Literature of the Clergy

Latin alphabet introduced

We shall now trace what part the Icelandic church and clergy played—more or less directly—in the production of literature. Its first important part was introducing the Latin alphabet for writing books, a virgin field, for the runes were always restricted to monumental and magic purposes. Sermons and homilies must have been preached from the very first in the native tongue by the missionaries, and since there were Englishmen among them, such as Rúðólfr in Bær in Borgarfjörðr, they may have started the Icelanders on writing their homilies in their native tongue as was the custom in England.

Icelandic bishops

By the middle of the eleventh century the Icelanders had become ambitious enough to choose their own bishop with a seat at Skálaholt in the South. Here the first two bishops, father and son, Ísleifr Gizurarson (1056–80) and Gizurr Ísleifsson (1082–1118) laid the foundation of the new church. The latter’s popularity was such that he could even introduce the tithe law in 1097 and, in order that the country might never be without a bishop, he generously gave up a quarter of his jurisdiction to a new bishop, Jón Ögmundarson, at Hölar in the North (1106–21).

Schools and learning at the sees

Schools were operated at both sees, but we know nothing about the one at Skálaholt, now Skálholt, beyond the fact that many chieftains sent their sons to be educated there. At Hölar, Bishop Jón brought two foreigners, a native of Gautland (Götland) to teach Latin grammar and a Frenchman, Rikinni, to teach Gregorian chant and Latin versification. This paradise of learning was not without its snake in the shape of Ovid’s De arte amatoria to tempt a young clerk, but such a book was not tolerated by the saintly bishop any more than the impious and sexy
dancing which seems to have come in the wake of the French cantor. The new learning attracted not only budding clerics, but also a deft maiden and a skilled carpenter, Þóroddr Gamlason rúnameistari, who both became expert Latinists by listening to Latin being taught. In this one should not forget that in the Iceland of 1100 there was no great social cleavage between the chieftains and the farmers or even the farmhands, for pioneering life had proven such a social equalizer that by this time even the slaves had been set up in freedom to shift for themselves.

*Astronomy and computus*

The maiden and the carpenter at Hólar were not the only examples of learning spreading outside the circle of clergy. Stjörnu-Oddi, apparently a farmhand in the North, became interested in astronomy and made observations far ahead of his time. Still, most of the literature on chronology and calendar science is, no doubt, attributable to the clergy. Before Christianity was introduced the Icelanders had counted time in 52 weeks in a year of 364 days. By the tenth century they had discovered that this was too short a year and added one week to the summer, sumarauki, every seventh year. This reform was duly recorded by Ari inn fróði. It was the task of the twelfth-century chronologists to bring this native counting into harmony with the ecclesiastical Julian calendar. According to modern scholars they did solve it in a brilliant fashion.

*First Grammatical Treatise*

Grammarians and rhetoricians of eleventh and twelfth century Europe rarely dealt with any language but Latin, and it was most unusual if anyone, like the Englishman, Ælfric, wrote his Latin grammar in the vernacular. But in twelfth-century Iceland (*ca.* 1140–80) there was a grammarian who devised a modified Latin alphabet for his mother tongue and wrote his treatise—the so-called *First Grammatical Treatise*—in the vernacular. Moreover, this man, though he knew Hebrew, Greek, and Old English scripts—in addition to the Latin one—was so unorthodox that, to the amazement and delight of modern linguists, he actually invented a perfect phonological orthography for Icelandic. As a model observer and theoretician he seems to have had no peer in Western Christendom, until perhaps fifty years later when Brother Orm appeared on the English scene with the *Ormulum*. Both men wanted to create a practical spelling for their countrymen to ease the art of reading and writing. But fate was not particularly favorable to either; Orm was
ignored, and, though the Islander started a school of spelling no one followed him in detail.

Málskrúðsfraði (rhetoric)

This first anonymous Icelandic grammarian was followed by several others, but only the last one, the rhetorician Ólafur Þórðarson hvítaskáld, nephew of Snorri Sturluson, deserves to be mentioned. He wrote Málskrúðsfraði (Rhetoric) in the European school tradition, with the Latin terminology (*barbarismus*, etc.) but in Icelandic, and with examples from the skaldic poetry. His work in stringency of method does not measure up to his uncle’s *Edda* which, though wholly native, obviously owes much to the European vogue of rhetorics in the twelfth century.

Other centers of learning

The schools of the two dioceses, at Skálholt and Hólar, were not the only centers of learning. The school of Haukadalr was run by Teitr, son of Bishop Ísleifr; his most important pupil was Ari inn fróði. No less important was the school of Oddi, founded by the chieftain-priest Sæmundr inn fróði (1056–1133) who was the first Islander (and Scandinavian) to study in France (Bea?) and the first Islander to write in Latin. His son, Loptr Sæmundarson, married the king of Norway’s daughter; their son was Jón Loptsson, the most powerful chief in Iceland towards the end of the twelfth century. He fostered Snorri Sturluson. The traditions fostered by these schools were aristocratic and critical.

Monasteries: the Church militant

Other centers of learning sprang up with the seven monasteries—the first one at Þingeyrar—established in the period 1133–1226. In the latter half of the twelfth-century Iceland seems to have been flooded by a wave of religion which culminated about 1200 and did not begin to recede until the twenties of that century. The writings at the school of Þingeyrar, hagiographic and uncritical, were borne on this wave of religion. About 1200 a census revealed the presence of some 425 priests in a population of about 80,000—one priest for less than 200 souls. At the same time Iceland had its two saints: Þorlákr Þórhallsson, born 1133, Bishop of Skálholt 1178–93, exhumed 1198, and Jón Ögnumundarson, born 1052, Bishop of Hólar 1106–21, exhumed 1200, though neither of them were sanctioned by the Church. The first Code of Church Law, dating from 1122–33, had embodied the peculiar compromise with the
chieftains of the earliest Church in Iceland. Towards 1200 the European *ecclesia militans* was in no mood to compromise. Already Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson had tried to wrest the time-honored ownership of the churches from the chiefs (originally the Church had encouraged them to build churches on their estates!), but his attempt had foundered on the resistance of Jón Loptsson. The fight was carried on relentlessly by Bishop Guðmundr Arason of Hólar (1203–37), but with his impractical saintliness all he gained was to be repeatedly chased from his see, for even his claims to sainthood were ignored by the Church. It was reserved for the eminently practical Bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt (1269–98) to gain the ascendancy over the chieftains and to write a second Code of Church Law, which did not differ from the European Canon Law. With the ruling that this, God’s Law, was to prevail over the Law of the Land, in case of a clash, the Church was now made the wealthiest and most powerful institution of the country, and it remained so for two centuries and a half (1300–1550).

*Homilies, books of instruction, saints’ lives*

Already the *First Grammatical Treatise* mentions “sacred translations” among works in the mother tongue. Since there exists in a manuscript from about 1200 an Icelandic *Hóminiubók* (Book of Homilies, ed. Wisén, *Den Stockholmska homilie-boken*) it seems likely that some such work was meant. It is true that only sixteen of the fifty-six homilies have been identified as translations (e.g., from the *Homiliarum* of Paulus Diaconus) but whether that is due to disappearance of the Latin originals or to the originality of the Icelandic (-Norwegian) clergy is still an open question. Perhaps F. Paasche’s words about the lives of saints are equally applicable to the homilies: “It has been a common practice to classify these as ‘translations’ but the truth is that a great number of them contain considerable independent work in the shape of Icelandic theology and even polemical theology” (*Hóminiubók, ccimæ, vii, 16*). In any case these homilies are based on the Bible, the apocryphal Gospels, the lives of saints, and the history of the early Church.

A *Physiologus* (Bestiary) and an *Elucidarius* (Manual of Theology) date from about the same time as the *Hóminiubók*. Most of the *Postula sögur* (Lives of the Apostles), *Heilagra manna sögur* (Lives of Saints) as well as *Máriu saga* (Life of Mary by Kygri-Björn) date from the thirteenth century, though some are earlier, some later. Most are, presumably, translations; most, too, are anonymous, though a few Icelandic
authors are mentioned by name, like Kygri-Björn. A good deal of the matter of these three huge collections is Icelandic; the sagas must have been made for the monasteries where such legenda were prescribed for mealtimes and evening wakes. Style and language of these devotional works is very uneven; the Latin original shimmers through in many places as well as the florid and involved style (the learned style), but the early homilies are written in a surprisingly idiomatic Icelandic. Much work remains to be done to write the history of these legendary sagas and determine the sequence of the two or more versions that often occur of the same sagas, but when that has been done they will probably, like the sacred poetry, be found to reflect contemporary currents in the Church. They are often the foundation on which the sacred poems are based. As devotional works they have been praised by modern Catholics (Sigrid Undset).

Icelandic æfintýri (exempla)

It remains to mention an interesting collection of exempla, called Islensk æfintýri by the editor Hugo Gering. Part of these “adventures” or tales is a translation of Petrus Alfonsi, Disciplina clericalis, part are stories credited to the fertile Dominican preacher, Jón Halldórssson, a Norwegian student at Paris and Bologna and Bishop of Skálholt (1322–39). A couple of adventures, reputedly happening to himself, were related in his þáttir, written shortly after his death.

Legendary kings’ sagas

Legendary sagas of the missionary kings were written in the monastery of Þingeyrar, during the second half of the twelfth century. They are treated with the kings’ sagas, but here we must stress their importance as patterns, especially for the hagiographical bishops’ sagas, written shortly after 1200. Apart from Abbot Karl Jónsson, who was really a secular writer, we know the names of three hagiographers at Þingeyrar: the monks Oddr Snorraðsson (late twelfth century) and Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218 or 1219), and the priest Styrmir Kárásson inn fróði (ca. 1170–1245), who later became closely associated with Snorri Sturluson. It is true that the first book of miracles about Bishop Þorlákr had been written and read at the Althing in 1199. But the following year the “saintliness” of Jón Ögmundarson of Hólar (1102–21) “came up,” and the hagiographer Gunnlaugr Leifsson at Þingeyrar lost little time in composing his saga.
Jóns saga helga

Jóns saga helga was written in Latin at the instigation of Bishop Guðmundr Arason, the Good, in the period 1203–11. The Latin original is lost, but an Icelandic translation is preserved in two versions, of which the first is a close translation, the second an abbreviated copy, pruning not only some of the legendary matter of the first but also its ecclesiastical metaphors and learned style. The first version may belong to the first half (quarter ?), the second to the second half of the thirteenth century. Jóns saga helga is our only source for the activity of the church in the first quarter of the twelfth century: our information about the school at Hólar, the learning, and the dancing, comes from it. It also contains the miracles, Jarteinir, of Jón helgi. The activity of the hagiographers of Æingeyrar and Hólar seems to have started the southerners at Skálholt on their intense saga-writing in the first and second decade of the century. But because of lingering respect for the critical traditions of Sæmundr and Ari, their sagas were much more sane than those of the North.

Hungrvaka

Hungrvaka (Appetizer) was written in Skálholt during Bishop Páll Jónsson’s tenure of office (1195–1211) but after the sanctity of Bishop Þorlákr had been acknowledged (1198). It treats the lives of the first five bishops and is written with admiration for them and with an unostentatious piety. The unknown author wants primarily to whet the hunger of his readers for more information about his worthy subjects and to draw their minds from occupation with less essential reading matter. Which matter, we wonder. Apparently not laws, sagas, or genealogical lore, for he claims it to be his second purpose to entice young men to read these things. The “sagas” were probably those of Æingeyrar. Still, it looks as if a Landnáma compiler from the first quarter of the century (Styrmir) had to defend himself against this very criticism, so maybe Hungrvaka’s author was frowning on too much interest in secular matters in general.

Þorláks saga helga

Þorláks saga byskups is found in two forms. The older version, like Hungrvaka, was written in Skálholt (1202–11) under the auspices of Bishop Páll Jónsson. He was the son of Jón Loptsson of Oddi; his mother was Ragnheiðr Þórhallsdóttir, sister of the sainted bishop and concubine of the chieftain of Oddi. When the saint began to work mir-
acles, Bishop Páll had a book of his miracles read at the Althing (1199) in order to have his sanctity recognized. Now he had his uncle’s life composed with due emphasis on the holiness of his ascetic life but with studious avoidance of his uncle’s dramatic clash with his father at Oddi. Actually the bishop had not only waged and lost the first skirmish in a war of church patronage which was to last unremittently throughout the following century but he had also threatened to excommunicate Jón Loptsson for his illicit relations with his sister. It was precisely this very understandable omission which prompted a later writer (after 1222) to add a part, dealing with the bishop’s fight against the Oddaverjar. That constitutes the later version of the saga.

_Jarteinabækr_

Three _Jarteinabækr_ (Miracle Books) recount the miracles of St. Þorlákr. The first, of 1199, has already been mentioned; it is preserved in a contemporary manuscript. Another dates from the times of Páll Jónsson, a third from about 1300–25. The language of the miracles is spotless, sometimes racy. The miracles savor very much of the humble people. Actually they give in some respects a better and more realistic picture of everyday life in Iceland than any other sources available to us. They breathe the quiet religious fervor of the late twelfth century in its most dignified form.

_Páls saga_

The group of the bishops’ lives of Skálholt from the first decade of the thirteenth century comes to a close with _Páls saga byskups_, written shortly after his death. The style of this sympathetic saga so much resembles that of _Hungurvaka_ that scholars agree they must be by the same author, perhaps Ketill Hermundarson, friend and servant of the bishop, later abbot of Helgafell (d. 1220). _A priori_ one would think it likely that Bishop Páll had entrusted the composition of _Þorláks saga_ to the same author, but such is hardly the case, for the point of view of that work is more ecclesiastical and the style more rhetorical—with balance and alliteration—than the simple, manly, though pious style of _Hungurvaka_ and _Páls saga_. On the other hand, the difference in style may be due to the difference in subject only, for _Þorláks saga_ is in reality a saint’s life, not a bishop’s saga. No less a biographer than the Venerable Bede is known to have wielded those two styles for different subjects. The second version of _Þorláks saga_ (with Oddaverja þáttir) has been
attributed to Hallr Gizurarson, priest, lawspeaker, and abbot of Helgafell and Þykkvibær (d. 1230).

All the above-mentioned sagas follow a faulty chronology, with a shift of seven years back. This timing has been called the chronology of Þingeyrar, because it is first found in Sverris saga by Karl Jónsson, abbot of Þingeyrar. Jón Jóhannesson has shown (in Skírnir 1952) that it is derived from a Lotharingian computist of the eleventh century by the name of Gerland.

*Style of the Church militant*

The two sagas following, dealing with bishops whose rule falls within the thirteenth century, and written, probably, during the period 1230–1310, differ markedly in style from the earliest group of bishops' sagas, dating from the first two decades of the century. They deal with prelates, one saintly, the other worldly, in full fight against the secular chieftains of the time, and they are markedly similar in style to the contemporary secular sagas of the Sturlunga collection. Perhaps it might be called the style of the Church militant.

*Guðmundar saga Lambkárs*

Guðmundar saga Arasonar hins góða—he was a bishop of Hólar 1203–37—is found in several versions of a somewhat complicated history. His life up to the time that he became bishop (1160–1203) was written by his friend and secretary Lambkárr Þorgilsson (d. 1249), who seems to have died before he could tackle the bishop's *vita* itself. This so-called Prests saga (Priest's Life) has been incorporated into the Sturlunga collection, and it forms the beginning of a full Life of the Bishop, compiled *ca.* 1300 from many sources and preserved only in two versions, called the “Oldest” and the “Middle” saga by Guðbrandur Vigfússon, the earliest editor, while modern editors would reverse this order. The last-named version has an interesting preface stating how a collection of letters, located in a church in Eyjafjörður (Laufás), was burnt up (1258) before they could be utilized by the writer.

The composition of the Prests saga is full, annalistic, and sometimes clumsy, but it contains, in addition to the miracles worked by the incipient saint, a wealth of good stories. One such is the tale of Guðmundr's and his fosterfather's shipwreck. The storm was so terrific that the skipper had to canvas the crew for a man who knew the highest name of God. In the wreck Guðmundr broke his leg and his fosterfather lost his chest of books which, however, after due invocations on the part
of the owner, drifted ashore so that the books could be dried. Both the Priest’s saga and the Bishop’s saga are comparatively secular in style. Both give an unforgettable picture of the saintly bishop, maltreated by his enemies, but irrepressible, traveling all over the country with a horde of beggars and tramps, leaving a trail of consecrated springs (Geendar-brunnar), the names of which still linger, though their potency may have vanished among his heretical countrymen.

Arnarsaga

Arnarsaga byskups is the life of Ærni Þorláksson, Bishop of Skálholt 1269–98, the man who carried the struggle of the Church, begun about a century earlier by the saintly Þorlákr, and waged with more Godly spirit than worldly wisdom by Guðmundr the Good, to a victorious end. The saga, based upon contemporary speeches and letters, is among the most trustworthy and best sources for the history of the period. It is defective at the end, breaking off in the winter 1290/91. Scholars have attributed it to the bishop’s nephew and successor, Bishop Ærni Helgason (1304–20). As in Guðmundar saga góða the style is more secular than clerkly.

New style

In the first sagas of the fourteenth century there is a new spirit and a new style, though the break with the preceding secular group is not so sharp as that between the secular and the earliest pious group. This style is clerical, reflecting the spirit of the church that has attained its goal and can therefore indulge in some good-humored self-criticism and banter.

Laurentius saga

Laurentius saga is the life of Laurentius Kálfs, Bishop of Hólar (1324–30), written by his friend and confidant, Priest Ólaf Hauksson (d. 1393), who also wrote Lögmannsannáll. The life is detailed and well written; it is our chief source for the period. The author has a fresh sense of humor, not least in evidence in anecdotes about other clerics, learned and otherwise. He delights in explaining to us why the learned Jón flæmingi (from Flanders) wanted to live with a scarecrow of a woman and how sorely pressed some of the country priests were when visitatores of the bishopric were examining their reading knowledge of Latin. He writes as if the spirit of Chaucer might have been brewing
in Iceland; his style reflects the new spirit, but it never comes to a flowering.

_Guðmundar saga Arngríms_

Another _Guðmundar saga Arasonar_ was written by Arngrímr Brandsson (d. 1361), abbot at Pingeyrar, shortly after 1350. It was written in Latin, obviously to propagate the good bishop’s holiness in higher places. For that reason it contains a short description of Iceland. The Latin original is lost, but its learning and heavy, florid, rhetorical style has left its mark on the Icelandic translation, further adorned with _Guðmundar drápur_ by the author and others. Naturally, the saga stresses the bishop’s miracles, but there is little new in it. This is the last of the bishops’ sagas: it reverts to the hagiography of the earliest ones. Not only self-criticism but corruption is discernible in the church of the fourteenth century; both Arngrímur Brandsson and Eysteinn Ásgrímsson, the famed author of _Lilja_, had transgressed heavily before they, as repentant sinners, were restored to grace and power within their church.