

THE SAINT AND THE SAGA HERO. HAGIOGRAPHY AND EARLY ICELANDIC LITERATURE. By. Siân Grønlie. Studies in Old Norse Literature. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017. Pp. 306 (hardcover)

The influence exerted by hagiography – and more broadly the influence of religious literature on Old Norse sagas is a long-standing topic of research. Gabriel Turville-Petre's argument in his *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953, p. 142) that learned literature, including saints' lives, 'did not teach the Icelanders what to think or what to say, but it taught them how to say it' stands as a familiar if somewhat enigmatic call for further contextualising the Old Norse sagas within the body of Christian Latin learning. After all the favourite subjects of early saga writers were two Norwegian kings. One, Óláfr Haraldsson (d. 1030), was a saint whilst the other, Óláfr Tryggvason (d. 1000), enjoyed a heroic reputation and was also known as a zealous Christian. Indeed the symbiotic relationship between sagas and saints' lives has sometimes been considered one of the keys that may unlock salient questions about the origin of saga composition in Iceland. Given the tendency for early saga writers to write mainly biographical accounts it is only natural to look towards the most prominent biographical genre of the time, namely lives of saints. Hagiography may in some way have provided an inspiration and a model when, in the second half of the twelfth century, Icelanders began to write about Norwegian kings and native saga characters. It is fair to say, however, that there is scant scholarly consensus about the nature and extent of this influence.

In *The Saint and the Saga Hero* Siân Grønlie chooses to approach the sagas and hagiography – and Latin religious literature more generally – from a less traditional perspective. Above all, Grønlie seeks to illuminate the manifold ways in which hagiographic elements are embedded within the fabric of individual sagas. This primary aim is explained in the first of book's seven chapters. The introductory chapter introduces 'polysystem theory', a theory or literary approach which is particularly associated with the work of Itamar Even-Zohar (who, interestingly, has himself shown interest in the Icelandic sagas). Polysystem theory explores how different hierarchical 'genres' or 'modes of thought' come together within a given text. Accordingly, the way in which these are arranged within a text is seen to reflect broader cultural and political trends at the time of writing. In our case the Old Norse saga corpus emerges from an interaction between indigenous forms of storytelling and the established, prestigious corpus of hagiographic writings which results in a 'creative and energising literary process'. Essentially *The Saint and the Saga Hero* sets out to show different facets of this process through close analysis of individual sagas and saga episodes.

One of the book's main arguments is that we should not consider the hagiographic or religious elements as alien material imposing (or worse contaminating) indigenous stories, but explore how 'conflict' or 'competition' shapes the nature of the texts under examination. The assumption of a conflict or competition between the different genres may need modification in the context of the Old Norse corpus (a notion that Grønlie, if my understanding is correct, acknowledges in her concluding chapter). Perhaps it is simpler to assume that early Icelandic writers were equipped to arrange elements from different traditions and different literary modes to suit their chosen topic. We need only to consider Abbot Karl Jónsson's *Sverris saga Sigurðarsonar* (a work not specifically considered in this book) as a case in point. Grønlie, it should be noted, is not the first to explore the fusion of the hagiographic mode with other narrative modes from a theoretical perspective. Carl Phelpstead's *Holy Vikings: Saints' Lives in the Old Norse Kings' Saga* (Tempe, AZ: CMRS, Arizona State University, 2007) highlights the hybrid nature of Old Norse royal biography, albeit from a Bakunian perspective.

The corpus of the earliest Icelandic Kings' sagas is certainly a promising field for the application of polysystem theory. These are biographies about King Óláfr Tryggvason where the heroic and saintly fuse and, indeed, occasionally clash in frequently unexpected and occasionally awkward ways. From the perspective of his earliest recorded biographer, Brother Oddr Snorrason of Þingeyrar Abbey, Óláfr was the missionary king *par excellence* whose work extended beyond Norway to the Norse people of the North Atlantic. Grønlie deftly and learnedly demonstrates how Oddr grappled with the obvious paradoxes presented by Óláfr Tryggvason and his career. Here was someone who morphed from a pagan Viking warrior to a Christian missionary. The reward seems to have been Óláfr's acquisition of the Crown of Norway against all odds but, equally remarkably, he is defeated and (likely) killed only a few years later at the Battle of Svolder. That Oddr Snorrason infuses his account with biblical and hagiographic patterns has long been observed. Grønlie, however, illustrates how this religious material plays out Oddr's attempts to offer a coherent vision of the king's life (although contradictions still abound). In the process she underlines the remarkable inventiveness and adaptability already in evidence at this early stage of historical writing in Iceland. One just cannot help wondering what audience Oddr had in mind for his Latin text.

Placing the chapter on Óláfr Tryggvason early in *The Saint and the Saga Hero* is well chosen as Oddr Snorrason's treatment of his colourful career introduces some of its salient themes. This includes the relationship between sanctity and heroism, the problem associated with conversion, exile, marginality, violence and finally a martyrdom of sorts. The following

chapter includes a fascinating exploration of kindred themes in relation to, for example, Egill Skallagrímsson and Hrafnkell Freysgoði in their respective sagas. Linking Egill, a violent and pagan character, with saints and sanctity may at first sight appear somewhat incongruous. We are, however, shown how hagiographic and (more broadly) religious motives are woven into *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* where they both highlight the hero's similarity and dissimilarity with the saints. As such the depiction of Egill 'contests and inverts many of the paradigmatic values of the saint's life' (p. 82). This interpretation certainly explains the seemingly baffling instances when the saga echoes or parallels scenes from canonical religious texts, including from the *Dialogues of Gregory the Great*. Grønlie further emphasises the subversive and, arguably counter-intuitive, use of hagiographic motives in *Hrafnkells saga*. There, the eponymous hero undergoes torture befitting a martyr while the destruction of Freyr's temple (and the killing of the fateful horse, Freyfaxi) evokes similar acts by Norway's missionary kings. Again, associating a deeply ambiguous character like Hrafnkell (who is never even baptised) with sanctity may seem surprising. But the unusual use of hagiographic elements illustrates the plasticity with which saga authors integrated religious themes and motives, even in relation to events which purportedly occurred long before Iceland's official conversion. The conversion period – the decades flanking the turn of the millennium – is the focus of next chapter. Grønlie highlights the manifold ways in which this seminal event (or rather process) appears in *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* and, more specifically, how individual sagas appropriate hagiographic/religious motives for multiple purposes. Particularly interesting is Grønlie's analysis of the so-called *Fróðárundur*, 'The Wonder at Fróðá', section in *Eyrbyggja saga*. She demonstrates ghostly happenings that reveal a profound sense of anxiety regarding the fate of the dead in a newly converted society. The subsequent chapter explores the interiority and marginal position of saga heroes, such as Gísli Súrsson in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and Þorgils Þórðarson in *Flóamanna saga*, with particular reference to hagiography of the desert saints. This last chapter of the main text looks at the saga hero's relation with a saintly patron. Here again St Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway and Óláfr Tryggvason are in the spotlight with the latter, though not technically a saint, playing a comparable role as his holy namesake. The saga heroes on display are, among others, Sigmundur Brestisson in *Færeyinga saga*, Kjartan and Bolli in *Laxdæla saga* and the eponymous hero of *Bjarna saga Hítalakappa*. This discussion could have been extended to other *Íslendingasögur* and *þættir*. For instance, the theme of the 'saintly protector' features in contemporary sagas such as *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* and *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar* with St Guðmundr Arason (d. 1237) playing the leading role of a celestial patron. The theme

clearly resonated with the politics of thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Iceland. A mention should also be made of *Hemings þáttur Áslákssonar* which includes an extraordinary rich and complex example of the hero's engagement with a heavenly patron (in this case St Óláfr).

*The Saint and the Saga Hero* is a major contribution to Old Norse saga studies. It reveals in greater depth and detail than any previous study the ubiquity of hagiographic (and more broadly religious) motive and patterns in the Sagas of Icelanders. The book's wealth of observations and approaches will provide future scholars with plenty of food for thought. But the main quality of this fluently written and accessible book is found in the sensitive and judicious analysis of individual sagas and saga scenes. *The Saint and the Saga Hero* does not seek to flatten out the field of the saga corpus in the pursuit of a common denominator or an overarching thesis. Rather the focus is squarely on a variety and richness of an underexplored thread in a remarkable literary corpus.