

Bergr Sökkason and religious Icelandic literature

Some 25 years ago I published a book entitled Stilsignalement och författarskap i norrön sagalitteratur. Synpunkter och exempel (1968) — "Style and authorship in saga literature. Points of view and examples."

The focus of this investigation is religious literature, sagas of bishops, both foreign and Icelandic, legendary compilations such as Heilagra manna sögur and Mariu saga. The bulk of these texts were translations or revisions. Some of the translations in Heilagra manna sögur are of a special interest, because we know the name of the Icelandic translator. In the end of Michaels saga, on the archangel, the writer addresses himself to the reader with the following words: "I, who wrote this story, humbly implore the pious people who happen to read this booklet, to remember brother Bergr Sökkason's soul in commemoration of Michael with a prayer or alms".

We have to do here with Bergr Sökkason, who became monk at the monastery of Þingeyrar in 1317, prior at Munká - Þverá in 1322, and abbot at the same place in 1325. For some unknown reason he left his service in 1334, but became again abbot in 1345; nothing is known with certainty about the year of his death. Peter Foote, to whom I owe these biographical data, guesses that Berg has devoted himself to his writings preferably during the years 1334-1345, where we are left with a gap in his service at Munká-Þverá.

Another translation by Bergr Sökkason in Heilagra manna sögur is a version of Nikolaus saga erkibiskups. This time Bergr introduces his voluminous work by the following greeting to his readers: "All the friends of God and himself, those who read or hear this book, brother Bergr sends his kind regards from God and himself." And he goes on with an apology for his boldness of having, at the request of some persons, "taken upon himself the task of translating the biography of the blessed archbishop Nikolaus, rather fuller than it had before been written in old books." Bergr here hints at the existence of older interpretations. The Latin legend itself according to Unger's introduction in Heilagra manna sögur is to be found in Vincent of Beauvais' (d. 1264) Speculum historiale and, shortened, in the collection Legenda

aurea, edited by Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298). A Nordic version — by far shorter than that by Bergr — has also been published in *Heilagra manna sögur: Nikolaus saga erkbiskups I*, pp. 21-41. Bergr has extended his own translation to some five or six times that size. This is typical of what has been named the "florissant" Icelandic style of the religious and legendary sagas from the 14th century. In fact, Bergr is the most prolific representative of that style. In *Stilsignalement och författarskap I* I have studied these texts as they appear in their vocabulary and syntactic peculiarities. In that connection Bergr seems to hold a quite exceptional position even within the sphere of "florissant" style. Thus it seemed natural, or even necessary, to indicate him as the writer of many works in the sector of religious and legendary sagas. Among them was a late version of the legendary saga on bishop Guðmundr Arason, a stubborn and controversial Icelandic cleric of his time. But there are reasons to check my conclusion as to that version of the saga.

Among the Icelandic bishops' sagas the late biography on Guðmundr Arason holds an unique position. The bishop's changing fortunes in his controversies with the temporal power in Iceland had earlier been recorded by, among others, Snorri Sturlason's nephew Sturla Þordarson. When Arngrímr Brandsson (d. 1361), monk at the Þingeyrar monastery and abbot there in 1351, undertook once again to relate the story of Guðmundr's efforts as a champion of the Church, it was obviously not least in order to work for his canonisation. Arngrímr wrote in Latin, a version now lost. His work, however, is preserved in an Icelandic translation, by an unknown author. In many wordings this translation reveals obvious influences from the original. Thus it seems rather pointless to inform an Icelandic speaking audience on how to catch fish with the help of "a curved iron which is named fish-hook". And when the reader is in the end of the third chapter referred to "Icelandic books", if he should prefer their treatment of the topic, it can hardly be understood otherwise than as an allusion to the foreign language which Arngrímr is using. Once the author turns up as "ek, brother Arngrímr" (169). He says that — as a child he has got to fetch water, consecrated by bishop Guðmundr, for an old woman to bathe her blind eyes — and sure enough she recovered her sight, "svá at hún sá mann á hesti um hálfjörðungs veg" (169-70).

The translation has early been interfoliated by a series of stanzas from an ode (*drápa*) on Guðmundr Arason, written (composed) by Arngrímr Brandsson in the year 1345 — a date which is directly confirmed by stanza 47 (47) in the poem. The Icelandic *drápa* can of course not have belonged to the Latin version of the saga. These stanzas are introduced in our preserved Icelandic text by phrases as "Hér yfir

segir auktor" (178) or "Hér yfir segir herra Arngrímr" (180).

The translation of Arngrímr's Latin, it maybe the question of a fairly faithful rendering, but just as well of a very free one. A possibility to decide which of them we have to do with will hardly present itself. In the form the saga now exists, it bears witness to an extensive reading of medieval theology and hagiography. Such sources are referred to here — sometimes with quotations in Latin, much more frequently than in other Icelandic bishop's sagas. Not least there is time and again associated to Thomas of Canterbury. As an essential point of contact between the English martyr and Guðmundr Arason is obviously seen their vindication of the right of the church against secular rulers. Neither of them, for instance, yield "fyfir öngum lifandi manni af réttum veg, sem gjörði Thomas erkibiskup eða Guðmundr Holensis" (59). And when already in the first chapter it is said that while in office Thomas had to suffer "þá ógn og aga, sem bæði þíndi önd og líkama" (4), it certainly also alludes to the similar hardships of the Icelandic prelate.

Of special interest in this connection is a passage which seems to reveal a direct relation to the Icelandic Thomas saga. In version II of that biography — but not in the older version I — is related a dream by Mrs Máild, while she is pregnant with heron, the future martyr: "hún hugðist koma til Kristskirkju þar í Lundunum ok villdi inn ganga" (298).

In the legendary saga on Guðmundr Arason we are told a quite similar dream by one of his near kinsmen, and it is compared to the dream:

"er forðum sýndist frá Máild í Englandi, sem hún gekk með son sinn Thomam Cantuariensem, ok hún þóttist koma til Krists Kirkju í Lundunum ok mega eigi inn ganga, sakir mikils vaxtar, svá er hans sama glósa hér ok þar, sem skýrði einn spakr maðr í Englandi, at hennar burðr mundi verða meiri ok mætari, en kristni jarðnesk mundi bera, eða skilning á koma.(8).

In the quotation has been italicized the phrase that seems to remove any doubt about a relation between the two passages. And of course Thomas saga has to be seen as the original text. By the way, it may be said that Thomas II also on a later occasion (459) reminds the reader on Mrs Máilds prophetic dream. In Stilsignalement och författarskap I discussed the connection between the late legendary biography on Guðmundr Arason, the author of the Icelandic version, and Thomas II (144-51).

In the drápa by Arngrímr Brandsson which accompanies the Icelandic translation of the late legendary biography on Guðmundr Arason we find an undeniable testimony that Bergr Sökkason contributed to the panegyric on Guðmundr Arason. The stanzas 42 and 43 may be rendered thus: "The abbot Bergr has in clear words given expression to many a eulogy on the bishop. He reported all his true portents (omens) with an humble heart. It must be hard to find in this country a tongue which can in such a way ring the praise of a man's true honour."

"In his description he (Bergr) compared the honourable bishop to the cedar rich in oil which with four excellent qualified forebodes three powers: faith and hope strengthened the pious man; add that charity — rightly understood. That is a true characterization of such a man; that testimony will never die.

There follow some additional stanzas on the virtues and allegorized implication of the cedar.

In the Icelandic prose the comparison to the cedar is unfolded thus:

"Greindar nátturur cedri Þjóna vidrkvæmlega herra Guðmundi; sá fyrsta dygð, er cedrus skrifast óþillilligr, þýðir ágæt verk hrein ok heilög Þessa manns ok guðs vinar, er óngvan flekk eða fölnan taka með rás tímanna, heldr standa þau í guða auglití óbrigðilega án enda, hvar fylgir ilmr mikill, því at hannan(g)lig frægð af fyrgreindum verkum sæls Guðmundar flýtr viðá ok inn gengr í skilningarvit kristinna manna." (183)

The reference to the cedar is also found in Bergr's translation of Nicolaus saga II with the same content, and very much the same wording.

Greindrar nátturur cedri þjóna vidrkvæmlega stett Nicholai. Sú hin fyrsta dygd, at cedrus skrifaz usþillilligr, merkir ágæt verk hrein ok heilög þessa guðs vinar, er engan flekk eða fölnan taka með ras tímanna, heldr standa þau hardla fogr í guðs auglití ubrigðilliga an enda; hvar fyrir fylgir ilmr mikill, þvíat hannanglig frægð af fyrr greindum verkum sæls Nicholai vida hlíodandi gengr inn í skilningarvit allra manna í kristnina. (155)

The connection between the two passages on the cedar is very close. No doubt the translation in Nicolaus saga II has influenced the translation of Guðmundar saga to a degree that exceeds the limit of plagiarism. It certainly seems strange to apply the image of the cedar almost word for word to a prelate from Asia Minor in the fourth

century to an Icelandic bishop of the 13th century. But Finnur Jónsson has introduced an explanation that seems even stranger. To the passage on Bergr in *Arngríms drápa* he attaches in his *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* III² (p. 91) a bewildering commentary; on the comparison with the cedar he says "Disse ord er imidlertid hidtil blevne misforståede som om det var Gudmund, der mentes; men det foreligger her kun en henvisning til Bergs bemærkninger om biskop Nicolaus i hans saga om denne (164-165), hvor sammenligningen med cedern netop findes. Om Bergs virksomhed vides i det hele kun, at han har oversat og samlet (kompileret) en *Nicolaus saga*.

But here the misunderstanding must be on the part of Finnur Jónsson himself. Why should we have in a biography on Gudmundr Arason a reference to a bishop from Asia Minor? Instead the only conceivable explanation is that Bergr Sökkason has meant Gudmundr Arason, and made use of his earlier comparison in *Nicolaus saga* once again.

This is one of the points of contact that unquestionably bend to Bergr Sökkason as the author of the Icelandic translation of Arngrímr Brandssons Latin version of the legendary Gudmundr-Arason saga. The stanzas on Bergr in *Arngríms drápa* and Bergr's cedar symbolism would then get a natural explanation; it would not be necessary to fall back upon the extremely improbable alignment that Finnur Jónsson reckoned with. The *drápa* — which as we know dates back to the year 1345 — now gives us a terminus ante quem for Arngrím's Latin work as well as for Bergr's translation. (For the latter we also can get a terminus post quem, as there is mentioned, p. 173, a remarkable healing in the year 1343). From Arngrím's words we are also ought to be able to infer something about the relation between the original and the Icelandic version. Arngrímr would of course not have done homage to Bergr as the originator of the comparison to the cedar, if it had been in his own Latin version. Thus Bergr has amplified and expanded his original. One can suspect that to have been the case at many more points. When Arngrímr says that Bergr has described "margan biskups heiðra allar sannar jarteinir hans", it might also be seen as an allusion to numerous other contributions by Bergr in the Icelandic text. At least there are nowhere else any survivals left of his, according to Arngrím, extraordinary rethoric on bishop Guðmundr. If Bergr has strongly revised Arngríms work according to his personal style, it would also agree with his practice in other examples of his translations.

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