

Saints and Sinners: death scenes in
konunga and samtíðar sögur

The eighty-first stanza of Hávamál cautions against judging a thing before it is fully tried. Its author would undoubtedly have approved of the dictum "non laudaveris hominem in vita sua". The life of a Christian could not be judged until it was over; no matter how virtuous or sinful it had been, all his deeds could be cancelled, and heaven lost or won, at the moment of death. The former possibility does not concern us - it rarely occurs outside monastic exempla. The latter, however, was of considerable interest to medieval Scandinavians, most of whom bore a more or less heavy burden of sin, and knew that sudden death without the chance of confession was far more likely than old age with the possibility of atonement by making a pilgrimage or entering a monastery. Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson is said to have prayed at the shrine of St. Egidius (where God granted pilgrims a single prayer), "at af verðleikum Egidii skyldi hvorki fjárhlutr, né þessa heims virðing, svo veiðast honum, at þeir lutir hnekði fyrir honum fagnaði himinríkis dýrðar."¹ The fate of a man's soul was of interest to his survivors, who were expected to provide masses on his behalf, and it also made a final comment on his life and character. It is therefore not surprising that descriptions of the final hours (or minutes) of a man's life often include acts of piety as well as demonstrations of bravery.

Pious behaviour at the time of death shows that a man repents of his sins, and therefore has a chance of being saved. Outstanding demonstrations of piety may suggest that he is a saint; in that case, supernatural occurrences will confirm the fact. In the following, I have collected passages which describe piety and "miracles" associated with the deaths of characters in Sturlunga, Orkneyinga saga, and the kings' sagas, and divided them according to whether I think they indicate salvation (or the possibility thereof) or sanctity. The former are presented in part I, the latter in part II. The division is necessarily a subjective one,

and there is considerable overlap between the two groups. In part III, possible relations between some of the sagas studied are mentioned, and the significance of hagiographic elements in secular writings is discussed.

Part I

The one act essential for salvation was repentance for one's sins, preferably accompanied by confession. Requests for a priest are frequently attested in the sagas, and refusal of the request reflects badly on the person responsible.

Even when formal confession was not possible, "er eigi sva þung synd, at eigi megi hreinsaz fyrir iðranar tar"² Many individuals express their contrition by reciting prayers, and a number choose to be executed lying with their arms stretched out in the form of a cross. This was a common attitude of prayer and penance.³ Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson awaited death kneeling on both knees and elbows⁴; the position of genuflexion required by the penitential of St. Þorlákr.⁵

Even those who repented, however, might expect to be punished for their sins in the next world if they had not done penance in this one. Hence the offers made by several prisoners to their captors before they are executed. Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, when his offer of sjálfðæmi has been rejected, proposes to go on a pilgrimage for the benefit of his and his enemies' souls, and never return.⁶ St. Magnús of Orkney suggests three possibilities; pilgrimage and exile, imprisonment in Scotland with two companions, and incarceration combined with maiming such as Hákon saw fit.⁷ Hákon Þórðarson offers to go on pilgrimage with a hand and foot cut off; his captors refuse to torture him in this manner, and also deny his second request, to be stabbed to death rather than beheaded.⁸ There seems to be no stigma attached to these attempts to escape death; indeed, some of the alternatives are not much better. It is interesting to note an additional element which is present in all three cases: the captor (of Hrafn and Magnús) or executioner (of Hákon) is thought to be under some form of obligation to the prisoner, making his action especially heinous.

Hákon Þórðarson, mentioned above, and Sveinn Jónsson, who asks to be mutilated before he is killed,⁹ seek by the sufferings they incur in this world to decrease those in the next. The most famous expression of this idea is from *Njáls saga*: "guð er miskunnssamr, ok mun hann oss eigi bæði láta brenna þessa heims ok annars."¹⁰ It also appears in *Hungrvaka*, where we are told that bishop Magnús (also the victim of a fire) prayed that God "skyldi þat líflát spara honum til handa, er hánur þætti sér í því laung sín þíning."¹¹ Similar sentiments are expressed by bishop Gizurr.¹²

An interesting example of a death which fulfills the wishes of the deceased is that of Þorgils skarði. After listening to the saga of Thomas of Canterbury, he remarks "þat myndi vera allfagr dauði"¹³ On the following day he is slain by a blow identical to the one which killed the archbishop.¹⁴

Along with examples which suggest that a soul may be saved, there are a few which point in the opposite direction. Some of these incorporate supernatural elements; the night before his death, Sturla Sighvatsson has disturbing dreams, and subsequently says a prayer which should result in forgiveness for unconfessed sins.¹⁵ The fact that he fails to take up the shield intended for him - which was marked with a crucifix - leaves the reader in some doubt as to the prayer's effectiveness. Kolbeinn Tumason fails to hear the bells ring on the eve of the feast of his patron, St. Mary; he is slain on the following day by a stone whose thrower cannot be identified.¹⁶ (A later version of the saga demonstrates a greater sympathy for Kolbeinn by inserting an episode which reassures the reader that Mary will come to his aid in his hour of need.¹⁷) On a more prosaic level, Harald Gilli is slain in bed with his mistress, so drunk that he is not even aware of what is happening to him, and consequently unable to repent of his sins.¹⁸

Part II

Repentance and prayer might be expected of any Christian, but there are some who go even further. They place moral considerations before the necessity of defending their lives,

forgive, and even pray for, their enemies. Such stories are told of the saints. Other recurring motifs are the saint's awareness of his approaching end, the beautiful and/or incorrupt state of his body, lights which shine over it, and springs or green fields which appear where his blood has fallen. Ultimately, of course, the saint performs miracles. On the following pages I have summarized some of these features as found in Sturlunga and the kings' sagas; a few parallels from saints' lives have been included for comparison.

	Would rather suffer a wrong than commit one	Refuses to save life
St. Claf		throws away sword Hkr II 368
St. Magnús	þá vil ek miklu heldr þola rangendi en gera ðörum manni. Ork.s. 363	won't endanger followers, Ork.s. 107
St. Knút	gives up crown rather than fight brother. Knytlinga 143	won't save self at expense of followers. Knyt. 188
Kjartan	miklu þykki mér betra at þiggja banaorð af þér, frændi, en veita þér þat. Laxdala 154	siðan kastaði Kjartan vápnum ok vildi þá eigi verja sik. Laxdala 154
Höskuldr		has a sword but doesn't use it Njáls saga 280-1
Tostig Godwinsson	betra er at þiggja bana af bróðr sínum en veita honum bana Morkinskinna 276	

	Forgives Enemies	at place of execution, grave, etc:	
		Light Spring	Green Field
St. Olaf	masses, alms for enemies who fall Hkr II 360	Hkr II 397	Hkr II 405
St. Magnús	forgives, prays for slayers Ork.s. 368	Ork. 373	Ork. 369
St. Knút	priest to pray for all who die Knytl. 190	Knytl. 205	
St. Knut lavard	guð fyrirgefi þér ok fyrirgefa vil ek þér Knytl.254		
Valbjófn "sannheilagr maðr"	Fagrskinna 299		
jarl Harald ungi called <u>sannhelgan</u>		Ork. 292	
St. Þorlákr		Bps. 303	
Olaf Tryggvason		O.T. 182	
Eysteinn Haraldsson called hoíy			Hkr III 345
Sverrir	biðium þess guð, at hann fyrirgefi þeim..vil ek ok fyrirgefa þeim Sverris s 75		
Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson		before the event Bps. 671,674	Bps. 674
Höskuldr	guð hjálpi mér, en fyrirgefi yðr Njáls s. 281		
other		where church will be built St. I 9	

Condition of body

- St. Olaf var engan veg brugðit ásjónu hans, svá rjóði i kinnunum, sem...hann væri nýsofnaðr
Hkr II 404
- St. Magnús bones good color
Ork. 124
- St. Knut wounds healed, líkitt bjart ok þekkilegt
Knytl. 199
- með heilu líki sem hann væri nyandaðr
Knytl. 228
- Valþjófr undecayed, blood fresh
Ord. II 86
- St. Þorlákr sores on body healed; öllum þótti betra hjá honum önduðum, en mörgum lifandi mönnum
Bps. 112
- Guðmundr Arason (beatified) allir...kváðust aldri sét hafa dauðs manns hold jafnbjart eða þekkilgt sem þetta
St. I 400
- allir menn mæltu þat, at þetra þætti hjá Skarpheðni dauðum en ætluðu
Njáls s. 344
- Njáls ásjána ok líkami sýnisk mér svá þjarttr, at ek hefi engan dauðs manns líkama set jafnbjartan
Njáls saga 343
- Sverrir (S's face was left uncovered according to his orders, to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the ban he was under.)
engi þættist sét hafa fegra líkama dauðs mans. S.s. 341
- Ingimundr heill ok öfúinn...
en þetta þótti mönnum mikil merki, hvé guði hafði líkat atferð Ingimundar prests, er hann skyldi svá lengi legit hafa úti með heilum líkam ok ósköddum
St. I 138
- Edward the Confessor face blushed like a rose, seemed to be asleep rather than dead. Life of St. Edward
tr. Frank Barlow London 1962
p. 80

Part III

Episodes such as the above are extremely common in saints' lives; some of the phrases ("bjart ok þekkilegt," "bað guð hjálpa sér") are clichés. In some cases, however, a model can be identified. Bjarni Guðnason has demonstrated that Knytlinga saga models its presentation of St. Knut on the saga of St. Olaf.¹⁹ I believe that an echo of Thomas saga erkibyskups can be detected in Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarson; both men receive death in one attitude of prayer and when slain, their bodies fall gracefully into another.²⁰ Bjarni Einarsson has pointed out biblical influence in the accounts of the final days of St. Olaf and Þormódr.²¹

Individual motifs which have been borrowed include the bright light which descends over Olaf Tryggvason and prevents a definitive statement concerning his death; a similar occurrence took place at the death of John the Evangelist, the fate of whose body is also unknown.²² The second anecdote recounted about Sigurðr slembi's sojourn in Iceland is reminiscent of the episode which led to the slaying of St. Hallvard.²³ I find the accounts of the deaths of jarl Valþjófr and Eysteinn Haraldsson suspiciously similar, especially as the former is completely unhistorical. If the author of Fagrskinna (or his source) was ignorant of the circumstances of Valþjófr's death (or perhaps considered his tears of repentance unmanly,²⁴) he might well have inserted the cross motif of Eysteinn's story. Slight evidence in favor of the second possibility is the fact that the impatient executioner still appears, though he has been transferred to Eysteinn.²⁵ (It is possible that he represents a common motif; a similar character is found in Sturlunga.²⁶) Another element of the Valþjófr story which recurs is that of giving away clothing (as alms in the account of Ordericus Vitalis, as a sign that he forgives his executioner in Fagrskinna.) St. Magnús of Orkney encourages his cowardly executioner by informing him that his payment will be Magnús's clothing and arms, "sem siðr er til ok lög inna fyrri manna."²⁷ King Knut gives his kirtle to a priest to pay for prayers for the souls of all who fall in the ensuing battle.²⁸

Within the genre of saints' lives, borrowing is normal and expected. The idea of the communion of saints is applicable to literary motifs as well as merits. In non-hagiographic works, structural imitation might be part of the writing process - it has long been recognized that Christian literature influenced vernacular composition. Were hagiographic motifs adopted simply as stylistic elements, or do they have a deeper significance?

I am convinced that hagiographic motifs are meant to retain some of the implications they had in their original contexts. At the very least, they serve as a basis for moral judgements; they may also suggest that the person to whom they are applied enjoys divine favor, or even that he is in fact a saint. I suspect that the latter possibility is true far more often than has been recognized. Bjarni Gudnason has argued that the saga of Sigurðr slembi was intended to promote his sanctity,²⁹ in view of the other pretenders to the throne who were said to be saints,³⁰ this is very likely. It is interesting to note that a passage in Sigurðr's saga unambiguously disproves the claim of a rival "saint;" Harald Gilli's death is described in such a way as to leave no doubt that he died in a state of sin.³¹

I would like to discuss three other Norwegian kings endowed by their biographers with some of the attributes of sanctity. The first is Magnús Ólafsson inn goði. His sobriquet is often used to describe holy men (Guðmundr Arason and Edward the Confessor, for example.) Magnús suffers from being overshadowed by his saintly father, who periodically gives him aid and advice. Magnús does, however, perform a few miracles himself.³² I think it not unlikely that the author of these stories wanted Magnús to succeed to his father's honors in heaven as well as on earth.

There are also hagiographic elements in the sagas of the rivals Sverrir and Magnús Erlingsson. The former, indeed, is full of them: Sverrir's account of his early life is clearly modelled on that of a saint, and (if believed) proves that he, not Magnús, is St. Olaf's representative on earth. If he had not had the misfortune to oppose the church party, I have little doubt that his descendents would have been as succes-

ful in obtaining his canonization as were the Danish kings.

Magnús Erlingsson, on the losing side, had no chance of becoming a saint. It is interesting to note, however, that for a loser he received a remarkably good press. Hostility is focused on his father, and Magnús claims that he fights to fulfill the oath made to God at his coronation.³³ This argument is ascribed to another saint, Edward the Confessor, when maintaining his right to defend his kingdom.³⁴ Magnús's body is well preserved after several days' immersion.³⁵ This fact was of use to Sverrir, since it enabled identification of the corpse, but it is interesting to note that the phrases used to describe Magnus's face echo the description of St. Olaf's (see p. 6). Without entering the debate on the composition of Sverris saga, there can be little doubt that the author(s) had informants from both sides of the conflict. It would have been very much in the spirit of the age for the church party to try to turn Magnús into a martyr, and it is possible that traces of such an attempt are reflected in extant accounts of his life.

Although the Icelanders ultimately chose churchmen rather than warriors as saints, this does not imply that the latter type would not have been welcome. It is generally recognized that the Icelandic clergy attempted to establish Olaf Tryggvason as the original "apostle of the North;" their attempts were frustrated only by his failure to perform miracles. Icelanders were involved in the biography of Sigurðr slæmbi, and the three episodes in his saga which illustrate virtues (of a sort) take place in Iceland. Hákon Þórðarson and Sveinn Jónsson are, by the circumstances of their deaths, no less qualified for sanctity than Eysteinn Haraldsson or Sigurðr slæmbi, and it could be argued that they are being represented as martyrs with this in mind. In another context, Sturla Sighvatsson comments of some men he has had slain "þú munt skjótt kalla þá helga."³⁶

One must nonetheless be cautious of interpreting all scenes with Christian elements in exclusively hagiographic terms. They are almost always accompanied by displays of bravery and fortitude - which they often provide an excellent means to demonstrate. Sveinn's hreysti was praised,

and Eysteinn, who asked to be hewed in a cross between his shoulders, had his captors observe "hvært hann mundi þola járn eða eigi."³⁷ Christian and heroic ideals are perhaps best combined in Sæmundr Ormsson, who "varð bæði við dauðann harðliga ok hjálpvænliga."³⁸

The author of Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarson would probably have liked to make its hero a saint - he emphasizes Hrafn's piety and God's response to his prayer.³⁹ Hrafn's life and death are no worse than those of other Scandinavian saints, and we are told that a green field replaced the clay where he was slain. However, the light seen at the spot precedes rather than follows his death, which relegates it to the category of comets and other omens which presage great events, even if they have no religious significance. Hrafn's vision of himself in a shining light the winter before his death fits a secular or hagiographic context equally well.⁴⁰

The same is probably true of the authors of Hungrvaka, which reports minor miracles for most of the bishops of Skálholt, and Guðmundar saga, which records the incorrupt bodies of two of Guðmundr's relatives. Although the bodies were found in Greenland, where such an event might not be considered too surprising, in one case the body is contrasted with those of the man's companions, which were reduced to skeletons. We are told that "þetta þótti mönnum mikil merki, hvé guði hafði líkat atferð Ingimundar prests."⁴¹

The above quotation nicely summarizes the essential meaning of post-mortem miracles. The recipient, whether he was a saint or not, has pleased God in some way. Acts of devotion performed prior to death are the more likely to please him the closer they approach the deeds of the saints.

In conclusion, I would like to comment briefly on the implications of my topic for the passages that inspired it, those describing the deaths of Kjartan, Höskuldr, Skarphéðinn, and Njáll (see pp.4-6). All of these men were Christians; all but Njáll - who appears to be innocent of crimes - make an unusual gesture of piety at their deaths. Njáll's face is saintly in its brightness. I think there can be little doubt that the authors of Laxdæla and Njáls saga are telling us as clearly as possible that all of them were saved. The opposite

is true of Gísli Súrsson; deserted by his good dream woman, he dies in the process of cleaving a man in half. I think there is little hope for him.

Margaret Cormack

Notes

- 1) Bps. I p.642
- 2) Postola sögur p.803
- 3) St. I 292 = II 251, St. I 322,534, Hkr. III 345/Fgr.357, Fgr. 299
 Arons saga Hjörleifsson depicts Aron as praying thus:
 "leggst Aron flatr á jörðina ok retti sik í kross. Söng hann fyrst sálminn Benedicite ok Ave Marie." He explains to his mother that "Guðmundr Biskup hefði honum þetta bragð kennt, at hann skyldi þetta bænahald hafa ok þetta atferli, þá er honum þætti á liggja, at guð heyrði bæn hans ok helga Mária." (St. II p. 268). It is possible that Guðmundr did in fact have a hand in popularizing this form of devotion; his saga informs us that "marga lute tók hann þá upp til trú sér, er engi maðr vissi áðr, at né einn maðr hafe gert áðr her á landi." (Bps. p.431) It is interesting to note that St. Ambrose, one of Guðmund's patrons, "lagdi hendr sínar í kross ok badz fyrir" before he dies (peacefully.) (HMS I 44). However, Arons saga was written about a century after the lifetimes of its principals, and it is possible that the author, knowing of Aron's friendship for Guðmundr (and perhaps familiar with Ambrosius saga) inserted the episode on his own. Praying or doing penance with arms stretched out to form a cross was a recognized practice, and there is no way of establishing when it came to Iceland.
- 4) Bps. 674
- 5) "Skriftaboð Þorláks biskups," ed. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, Gripla V, Reykjavík, 1982 p. 108
- 6) Bps. 673
- 7) Orkneyinga saga 109, 367.
- 8) St. I 198
- 9) St. I 253
- 10) Njáls saga 329

- 11) Bps 78+note 9
- 12) Bps. 70
- 13) St. II 218
- 14) St. II 221
- 15) St. I 430 and p. 570, note 3 to ch. 138
- 16) Bps. 494, 567
- 17) Bps. 569-70
- 18) Hkr. III 301
- 19) Danakonunga Sögur p. cxvii ff.
- 20) Thomas "hneigir sik fyrir altarinu á bæði kne...fellr erkibyskup fram á gólfitt með rettum líkama, svá fagrliga sem til banar..! Thomas saga erkibyskups, ed. C.R. Unger, Christiania 1868 p. 441.
 "Þá lagðist Rafn niðr á kné ok olboga...hrærði hann hvorki háund né fót er hann svæfðizt, heldr la hann sem hann var vanr at falla til banar." Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarson, ed Hrafn
- 21) Bjarni Einarsson, "Frá Þormóði, kappa hins helga Ólafs konungs," Lingua Islandica, Íslenzk Tungva, vol.4, 1953 p. 112-121.
- 22) Postola sögur 454
- 24) Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson alone sheds tears of repentance; St Magnús tells his executioner that his tears are unmanly. Orkneyinga saga p. 110
- 23) Morkinskinna p. 409, HMS I p. 397
- 25) Eysteinn: "Síðan lagðisk hann niðr á grúfu ok breiddi hendr frá sér út ok bað sik hoggva í kross á milli herðanna, kva þá skyldu reyna, hvárt hann mundi þola járn eða eigi... Símun mælti við þann, er hoggva skyldi, bað hann til ráða, kvað konung hólzti lengi hafa kropit þar um l yng. Hkr III 345
 Valbjófr. "En þa er iarlienn vissi hværr hann skyllði hoggva þa firir gaf hann þeim riddara vannlega oc sva konongenom oc allum öðrum þæ im er aftir hanum hafðu faret. oc til iartegna gaf hann riddara siikikyrtil sinn þeim er hoggva skyllði hann. Þvi nest lagðe hann sik til iarðar i cross oc rette baðar hendr i fra ser. Fagrskinna p.289
 "having distributed among the clergy and poor who happened to be present the robes of honour which his rank of earl entitled him to wear, he threw himself on the ground and continued some time in prayer to God, mixed with sobbings and tears. The executioners...called to the kneeling earl: "Rise, sir..." to which he replied, "wait awhile, for the love of God almighty, at least while a say the Lord's prayer on your behalf and my own "...But when he came to the last petition ...his tears fell so fast, and his sobbings were so violent, that he was unable to conclude the prayer...The executioner would wait no longer, but... severed the earl's head from his body with a single stroke. But the head, after it was severed, uttered..."But deliver us from evil. Amen " Ordericus Vitalis II p. 85

- 26) St II 100
- 27) Orkneyinga saga p. 110
- 28) Knytlinga p. 190
- 29) Bjarni Guðnason, Fyrsta Sagan, Studia Islandica no.37
Reykjavik, 1978
- 30) Harald Gilli (Mork. 414), Eysteinn Haraldsson (Hkr.III
345), Þorleifr Breiðskegg (Sverris saga 214), Óláfr
Guðbrandsson (Hkr. III 410)
- 31) Mork 413
- 32) Mork 119, 146-7
- 33) Sverris saga pp. 115, 156
- 34) Mork 54
- 35) Sverris saga 178
- 36) St.I 357
- 37) Hkr III 345
- 38) St II 100
- 39) Bps 642
- 40) Bps 662
- 41) St I 138

Abbreviations and Editions

- Bps Biskupa Sögur, hið íslenska Bókmentafélag.
Copenhagen:1858. vol. I
- Fgr Fagrskinna, ed. Finnur Jónsson. Copenhagen: 1902-3.
- Hkr Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni Adalbjarnarson. Íslensk
Fornrit, vol. xxvi-xxviii. Reykjavík:1979
- HMS Heilagra Manna Sögur, ed. C.R.Unger. Christiania:
* 1877
- Knytlinga Danakonunga Sögur, ed. Bjarni Guðnason. Íslensk
Fornrit vol. xxxv. Reykjavík:1982
- Laxdoela Laxdoela saga, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslensk
Fornrit, vol. v. Reykjavík:1934.
- Mork Morkinskinna, ed. Finnur Jónsson. Copenhagen:1932.
- Njáls saga Brennu-Njáls saga, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson.
Íslensk Fornrit, vol. xii. Reykjavík:1954.
- Ord Ordericus Vitalis, The Ecclesiastical History of
England and Normandy, transl. Thomas Forester.
London:1856. AMS reprint, N.Y.:1968
- Ork Orkneyinga saga, ed. Finnboði Guðmundsson. Íslensk
Fornrit, vol. xxxiv. Reykjavík:1965.
- O.T. Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar eftir Odd munk, ed. Guðni
Jónsson. Konunga sögur, vol. 1. . Reykjavík:1957.
Postola sögur, ed. C.R. Unger. Christiania:1874.
- St Sturlunga saga, ed. Jón Johannesson, Magnús Finböga-
son, Kristján Eldjárn. Reykjavík, 1946.
Sverris saga, ed. Guðni Jónsson. Konunga sögur,
vol. 2. Reykjavík:1957.
- * Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar, B-redaktionen,
ed. Annette Hasle. Editiones Arnarnaganae
Series B, vol. 25. Copenhagen; 1967.