

Thoriákr's Miracles

In the twelfth century a number of holy men attained some form of sanctification in the Scandinavian world, although it was not formal canonization approved by the pope. In Norway, for instance there were Olaf and Hallgard, in Denmark Canute and Kjeld, in Sweden King Erik, in the Orkneys Magnus. Iceland must have thought it was its turn, because before the century was over two of its bishops, Jón and Thoriákr, were found to be blessed.

Thoriákr Thörhallsson, bishop at Skálaholt, was the first one to be named, even though he had been born long after Jón. He died in 1193, and at the Althingi of 1198 permission was granted to invoke his name for intercession. Thoriákr obligingly worked a number of miracles at the thing and in the months afterwards, so that at the Althingi of 1199 the bishops declared him canonized.

Thoriáks saga was written in the first decade of the thirteenth century, and today is extant in three main versions in manuscripts from the fourteenth century and later. The saga is extremely laudatory of Thoriákr, picturing him as a model bishop of great integrity and compassion. The picture we get of him in the Oddaverja tháttur, included in Redaction C, is more realistic, showing him as part of the political situation of the day.

Even in his lifetime some marvelous things were said to have happened. Most of the miracles that have been ascribed to him, however, took place after he was declared worthy of supplication at the Althingi, and many more during and after his canonization.

Many of these miracles, called *jartoinir*, are narrated briefly at the end of the saga, more in the later versions than in the one closest to the original. They are narrated, however, in greater detail in "miracle books" (*jarteinabœkr*), three of which are extant. The earliest one seems to have been written in 1199, and the others in part copy it, in part supplement it.

Of the many types of miracles that Thorlâkr performed, the most usual type had to do with the curing of physical ills. One Tjörvi, for instance must have had a bad case of arthritis: his hands were so stiff that he could hardly move his fingers. After he made his vow to Thorlâkr he went to bed, and the next morning his hands were healed. (78) An unnamed woman had such pain in her hand that she couldn't use it for anything. After she invoked Thorlâkr's aid she became healed the next night. 86

Jön Ábóti ör Veri came down with an affliction called kverkamein, as did many other people involved in the Thorlâkr miracles. It seems, by its description, to have been strep throat. Jön's throat swelled up so that he could hardly speak, but after seeking Thorlâkr's aid he went to bed and he, too, woke up healed the next morning. 78 A man had quinsy so bad he couldn't speak, but after he invoked Thorlâkr the infection broke that very night, and in a few days he was as good as new. 85 A certain woman had the mother of all abdominal infections, it having lasted thirty years. After she called upon Thorlâkr he made her wait twelve days, after which he appeared to her in a dream, and the next day she was healed. 95

Guðmundr gríss suffered from some unnamed but deadly disease, and after he called upon Thorlákkr he got better "dag frá degi" and was completely cured after he burned a candle in Skálaholt. 79 At the same Althingi of 1198 a northern man suffered such pain that he lost consciousness. When Thorlákkr was invoked he recovered instantly. 80 At the same memorable assembly a priest by the name of Thórðr took so ill that his friends feared for his life. When Thorlákkr was called upon he improved so rapidly that he was able to ride away from the thing. 80 A young woman had such terrible pain "svá menn fengu varla hana geymt," and Thorlákkr cured her immediately. 86 Another woman was so ill that she lost speech and consciousness. When others invoked Thorlákkr for her she became healed. 88 A girl so ill she couldn't be cured was healed immediately when her foster sister invoked Thorlákkr for her. 96 A young boy suffered from pestilence (fársótt) so badly "at kvíðrinn slitnaði," whatever that means. But Thorlákkr cured him. 96 A young man, Thorsteinn, suffered from a kidney stone, and after visiting the church where Thorlákkr's casket was honored, the troublesome stone, "eigi minni vexti en baun," later that day came forth "frá getnadarlim hans." He had it put into a ring, "ok urðu þar af mýrg merki síðan." 102-02 A man called Uni (in A and Jón in B) had a wizened leg so that he had to use a prosthesis. He was carried into the church where Thorlákkr's coffin lay in state, and was healed by touching the cloth that was spread on top of it. 103 & 105 Various other maladies were healed at that time: a

girl of a crippled hand; a boy with epilepsy; a man with crippled fingers who couldn't get to the church. 103-04)

Many people suffered from one or another kind of eye trouble. Sighvatr, a northerner, had such pain in his eyes that he thought they were going to pop out, but after calling on Thorlâkr the pain ceased overnight, although as testimony to his former pain his eyelids stayed red and swollen for some time. A priest named Torfi's eyes became very sore as he left the thing, but when he went to Skâlaholt and held a mass for Thorlâkr, they were healed right away. 83 A boy's bad eye pain was healed by a combination of a candlewick his mother wrapped around his head and an invocation of Thorlâkr. 84 An unnamed woman also had "augnaverik mikinn," but became cured immediately after she had called upon Thorlâkr. 83 A man's eyes were so weak he could barely distinguish his hand in front of his face, but after he invoked Thorlâkr he got his sight back immediately. 85 Another man had been plagued for some time not only by painful eyes, but also by epilepsy. Thorlâkr cured him of both, but only after he appeared in a dream and told him he must first confess his sins. 94; 112 A man called Steinhörr was saved from death in a storm at sea after he had called upon Thorlâkr. 190

A number of people suffered from swollen abdomens. Such was the case with Unas, whose affliction improved as soon as he invoked Thorlâkr. That night he dreamed not only of Thorlâkr, but also of Saint Vitus, and he awoke the next morning completely healed. 80 Another man swelled up so that he was as fat as a

cow, but Thorlákur cured him rapidly. 92 One Árni had a great pain "innan rifja," but Thorlákur fixed him up right away. 82

There are of course many cuts and slashes. Ormr, a kinsman of Thorlákur's, thought he would respect Thorlákur's holiness more if he experienced it himself. At that very moment he cut his right hand on a knife, and it bled profusely until Thorlákur staunched the flow; it stopped immediately and nary a drop flowed afterwards. 82 A man had a foot injury that had become infected, and when the doctors could not heal it he prayed to Thorlákur. Thorlákur stroked the foot in a dream, "en hann vaknaði alheili." 96

Often bones were broken. A certain priest broke his collar bone, and it gave him so much pain that he couldn't ride. Thorlákur cured him rapidly. 88 A woman broke her foot, and after the local leeches had failed to heal her, she called upon Thorlákur, who appeared to her in a dream, so that she woke up cured. 93 A man fell off a rock, breaking his foot and kneecap. Thorlákur healed him immediately. 98 A woman was lamed by a falling tree. After her husband had called upon Thorlákur she saw the latter in a dream and woke up healed. 100

Burns are common, too. A boy fell into a fire and burned his hand. His hand was healed up in three days.

I'm not sure what sour-whey tubs (syruker) were like, but boys seemed to be apt to fall into them. One boy seemed dead when they fished him out, but after his parents invoked Thorlákur he showed signs of life, and after lying unconscious for some time,

he jumped up healed. 91 Hot springs were danger spots, as well. A woman fell into one and her feet were so badly scalded that it was feared that she would have to lose them. But after Thorlâkr was called upon, she recovered in a month. 92

The circumstances of the healing process vary considerably, as we have seen above. Often the illness or wound is healed immediately (thegar), or overnight. Very often Thorlâkr appears to the person in a dream and gives notice that he or she will be healed. Sometimes the ill person dreams that Thorlâkr accomplishes the healing by touching the sore point. Often the healing takes place in the church at Skálaholt in the presence of Thorlâkr's coffin or the shrine including his bones.

Often, though, the healing process takes a long time and is accompanied by the ordinary established treatment. Occasionally the healing is accomplished by miraculous healing agents. For instance, a boy whose leg was swollen and infected because of a knife wound had his leg washed with the same water that had been used to wash Thorlâkr's bones. 227 A woman who lost her wits was cured by having her mouth smeared with an ointment blessed by Thorlâkr. 100

Thorlâkr also averted many calamities, or mitigated the losses incurred through them. In a flood a man lost two chests, one filled with clothing and one with tools. After he invoked Thorlâkr they were found undamaged. 86 Some men came to a swollen river. Only those who invoked Thorlâkr got across. 86 Some merchants couldn't raise their anchor, and Thorlâkr helped

them raise it. 87 Some merchants were traveling from Vestmannaeyar to Iceland proper and incurred a great storm. After Thorlâkr was invoked, the storm subsided. 87 The Holtavatn was once so dammed up that the farmers who had fields at its edge threatened to have a big loss. After being called upon, Thorlâkr saw to it that the sand blocking the exit gave way, and the waters subsided. 90 A man's ship was forced out to sea from its mooring, but after Thorlâkr was invoked it returned overnight to its regular mooring. 90 Some Orcadian merchants ran into a terrible storm near the Faeroes. Thorlâkr turned it into a favorable wind. 93 A similar experience was undergone by some merchants in the English channel. 94 An invocation of Thorlâkr secured a fair wind to Vestmannaeyar for Bishop Páll and his friends. 95 Thorlâkr performed an even greater miracle another time, when he gave fair winds to two ships going in opposite directions that passed each other going into and out of a fjord. 96 Some women were unable to dry clothes for a party for Páll because of the wet weather. After they had prayed to Thorlâkr the sun came out even as they sang their heitsöng, and the clothes dried in time. 95-6 Two women were traversing a fjord on the ice when one of them gave birth to a child far from any farmhouse. After they prayed to Thorlâkr, men appeared and brought them to a farm. It had been so cold that the baby's eye had fallen out. The mother bandaged the eye, invoked Thorlâkr's help and went to sleep in the middle of the afternoon. She woke up in the evening and the boy's eye had been healed. 97 In a

farm in the West Fjords a house caught fire when no one was here except small children. One of them invoked Thorlákkr, after which a rain that fell only on that one spot put the fire out. 98

There are many instances where Thorlákkr helped people in need of food. A poor housewife prayed for food for her children in a time of famine. She then found a seal on the beach, lying still so that she could slay it. 98 A hospitable bōndi needed food because of the famine, and Thorlákkr provided a whale that he and his guests secured. But then a storm washed it away, only to wash it up on a beach where the bōndi had it all to himself. 98 A poor farmer prayed for food in the famine, and Thorlákkr arranged it so a whale got caught in his dragnet as long as the net itself. 99 A man caught a large fish, but it broke his line and got away. After the fisherman had prayed to Thōriákkr he found the fish on land, complete with hook, line and sinker. 99-100

Thorlákkr also obligingly found things that people had lost. A northerner lost good shackles at the famous assembly of 1198. When Thorlákkr was called upon, they were found in a place where they had often been sought before. 81 Another man, this time a poor man, also lost shackles, this time in a swamp, so that it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. But after Thorlákkr was invoked, they were found right away. 84 A housewife lost "good gold," but it, too, was found after Thorlákkr was called upon. 88 Another housewife, by the name of Thōra, lost a golden ring in her bed. She prayed secretly to Thorlákkr, for the áheit had not yet been approved in her sveit, and she found it. 97

Another woman lost a padlock, and Thorlákkr helped her find it. 96-7 A man lost a sledge hammer through the ice into the sea. After he called upon Thorlákkr the sledge was found on dry land the next day. 93 In a certain farm thieves stole some undescribed property. Thorlákkr didn't get the property back, but he fixed it so that those who were robbed caught so many salmon that they were better off than before. 89

Sometimes animals get lost, as was the case when Magnús Gizurarson's herd of sheep couldn't be found. Magnús was concerned lest the ewes would be swollen up from lack of being milked. But Thorlákkr came through, and they returned, all in good shape. 83-4 A boy lost a herd of cattle in a thick fog, and Thorlákkr helped him find them. 93

Thorlákkr also healed animals that had been hurt. A horse's feet were badly burned when a young man rode him through ground that was heated by hot springs. Thorlákkr cured him in a few days. 84 Another time he healed a cow who had gotten lame when she fell off a ledge. 100

Now, the word áheit seems not to have been a merely formal word, meaning that one merely had to petition Thorlákkr. Whenever an invocation was made, it was accompanied by a vow, a promise, to deliver something in return for the favor asked. The Old Norse word is invariably heita, with its basic meaning of "to promise." Generally it goes something like "X hét á Thorlák biskup..." The gifts varied considerably, depending on the size of the miracle that was requested, the ability of the recipient

to pay, and his generosity. The first version of the saga has little to say about the nature of the gifts, but there is much more specific information in the later version and in the miracle books. While a number of times the gifts amount to merely saying a number of pater nosters, or singing psalms, in general more concrete rewards are pledged and given.

The most frequently pledged gift was a candle, often accompanied by sǫng, which generally means that a mass is sung to honor Thorlǫkr, or prayers. Such was the case when a man lost an ax. 177 A woman called Koltherna cut her hand, and pledged a small candle and some prayers. 207 A young man named Sveinn was very ill, and his poor parents pledged two candles for his recovery, which took place overnight. 208 A poor woman pledged a candle so that Thorlǫkr would heal her son's feet. 208 A sickly boy who had been missing was found in the hlundgröf, all but dead. His father pledged candles and masses, and the boy lived, although he was sickly for a long time. 212 A housewife pledged a candle "til glorie inum saæla Thorlǫki byskupi" in order to cure her husband of a swollen abdomen. 167

Often the candles promised were very large. A man offered Thorlǫkr a candle five ells long for saving the life of an ox that had been crushed in the collapse of a rock shelter. 178-9 A fisherman who had importuned Thorlǫkr to let him catch the first halibut, pledged a candle as long as the fish. 208 An ax lost through the ice was restored by Thorlǫkr, and he was requited with a candle as long as the shaft of the ax. 115

Often wax was given instead of candles--presumably it could be converted into salable candles. Some Orcadian merchants were so grateful to Thorl  kr for having saved them from being wrecked in a storm that they brought twenty marks of wax to Sk  laholt. 116 Generally, to be sure, the amounts were more modest. When J  n Eriendsson had a bad throat, his parents brought a mark of wax to Sk  laholt and promised that J  n would always vainfasta on Thorl  kr's festival day. 235-6 Another boy's parents, for a similar affliction, pledged to give two aurar of wax, sing psalms and feed the poor on Thorl  kr's next festival day. 236 One Arnbj  rn J  nsson, having been sick abed for six months, promised to feed a poor man twice and give a mark of wax to Sk  laholt every summer. He improved immediately, and when he added an eyrir of va  m  l to the pot, he continued to improve until he was completely healthy. 237-8 Eir  kr birkileggr lost a gold ring, and pledged to give an eyrir of wax and feed three men on Thorl  kr's mass day if he got it back. (He did.) 239 Finnbogi, in dire peril in a sinking ship, promised a mark of wax if he was saved, as did Teitr in a similar situation. 239-40 A Norwegian woman in her sixties fell and broke a hand and a foot on her way to mass in Thr  ndheimr. She pledged to donate a hand and a foot made of wax and a further six marks of wax, so not surprisingly she started to get better right away, and within a month she was her old self again. 240 A farmer in Skagafj  r  r called Karl cut his wrist to the bone with an adze. Upon the advice of a priest he pledged to travel to Sk  laholt the next summer and present the

church with a half mark of wax in addition to paying for three masses for the soul of Bishop Árni and other saints. Even so, the hand had to be cared for, but it healed cleanly without swelling or infection. 245-8 In 1323 a farmer, Bjarni, pledged a mark of wax if his dying horse would recover--he recovered so well that he could carry two people or a barrel of beer. 246-47 This same Bjarni pledged a mark of wax if Thorlákr would bring a wrecked ship to shore. 247-8 In 1325 a shepherd was so ill he couldn't speak, and his master pledged that he would go to Breiðholt and donate a candle. When the boy did not improve, he pledged that he or the boy would go to Skáliaholt and fast on Thórlákr's festival day and also present an eyrir of wax. 248-9

Many other things are pledged for Thorlákr's intercession. Things that have been lost and found again are often paid for in kind. A woman named Ingunn lost her gold seven years before Thorlákr's death. She couldn't locate it, even though she invoked the intercession of a number of saints. But after Thorlákr had been declared saintly she pledged to give him half of her gold, and lo and behold! it was found. 115-16 A man called Ólafr lost a herd of cattle and pledged to give one of the beasts to Thorlákr if they came back. At first all came back save one ox, and Ólafr assumed that Thorlákr had picked that one out. Sure enough, he was found later, healthy and fat, and Ólafr brought him to Skáliaholt. 200 A Shetland man called Hávarðr, who saved his hoard of gold rings from raiding vikings by burying them in sand, pledged one of the rings to Thorlákr if he found

them again. 202-3 A rich Norwegian had his ship ransacked by robbers, but, because of the man's pledge to Thorlâkr to give him some of his wealth, the robbers didn't find his money chests. 203-4 A horse became so infected after gelding that its owner pledged to give half the horse to Thorlâkr if he survived. We are told that he kept his pledge, but I'm not clear how, especially in view of the Christian ban on eating horse meat. 115

Some assorted other pledges follow: A woman in Gröf who had lost a golden brooch pledged half of the value of the brooch. 180 A Vestmannaeyar woman named Halldóra gave a golden ring when she was cured of a three-year sickness. 184-5 A woman pledged an unspecified amount of money for the return of a lost ring. 197-8 When Hávarðr the Shetlander suffered from painful eyes he got his thingmenn to help him, and they all sent a handful of meal to Skálaholt every summer for a long time. 203 Some Varangians, outnumbered in battle by their heathen foe, promised to build a church in honor of Thorlâkr if they could defeat the enemy. 205 A man called Ormr, who had hurt his face, pledged six aurar's worth of vadmál. 199 A man who was injured by a scythe pledged half an eyrir. 232-3

We are shown on some occasions that Thorlâkr took these pledges seriously, and expected them to be kept. A young man had a swollen and painful hand, and invoked Thorlâkr's aid, making a pledge, the nature of which is not revealed. Thorlâkr appeared to the young man in a dream, and reminded him that he had not yet made good a pledge he had made some time before. The young man

made good on both pledges and was healed. 95 A young boy fell on a knife and injured himself so badly that it was thought he would die. The boy's father pledged to pay for masses and to give six ells of vaðmál to the church in Skálaholt. That summer he used part of the vaðmál to buy a kettle. A horse that was carrying a number of kettles, this man's among them, fell down. None of the kettles was damaged except the boy's father's--his was smashed to pieces. The next summer he was careful to pay everything he had pledged. 198-99 A mother and daughter were drowned when others on a ship were saved, and in their clothes was found a silver brooch which they had promised Thorlákr and not delivered. 190-1

The miracles that Thorlákr was said to have performed were for the most part fairly modest affairs--finding small articles that had been lost, healing small ailments or minor wounds. Occasionally the miracles were more impressive: lives saved from disasters at sea, people healed that had been thought beyond saving. When an article is found that has been lost we can easily surmise that it would have been found anyway, with or without Thorlákr. When a cure is effected after a long treatment by the medical practitioners of the day, we might be tempted to think that Thorlákr had little to do with it. When a fair wind comes after Thorlákr has been invoked, who is to say that it wouldn't have come anyway? If one man of many is saved from a catastrophic storm at sea, who is to say that it wasn't just luck on his part?

It is a different story when a badly swollen hand or abdomen

is cured immediately, or when a blind person suddenly regains his sight; when a man with a wizened leg since boyhood can throw away his wooden leg and walk normally. Here we must accept the miraculous or assume that the facts have been invented or exaggerated. The writer, after all, was out to make a case for sainthood, at least in the jarleinabók of 1199, where proof had to be brought to the Althingi of that year that Thorlákkr was indeed a saint.

Obviously, the details given about the gifts that are made in payment of the miracles Thorlákkr performs are meant to get across the idea that miracles must be paid for. Every candle that was lit, every mass that was sung, had to be paid for. Apart from the prestige involved in having a blessed body enshrined in one's church, the profit angle must have been important for the creation of saints. While it is not unlikely that some of the miracles have been lifted from the lives of other saints, there is a completely Icelandic quality about them all. Very often, especially in the jarleinabœkr, the descriptions of the miracles contain many details that are essentially irrelevant to the miracles themselves, but give us a realistic picture of the circumstances in which the persons involved lived. This is the big miracle that we can thank Thorlákkr for.

Footnote

1. References are to page numbers in Gudni Jónsson's edition of Byskupa Sögur, Vol. I

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