Michael Dallapiazza et al., Trieste, Edizioni Parnaso, 2000, 257–64. Ólafur Halldórsson, the most recent editor of Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, does not discuss this matter in his otherwise very thorough discussion of textual matters and links between the saga and other texts, Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Formáli.' *Færeyinga saga, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson. Íslenzk fornrit XXV,

Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* appears to have been composed in Latin in the late twelfth century. However, it was soon translated into the vernacular, and the original was subsequently lost.³⁵ Given Oddr's monastic background – he was affiliated with the Benedictine house of Þingeyrar in northern Iceland – and Óláfr Tryggvason's position as a missionary king, it is not surprising that learned perspectives and hagiographic motifs occasionally colour the text. For example, the account of Óláfr's birth and escape from Norway echoes the biblical accounts of the Nativity of Christ and the Flight into Egypt, and Þorkell dyðrill's vision later in the saga is patently modelled on the Transfiguration of Christ.³⁶ Many other incidents betraying an ecclesiastical or hagiographic background can also be found in this saga. However, the presence of elements of this nature should by no means lead one to the conclusion that the saga is based exclusively on such materials or that the edifice of the saga in its entirety can be derived from known hagiographical models. The saga takes the form of a biography that provides a predominantly historical account of Óláfr's life from his birth to his disappearance in the course of the battle of Svǫldr. The translated lives of foreign saints from the earliest period are on the other hand more accurately described as Passions rather than as Lives in that they usually focus on the missionary activities of the saints and the events that culminate in their deaths.³⁷

The overt didacticism of the long sermon-like speeches that characterize the oldest translated lives of foreign saints has not left a strong imprint on Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* either. When Óláfr returns to Norway after his conversion and baptism, he lands at the island of Mostr and immediately launches his mission: 'Then Óláfr began to speak in front of the people and preached the gospel and sought to persuade

Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2006, v–xcxvi, at lxxxvi–clxxxiii. A problem for the theory of the chronological priority of Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* is that the S version of this saga (prioritized by the editor), occasionally refers to a (written?) saga about Óláfr Haraldsson (see, e.g., *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason*, in *Færeyinga saga, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar eptir Odd munk Snorrason*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson. Íslensk fornrit XXV, Reykjavík, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2006, 204).

³⁵ The degree to which the translated text reflects Oddr's original is impossible to ascertain. In particular, it requires a stretch of imagination to suppose that Oddr's version included Latin versions of the not insignificant number of skaldic stanzas included in the text, although the single stanza in Latin that is included in the vernacular versions, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, 308 and 310, offers tantalizing evidence of his procedures of composition.

³⁶ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, 268–69.

³⁷ Jonas Wellendorf, 'The Attraction of the Earliest Old Norse Vernacular Hagiography.' *Saints and Their Lives on the Periphery: Veneration of Saints in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (c. 1000–1200)*, eds. Haki Antonsson and Ildar Garipzanov, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, 241–58.

all with fair words.’³⁸ Had Oddr adhered more strictly to the hagiographical models found in the oldest translated saints’ lives, he would not have let his protagonist miss such an excellent opportunity to deliver an elaborate and edifying oration. Oddr, however, is satisfied with letting his audience know that Óláfr preached well, with the result that a great number of people were converted. One might also mention that Óláfr’s depiction is much more nuanced and ambiguous than that of the typical protagonists of the early saints’ lives.³⁹ These examples make clear that although Oddr did learn ‘what to say’ from the early ecclesiastical literature, it was not his exclusive source, and a more complex and dynamic model is required to account for the early development of biographical saga narratives.

Similar arguments can be made for the other late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century saga biographies of St. Óláfr Haraldsson and King Sverrir. Hagiographic materials have left their clear imprints on the *Legendary Saga* of St. Óláfr and *Sverris saga*, but other elements make substantial contributions as well.⁴⁰ The fragmentary state of the so-called *Oldest saga of Óláfr Haraldsson* makes it difficult to determine the extent to which hagiographical and other ecclesiastical materials left an imprint on this text, but since the six preserved fragments are entirely secular in their contents and outlook, the *Oldest saga*, which is probably younger than suggested by its now conventional designation, may have been a very different work to Oddr’s text about Óláfr Haraldsson.⁴¹

38 ‘Ok þá tók Óláfr at tala fyrir fólkinu ok at boða Guðs erendi ok at teygja alla til með fõgrum orðum’, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, 213.

39 Although Phelpstead’s *Holy Vikings* does not offer an in-depth treatment of Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, he sees the nuanced portrayals of the saintly royal protagonists of the sagas of ‘Holy Vikings’ that he analyses as typical of the genre, and seeks to account for this within a dialogic (in a Bakhtinian sense) framework.

40 One example of scholarship that expertly shows how imported material is molded to fit local narrative standards is found in Theodore M. Andersson, ‘Lore and Literature in a Scandinavian Conversion Episode.’ *Idee, Gestalt, Geschichte: Festschrift Klaus von See: Studien zur europäischen Kulturtradition*, ed. Gerd Wolfgang Weber, Odense, Odense University Press, 1988, 261–84.

41 Since Jonna Louis-Jensen, ‘Syvende og ottende brudstykke: Fragmentet AM 325 IV alfa 4to.’ *Opuscula* 4 (1970), 31–60, scholars generally agree that the unmistakably hagiographic fragments (the seventh and the eighth), that were assigned to *Oldest saga* by Gustav Storm, *Otte brudstykker af den ældste saga om Olav den Hellige*. Oslo, Grøndahl, 1893, in fact belong to the *Legendary saga*. Ascriptions of scenes with a more clerical slant to *Oldest saga* must remain entirely conjectural. In Jónas Kristjánsson’s study of this problem, Jónas Kristjánsson, ‘The Legendary Saga.’ *Minjar og menntir: Afmælisrit helgað Kristjáni Eldjárni 6. desember 1976*, ed. Guðni Kolbeinsson, Reykjavík, Bókaútgáfa menningarsjóðs, 1976, 281–93, the argument in many cases yields to mere conjecture, e.g.: ‘It is safe to assume that in the *Oldest Saga* there was something about the youth and younger days of King Olaf and it may be regarded as certain that the accounts in the *Legendary Saga* are derived from this’, 286.

The three-step model outlined by Turville-Petre (saints' lives/ecclesiastical literature > kings' sagas > sagas of Icelanders) discussed earlier does not, understood in its strictest sense, allow for the direct influence of saints' lives and ecclesiastical literature on the sagas of Icelanders. Yet, a number of scholars have striven to show that the sagas of Icelanders bear a clear imprint of such literature. Studies along these lines generally remain controversial, particularly when they seek to establish a hagiographical or ecclesiastical origin for a saga episode in a text that is not otherwise overtly and pervasively characterized by religious themes. It has therefore often proven difficult to establish arguments that the majority of the scholarly community finds persuasive. As was the case with the kings' sagas, it is mainly at the level of incident or detail that such arguments have been advanced.

The most widely accepted instance of such an episode is undoubtedly Flosi's aforementioned dream at Svínafell in *Njáls saga* which appears to be modelled on an episode in the *Dialogues* by Gregory the Great.⁴² Regis Boyer presents other instances of such 'impregnations', as he terms it, from the *Dialogues* (only a few of his examples are drawn from the sagas of Icelanders),⁴³ as does Eugene J. Crook who focuses exclusively on one of the climactic sections of *Njáls saga*.⁴⁴ Along somewhat similar lines, one might also mention Sveinbjörn Rafnsson's attempt to show the influence of Petrus Alphonsi's *Disciplina clericalis* on *Egils saga*⁴⁵ and, on a much larger scale, Torfi H. Tulinius' attempt to uncover hitherto unrecognized layers of meanings in *Egils saga* through a reading of the text that is inspired by typological

42 The *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great and (at least some of his) Gospel homilies were translated into the Old Norse vernacular at an early stage and remained popular for centuries (see the comprehensive survey in Kristen Wolf, 'Gregory's Influence on Old Norse-Icelandic Religious Literature.' *Rome and the North: The Early Reception of Gregory the Great in Germanic Europe*, eds. Rolf H. Bremmer Jr., Kees Dekker, and David F. Johnson, Paris, Peeters, 2001, 255–85.

43 Regis Boyer, 'The Influence of Pope Gregory's *Dialogues* on Old Icelandic Literature.' *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference: University of Edinburgh, 1971*, eds. Peter Foote, Hermann Pálsson, and Desmond Slay, London, The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973, 1–27.

44 Eugene J. Crook, 'Gregory's *Dialogi* and the Old Norse Sagas: *Njáls Saga*.' *Rome and the North: The Early Reception of Gregory the Great in Germanic Europe*, eds. Rolf H. Bremmer, Kees Dekker, and David F. Johnson, Paris, Peeters, 2001, 275–85. Another study that examines the influence of Gregory's *Dialogues* is Grønlie, 'Saint's Life and Saga Narrative,' who gives examples from Oddr munkr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Egils saga* and *Flóamanna saga*. At the level of detail, one might mention Wilhelm Heizmann's argument that what appears to be a proverbial expression in *Laxdæla saga* betrays knowledge of Gregory the Great's moral interpretation of the biblical book of Job, Wilhelm Heizmann 'Kannte der Verfasser der *Laxdæla saga* Gregors des Großen *Moralia in Job*?.' *Opuscula* 10 (1996), 194–207).

45 Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 'Sagnastef í íslenskri menningarsögu.' *Saga* 30 (1992), 81–121, at 92–95. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson has also attempted to uncover traces of typological thinking in *Laxdæla saga*, Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 'Í laukagarði Guðrúnar Ósvífursdóttur.' *Skírnir* 163 (1989), 347–50.

and allegorical methods, seeing references, not only to Old Norse mythology but also to a host of biblical narratives.⁴⁶ Although Torfi Tulinius' monograph enriches and nuances our understanding of *Egils saga* in numerous ways, one cannot get around the fact that many suggestions are speculative and unverifiable. In Torfi Tulinius' reading, the rogue Viking poet par excellence, famed for his greed, brutality, and consumption of sour milk products and alcohol is in turn associated with Cain, David, Judas, and St. Paul. Torfi Tulinius furthermore advances the claim that his reading, loosely based on allegorical and typological modes of interpretation, is historicist, that he has uncovered layers of meaning consciously deposited in the text by its author, and that the original intended audience of the text would have made similar associations.⁴⁷

Reading *Egils saga* against a biblical subtext certainly enriches our understanding of it, but one issue (among others) such a reading needs to address in order to be considered historicist is that *Egils saga* itself does not contain a single statement to the effect that a biblical subtext is to be sought in the saga. Therefore arguments need to be advanced for such a reading that go beyond appeals to the pervasiveness of such modes of interpretation in medieval culture, especially since it has not been unusual to claim that the sagas of Icelanders are pure narratives with no ulterior motives (see the following paragraph).

Moving from Torfi Tulinius to the other extreme of the scholarly spectrum, one can easily find claims that the sagas of Icelanders are traditionalistic narratives, in the sense that they build on inherited material that circulated in Icelandic oral tradition, a channel through which unobtrusive narrators, the anonymous mouthpieces of tradition, let tradition flow. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen once wrote: 'There is little reason to think that the authors of the sagas of Icelanders ... have wished to communicate another message to us than that these were the deeds and conducts of

46 See Torfi Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni: Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga*. Reykjavík, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004, translated by Victoria Cribb as *The Enigma of Egill: The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson*, rev. ed., Ithaca, Cornell University Library, 2014. See also the methodological and theoretical discussions (not dealing with *Egils saga*) in Mikael Males, 'Allegory in Old Norse Secular Literature: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges.' *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 9 (2013), 99–132, and Jonas Wellendorf, 'Middelalderlige perspektiver på norrøn mytologi: Allegorier og typologier.' *Edda: Nordisk Tidsskrift for Litteraturforskning* 98, 4 (2011), 289–312.

47 Torfi Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni*, 115–16.

the past.’⁴⁸ This statement is obviously too general, but when juxtaposed with Torfi Tulinius’ reading of *Egils saga*, it highlights the wide range of attitudes towards the sagas of Icelanders and the material contained in them. Perhaps easier to swallow than these positions is Roughton’s (tongue-in-cheek?) reading of *Egils saga* as an inverted or perhaps even parodic hagiography.⁴⁹ Roughton sees the author’s narrative prototype in the life of the confessor Þorlákr rather than among the translated lives of the martyrs of the early church. Naturally, if one wishes to invert or parody a certain genre an at least intuitive understanding of the narrative conventions of that particular genre is necessary. In that sense, one may say that the early hagiographical literature did indeed leave a clear imprint on a text normally placed generically among the sagas of Icelanders, although it must be stressed that *Egils saga* occupies a place apart within that particular genre.⁵⁰

With Roughton’s hagiographical reading of *Egils saga*, the level of particular incident and motif has given way to the levels of themes and large-scale structure. Returning to the safer territory of sagas of missionary kings that are obviously influenced by Christian modes of thought, one might mention that a number of articles treat the typological theme of forerunner and fulfiller (see John the Baptist and Christ) as it is found in the material of the two Óláfrs and various other constellations involving at least one Óláfr.⁵¹

48 ‘Der er ringe grund til at tro, at islændingesagaernes forfattere ... har villet bringe os andet budskab end det, at sådan var fortidens handlinger og holdninger’, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘Græder du nu, Skarpheðinn? Nogle betragtninger over form og etik.’ *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1994, 480–89, at 489. See also Andersson’s statement that ‘[the saga author] draws no general conclusions and invites his reader to draw none. In this sense the saga is not interpretable’, Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytical Reading*. Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1967, 32.

49 Philip Roughton, ‘A Hagiographical Reading of *Egils saga*.’ *Á austrvega. Saga and East Scandinavia: Preprint Papers of the 14th International Saga Conference Uppsala, 9th–15th August 2009*, eds. Agneta Ney, Henrik Williams, and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist, Uppsala, University of Gävle, 2009, 816–22.

50 The scholarly currents, most recently Haukur Þorgeirsson, ‘Snorri versus the Copyists: An Investigation of a Stylistic Trait in the Manuscript Traditions of *Egils Saga*, *Heimskringla* and the *Prose Edda*.’ *Saga-Book* 38 (2014), 61–74, seems at the moment, and despite methodological challenges, to favor the old suggestion that *Egils saga* was indeed written by Snorri Sturluson.

51 See Merrill Kaplan, ‘Out-Thoring Thor in the *Longest Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason*: Akkerisfrakki, Rauðr inn rammi, and hit rauða skegg.’ *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 107, 4, (2008), 472–89; Lars Lönnroth, *European Sources of Icelandic Saga Writing: An Essay Based on Earlier Research*. Stockholm, Thule, 1965; Jonas Wellendorf, ‘Forerunners and Fulfillers: Structuring the Past in Old Norse Historiography.’ *La typologie biblique comme forme de pensée dans l’historiographie médiévale*, ed. Marek Thue Kretschmer, Turnhout, Brepols, 2014, 179–95; Julia Zernack, ‘Vorläufer und Vollender: Olaf Tryggvason und Olaf der Heilige im Geschichtsdenken des Oddr Snorrason munkr.’ *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 113 (1998), 77–95.

One of the more interesting developments since Turville-Petre is that scholars, following Hofmann's study of the authorship of *Yngvars saga víðförla*,⁵² appropriately published in Turville-Petre's memorial volume, are now prepared to take this saga's attribution to the late twelfth-century author Oddr Snorrason munkr (the author of the now lost Latin version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*) at face value and to hold that it was originally written in Latin.⁵³ This has, in turn, resulted in ongoing re-evaluations of the importance of the early (mostly lost) Latin literature of Iceland for the development of the vernacular literature. Focusing on *Yngvars saga víðförla* and the *Óláfs sögur Tryggvasonar* by the Þingeyrar monks Oddr Snorrason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson, Haki Antonsson has analysed typological resonances and a pervasive concern with redemption and the postmortem fates of Óláfr Tryggvason and Yngvarr víðförla in these works.⁵⁴ Gottskálf Jensson, similarly, has devoted a series of articles to this early material that is largely lost or only indirectly preserved in the form of translations or quotations and, in collaboration with Susanne Miriam Arthur (née Fahn), has also directed our attention to some of the parts of this literature that are actually preserved.⁵⁵ Infused with the enthusiasm for this new development, there is a certain danger of overstating one's case, and Gottskálf Jensson's hypothesis that the earliest *fornaldarsögur* were written in Latin might be such an instance.⁵⁶ In the end, this hypothesis is perhaps more contingent on the definition of the genre of the

52 Dietrich Hofmann, 'Die *Yngvars saga víðförla* und Oddr munkr inn fróði.' *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, eds. Ursula Dronke et al., Odense, Odense University Press, 1981, 188–222.

53 'En þessa sögu höfum vér heyrt ok ritat eftir forsögn þeirar bækr, at Oddr munkr inn fróði hafði gera látit at forsögn fróðra manna ... Þessa sögu segist Oddr munkr heyrt hafa segja þann prest, er Ísleifr hét' (We have heard and written this saga after the dictate of that book which Oddr Monk the Learned had had made after the dictate of learned men ... Oddr Monk says that he has heard it told by that priest whose name was Ísleifr), *Yngvars saga víðförla*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, vol. II, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Reykjavík, Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1959, 459. Phelpstead is more skeptical of Hofmann's claim, see Carl Phelpstead, 'Adventure-Time in *Yngvars saga víðförla*.' *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed: Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, eds. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen, Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009, 331–47, at 338–40.

54 Haki Antonsson, 'Salvation and Early Saga Writing in Iceland: Aspects of the Works of the Þingeyrar Monks and Their Associates.' *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 8 (2012), 71–140.

55 Gottskálf Þ. Jensson, 'The Lost Latin Literature of Medieval Iceland: The Fragments of the *Vita Sancti Thorlaci* and Other Evidence.' *Symbolae Osloenses* 79 (2004), 150–70; Gottskálf Þ. Jensson, 'Were the Earliest *fornaldarsögur* Written in Latin?' *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed: Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, eds. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen, Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2008, 79–91; Gottskálf Þ. Jensson, '*Revelaciones Thorlaci Episcopi – enn eitt glatað latínurit eftir Gunnlaug Leifsson munk á Þingeyrum.' *Gripla* 23 (2012), 133–75; Susanne Miriam Fahn and Gottskálf Þ. Jensson, 'The Forgotten Poem: A Latin Panegyric for Saint Þorlákr in AM 382 4to.' *Gripla* 21 (2010), 19–60.

56 Gottskálf Þ. Jensson, 'Were the Earliest *fornaldarsögur* Written in Latin?'

fornaldarsaga, a question to which the contributors to three recent anthologies on this genre have repeatedly returned, than on the presence of *fornaldarsaga*-like materials in *Yngvars saga víðfjóra* and Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*.⁵⁷

While Theodore M. Andersson once suggested that the Þingeyrar brothers 'represented an eccentric school of saga writing that should not be taken as the point of departure for the later tradition',⁵⁸ recent scholarship stages Þingeyrar as a veritable literary powerhouse in the decades around 1200. In the wake of these and other recent studies, we begin to see more clearly the contours of a dynamic early phase in the history of Icelandic prose literature in which the Latin hagiographical and ecclesiastical literature is cast in a vernacular mold and leaves a clear mark on native vernacular literature in the process. At the same time, local tradition is first presented in Latin and subsequently reconstructed in the vernacular from Latin models.⁵⁹ The situation is in other words more complex than the three-step model outlined by Turville-Petre. In the time that has passed since 1953, the cards have been shuffled and texts re-dated in ways that could not have been predicted then, but this does not diminish the lasting legacy of Turville-Petre's *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, which placed the early religious literature firmly at the centre of the literary map.

57 The three anthologies are *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi, handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8–2.9 2001*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, and Agneta Ney. Uppsala, Uppsala Universitet, 2003; *Fornaldarsagerne: Myter og virkelighed*, eds. Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson, and Annette Lassen. Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009; *The Legendary Sagas: Origins and Development*, eds. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson. Reykjavík, University of Iceland Press, 2012. See also Annette Lassen's chapter in the present volume.

58 Theodore M. Andersson, 'Kings' sagas (*Konungasögur*).' *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, eds. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, (1985) 2005, 197–238, at 213.

59 See Lars Boje Mortensen, 'Den formative dialog mellem latinsk og folkesproglig litteratur ca 600–1250: Udkast til en dynamisk model.' *Reykholt som makt- og lærdomssenter: I den islandske og nordiske kontekst*, ed. Else Mundal, Reykholt, Snorrastofa, 2006, 229–71; Mortensen, drawing on an impressive range of comparative material from the medieval literatures from Irish, English, German, French, and Old Norse speaking areas, develops such a dynamic model for a formative dialogue between Latin and vernacular literature in some detail.