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Árna saga biskups as Literature and History

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Árna saga biskups is the first saga to relate events that occurred after the termination of the Icelandic Commonwealth in 1262/64.[1] The work, which dates to the first quarter of the fourteenth century, is, along with the annals, the primary source for the political and ecclesiastical history of Iceland (and indeed Norway) during the episcopacy of Árni Þorlákssonof Skálholt (1269–98).[2] This period in Iceland's history was distinguished by the introduction of new laws and forms of administration, as well as a determined effort by the Icelandic episcopacy to gain control over major church farms (the so-called *staðir*), which for generations had been held by the landed elite.[3] The saga terminates in 1290, seven years before the Treaty of Ögvaldsnes (Avaldsnes), a concordat between Church and Crown that in some respects laid the foundations for the powerful late-medieval Church.[4] It cannot be established with certainty whether the original *Árna saga* ever extended to the bishop's death, though the most recent analysis of this issue indicates that it did not.[5]

Árna saga biskups offers insights into aspects of late thirteenth-century Icelandic society, such as Church administration, the nature of lay piety, and the conduct of the political game in a time of constitutional upheaval and uncertainty. Of especial value is the saga's inclusion of otherwise lost letters and administrative documents. For instance, when in 1276 a

1. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, Íslenzk fornrit, 17 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2008), pp. 3–212.

2. Norwegian and Icelandic history can, of course, not be so easily separated in this period. See Eldbjørg Haug, "Concordats, Statute and Conflict in Árna saga biskups," *Collegium Medievale*, 28 (2015), 70–104.

3. The most thorough overview of this dispute is still Magnús Stefánsson, "Frá goðakirkju til biskupakirkju," in *Saga Íslands* 3, ed. Sigurður Líndal (Reykjavik: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag, 1978), pp. 111–257. Magnús Stefánsson, *Staðir og staðamál: studier i islandske egenkirkelige og beneficialrettslige forhold i middelalderen*. Skrifter/Historisk institutt, Universitetet i Bergen, 4 (Bergen: Historisk institutt, Universitet i Bergen, 2000). See also Helgi Þorláksson, "Succumbing Secular Chiefs. On Secular Chiefs in Iceland, Their Loss of Ground to the Church, c. 1270 to 1355 and Its Impact," Ecclesia Nidrosiensis *and* Noregs Veldi: *The Role of the Church in the Making of Norwegian Domination in the Norse World*, ed. Steinar Imsen (Trondheim: Akademika, 2012), pp. 262–81.

4. Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000–1300* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 131–32.

5. *Árna saga biskups*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi rit, 2 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í Íslenskum fræðum, 1972), pp. civ–cvii.

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farmer complained about the overbearing actions of Þorvarðr Þórarinsson, a powerful representative of the Norwegian king, Árni dispatched an admonitory letter to the royal official, which is cited in the saga.[6] The saga also features an extract from Þorvarðr's missive to the Norwegian king in which he protests about the bishop's involvement in matters outside his brief.[7] Arguably, the saga's ample inclusion of administrative documents and annalistic entries has led to its neglect by literary scholars, and a common perception of its style as being "mostly dry."[8] With few notable exceptions, the saga's narrative art has hitherto attracted surprisingly little commentary.[9] But, as I hope shall become apparent, *Árna saga biskups* possesses a distinctive narrative voice that has hitherto remained largely underexplored and certainly unappreciated.

The original manuscript of *Árna saga* is lost, and its medieval survival is limited to five fragments. Three of these derive from the late fourteenth century (and only partially preserved) *Reykjarfjarðarbók*, which, in its original form, contained a version of *Sturlunga saga*, the great compilation of thirteenth-century contemporary sagas. The better part of *Árna saga biskups*, however, has been preserved in postmedieval copies of *Reykjarfjarðarbók*.[10] It is evident that *Árna saga* concluded *Reykjarfjarðarbók*, and thus it brought the historical narrative of *Sturlunga saga* beyond the Commonwealth period.[11] Though lacking the violent conflict that so marks *Sturlunga saga* proper, *Árna saga*, like the "secular" sagas, relates disputes between Icelandic men of authority where the perspective shifts between domestic politics and the Norwegian court. In other words, the saga was perceived, at least in the closing decades of the fourteenth century, as a testimony to Iceland's history.

Árna saga biskups can be read as both a biography of Bishop Árni Þórhallsson of Skálholt, and a history of Iceland between 1269 and 1290. The fusion of episcopal *gesta* and Iceland's broader history was scarcely a novelty in early fourteenth-century Iceland. Indeed, in his *Íslendingabók*,[12]

6. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 61.

7. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 63.

8. Vésteinn Ólason and Sverrir Tómasson, "The Middle Ages," in *A History of Icelandic Literature*: *Histories of Scandinavian Literature*, ed. Daisy Neijmann (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2006), p. 80.

9. The most interesting treatment of the saga as literature within a specific historical context is Richard Cole, "Árna saga biskups / Kafka / Bureaucracy / Desire," *Collegium Medievale*, 28 (2015), 38–69.

10. Stefán Karlsson, "Ritun Reykjarfjarðarbókar. Excursus: Bókagerðbænda," *Opuscula*, 4 (1970), 120–40; *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. lii–liv.

11. It should be noted, however, that *Reykjafjarðarbók* shows particular interest in clerical issues and the role of churchmen in Icelandic society. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, "Um afskipti erkibiskupa af íslenzkum málefnum á 12. og 13. öld," *Saga. Tímarit sögufélags*, 20 (1982), 50–56.

12. *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968).

composed sometime between 1122 and 1133, Ari Þorgilsson presents the two bishoprics, Skálholt and Hólar, as constituent parts, and indeed organic continuations, of Iceland's peculiar historical development.[13] More specifically, Ari associates Iceland's elite with four main developments: the settlement, the establishment of the Commonwealth, the conversion to Christianity, and the foundation of the Icelandic Church. In this manner Ari shows a seamless continuum not only in Iceland's history but also in the providential role of the country's leading families. A comparable interpretation is offered in *Hungrvaka*, a short episcopal *gesta* of Skálholt composed round around 1200, in which the history of the southern diocese is identified with a more general history of Iceland.[14] Likewise, *Páls saga biskups*, a brief biography of Bishop Páll Jónsson (1195–211), written not long after the death of the Skálholt bishop, is notable for its portrayal of the bishop as *primus inter pares* among Iceland's elite.[15] To this list can be added the earliest hagiographic saga of St. Þorlákr of Skálholt which was also composed around the turn of the thirteenth century.

These works, which collectively can be labeled the "Skálholt corpus," depict the bishops as outstanding figures in Iceland's political landscape who led a Church that had grown in stature and influence since the days of Ari Þorgilsson.[16] The corpus broadly aligns with Ari's vision of the Icelandic bishoprics as a stable, and indeed a stabilizing, element in Iceland's affairs which combine with semihagiographic portrayals of bishops as iconic shepherds of souls. Thus, from the first half of the twelfth century until the end of the Commonwealth period, there existed a strong narrative tradition, which presented Iceland's episcopates as an integral part of the country's history and constitutional development.

The reality was, of course, considerably more complex, as is shown by the turbulent episcopacy of Guðmundr of Hólar (1203–37) during which the bishop repeatedly clashed with leading men of his diocese about the proper governance of his see and ecclesiastical jurisdiction.[17] From the mid-twelfth century, new avenues of authority had opened up for the Icelandic bishops. Most significantly, with the foundation of the Archbishopric of Nidaros in

13. See also Else Mundal, "Íslendingabók vurdert som bispestolskrønike," *Alvísmál*, 3 (1994), 63–72.

14. *Biskupa sögur* 2, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Íslenzk fornrit, 16 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2002), pp. 3–43.

15. *Biskupa sögur* 2, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Íslenzk fornrit, 16, pp. 297–338.

16. For these individual works forming a larger Skálholt corpus, see Ásdís Egilsdóttir, "Eru biskupa sögur til?," *Skáldskaparmál*, 2 (1992), 207–20.

17. It is important to stress that writings about Guðmundr's episcopacy only began, as far as can be established, in the first half of the fourteenth century when his sanctity and perceived upholding of church liberty became topical issues. See Stefán Karlsson, "Guðmundar sögur biskups: Authorial Viewpoints and Methods," in *Stafkrókar. Ritgerðir eftir Stefán Karlsson gefnar út í tilefni sjötugsafmæli hans 2 september 1998*, ed. Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson. (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Ísland, 1998), pp. 153–71.

1152/53, the Icelandic Church acquired a patron and an overlord whose ecclesiastical agenda would profoundly influence its direction.[18] A defining moment in this respect came in 1237 when the Archbishop of Nidaros installed Norwegian bishops to the two vacant bishoprics, thus ignoring the native candidates that had been chosen by the Icelandic elite.[19] Furthermore, the appearance of the cults of St. Þorlákr of Skálholt and St. Jón of Hólar around the turn of the thirteenth century provided the bishops with a further source of power, prestige, and sense of identity. By the thirteenth century, Ari Þorgilsson's presentation of the Icelandic episcopacy, drawing authority mostly from its association with Iceland's history and the leading families, was seriously out of sync with political reality. This became even more pronounced with the dissolution of the Commonwealth in 1262–64 and the conclusion of the *Staðamál* in 1297.[20] Thus, the author of *Árna saga biskups* was confronted with the task of offering a fundamentally different image of episcopal power than was portrayed in previous writings.

In *Árna saga*, the eponymous hero is primarily guided by a sense of "the right order of the world," in which the local and the universal are conjoined. Although much of *Árna saga* focuses on the clash between ecclesiastical and lay authorities, the *ideal* it promulgates is still the harmonious relation between the two spheres. While in the older writings this equilibrium depended on affairs in Iceland, events are now largely dictated in Norway or even Rome.

Árna saga is a biography of a bishop that projects the ideals and concerns of an author associated with a Church that had only recently emerged from a period of turbulence and change.[21] Viewed from this perspective, the attribution of the text to Skálholt and the episcopacy of Árni Þorláksson's successor, Árni Helgason (1304–20), remains uncontested.[22] The saga is manifestly the work of someone who upheld the interests of

18. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Island og Nidaros," in *Ecclesia Nidrosiensis 1153–1537*, in *Søkelys på Nidaroskirkens og Nidaros-provinsens historie*, ed. Steinar Imsen (Trondheim, Norway: Tapir, 2003), pp. 121–40.

19. Heidi Anett Øvegård Beistad, "Election and Rejection—the Norwegian 'Seizure' of the Icelandic Bishoprics in 1237–39," in *Ecclesia Nidrosiensis 1153–1537* (2007), pp. 203–29.

20. With the cult of Guðmundr góði receiving attention of the Hólar bishops from the late thirteenth century onward; see Peter Foote, "Bishop Jörundr Þorsteinsson and the Relics of Guðmundr inn góði Arason," in *Studia centenalia in honorem memoriae Benedikt S Þórarinsson* (Reykjavík: Typis Ísafoldianis, 1961), pp. 98–114.

21. For an introduction and assessment of the Icelandic Church in the early fourteenth century, see Erika Sigurdson, *The Church in Fourteenth Century Iceland: The Formation of an Elite Clerical Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

22. From internal evidence it is clear that the saga was written after Árni Helgason became bishop of Skálholt in 1304. For a concise overview of the issue regarding the dating of *Árna saga* and its possible author, see *Árna saga biskups*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, pp., civ–cvi. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. xxii–xxvii.

the southern diocese and sought to shape memory of a profound crisis that coalesced in the dispute over the possession of the *staðir*. But above and beyond this immediate aim, the Icelandic episcopacy, and indeed the Icelandic Church, was in need of a different narrative. It required a different myth, so to speak, that complemented or even superseded the one offered by Ari Þorgilsson and the "Skálholt corpus." The saga author, I argue, crystallizes episcopal power in the figure of Árni Þorláksson by confronting a period of crisis in the not so distant past.

This study shows how the author achieves this aim by focusing on specific themes that are presented with considerable narrative and stylistic ingenuity. Particular focus will be on how Biblical as well as historical references and allusions play an active part in conveying the saga's principal concerns. Further, in a more general sense, *Árna saga biskups* shares the narrative feature of thematic patterning and intertextual echoing that is so evident in the Sagas of Icelanders.

I.

Árna saga byskups can be divided into main two parts that are preceded by a brief opening section that recounts Árni Þorláksson's childhood and pre-episcopal career.[23] The saga commences with a short description of the main protagonist's youth, beginning with his birth in 1237, and concluding with his episcopal consecration in 1269. This opening section—which occupies a mere seven pages in the modern edition—informs us about Árni's familial background while highlighting the usual qualities of an ideal bishop in the making: piety, studiousness, seriousness and steadfastness.[24]

Although Árni Þorláksson is of illustrious lineage on both his mother's and his father's side, his youth is marked by frequent changes of abode. Prior to Árni donating his family inheritance to the Abbey of Þykkvibær in southern Iceland and entering its school, his family moves residence a number of times within a short space of time. The saga subtly suggests the cause of this itinerant childhood. Þorlákr, his father, was likely a spendthrift who was unable to live within the means of his wife's inheritance and settle his family at a suitable farm. Additionally, contemporary readers may have suspected another reason for the family's predicament. According to the thirteenth-century *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, Þorlákr's father, the rich and popular chieftain Guðmundr "gríss" Ámundason, had followed "the

23. For a different (but related) division of the saga (into five sections), see Cole, "Árna saga biskups," p. 39.

24. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. 1–7.

preaching of the Gospels, parted with all his wealth and loved ones and entered a monastery."[25] A further source of destabilization was precisely the tension between Árni's distinguished ancestry and his father's inability to establish himself in the competitive world of late Commonwealth politics. Thus Þorlákr is twice forced to move his family because of disputes he was neither directly involved in nor responsible for.

Insofar as they are described, Árni's youthful years are distinguished by a curious combination of passivity on his part and the familiar theme of the pious and precocious child (*puer senex*) that is destined to become bishop.[26] For instance, Árni injures himself while playing indoor hockey of a kind, which, in the tradition of saintly youths, leads to his withdrawal from the usual activities of his peers. Later, Árni enters a monastic school, but, aside from these events, precious little is reported prior to his ordination as priest in 1263. True, Árni is a fine student, but even here, in extolling his dedication and intelligence, he is not allowed to hog the limelight. The venerable Abbot Brandr Jónsson, the saga relates, compared him to Jörundr Þorsteinsson, the future bishop of Hólar, and Runólfr Sigmundsson, who would later became abbot of Þykkvibær Abbey. Each one possesses qualities, we are led to conclude, that are of comparable or equal worth.

The episode of Árni's first *útferð*, or journey to the court of a Norwegian king, is also depicted in distinctly muted colors. In both the Sagas of Icelanders and the Bishops' sagas, early encounters with kings at court allow the main protagonists' qualities to shine. For instance, in the early thirteenth-century saga of St. Jón Ögmundarson of Hólar, two scenes at the court of King Sven Estridsen of Denmark (1047–76) illustrate the outstanding personality of the future bishop and saint, first as a toddler and then as a young man.[27] Nearer to the time of *Árna saga's* composition, *Lárentíus saga* describes how King Eiríkr Magnússon treated the future bishop of Hólar as a favorite drinking companion, and that Lárentíus subsequently chose to decline a permanent place at the court.[28]

Matters are less impressive in Árni's case—who, in the spring of 1263, joins the entourage of Abbot Brandr for his consecration in Norway as bishop of Hólar. At court, King Hákon notices that Árni and his table

25. "en gerði síðan eftir guðspjalla boðorðum, skilðist við á einum degi allt fé sitt ok ástmenn ok gekk þá í munkalíf," in *Sturlunga saga*, 2 vols., ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík: Sturlungaútgáfan, 1946), I, 140.

26. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, "The Beginnings of Local Hagiography in Iceland: The Lives of Bishops Þorlákr and Jón," in *The Making of Christian Myths in the Periphery of Latin Christendom (c. 1000–1300)*, ed. Lars Boje Mortensen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), pp. 121–33.

27. *Biskupa sögur* 1, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote, Íslenzk fornrit, 15 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2003), pp. 178, 186.

28. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. 236–37.

companions are not being served; the king intervenes and refers to them as "the bishop's priests."[29] Árni and his dinner companions, however, only held the rank of deacon, which prompts the author to comment that "the wisest of men thought him more senior in rank than he was." That Abbot Brandr and the king either praise Árni as a part of collective or compare him to other ecclesiastics is, I suggest, a deliberate stylistic ploy that distinguishes these episodes from descriptions of the pre-episcopal careers of the Icelandic saints Þorlákr and Jón.[30] Árni is an accomplished and courageous man whose qualities befit an ideal bishop, and, as such, his character provides a more up-to-date episcopal model to follow than that of the twelfth-century saintly bishops.

Árni finally moves center stage as he assumes powers that foreshadow his episcopal role. At the death of Bishop Brandr Jónsson, Árni is appointed bailiff (*ráðsmaðr*) at Hólar, a duty that he carries out until 1267. The illustrative episode of this period is when Árni, now ordained as a priest, hears of a certain deacon in Skagafjörðr who intends to wed his concubine. The deacon has secured the blessing and support of Jarl Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who, to further exacerbate matters, offers to host the wedding at his farmstead. Árni reacts swiftly and excommunicates the deacon along with all the wedding guests. Following a meeting between Árni and Gizurr, the deacon is instructed to dissolve his relations with the bride as a prerequisite to the lifting of the excommunications. In support of his cause, the saga presents Gizurr as upholding Iceland's customs and traditions, while Árni countered that the popes who should rule on every law had decidedly forbidden this kind of union under the threat of absolute excommunication.[31]Acknowledging defeat, Gizurr comments that as Árni had refused to bow to his will, he will be unlikely to do so when confronted by others.[32]

This episode prefigures not only Árni's adherence to Canon laws but also his fearless and eventually successful dealings with Iceland's then most powerful man, Hrafn Oddsson. But on a more specific level, the episode foreshadows a scene that takes place more than twenty years after his clash with Gizurr. Travelling with King Eiríkr Magnússon and his entourage to St. Óláfr's shrine in Nidaros, Bishop Árni declines to share a table with a recently excommunicated nobleman. The king, clearly angry and em-

29. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 8.

30. The contrast with the saga portrayal of Guðmundr Arason's youth is also of interest here. Cole, "Árna saga biskups," p. 44.

31. "Síra Árni sagði at móti at páfarnir er öllum lögu eigu með réttu að ráða hefðu svá frekliga afnumit ok fyrirboðit þess kyns samlag undir pínu fullkomins banns." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 11.

32. "'Þess vænti ek, frændi, at flestum munir þú verða ekki fyrirlátsamur þótt þú eigir málum at skipta, þar sem þú lézt ekki fyrir mér.'" *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 11.

barrassed, orders the nobleman to eat away from the travelling court.[33] Árni's refusal to compromise on this matter of ecclesiastical law with the Icelandic *jarl* near the saga's beginning echoes his principled stance with the Norwegian king near its close.

The short opening section thus shows Árni emerging from the world of Iceland's secular elite into a sphere where he is destined to serve a higher calling. Árni is not presented as a saint but rather as a figure who is chosen to lead the Icelandic Church in a period of crisis, and one who is guided by an unerring sense of the overarching divine laws that should govern society. The guiding theme is Árni's adherence to the laws and his insistence that they should be translated uncompromisingly into earthly reality.

II.

The saga's first part commences with Árni's episcopal election in 1269 and concludes with the death of King Magnús Hákonarson in 1280. At this point, Árni's relative early passivity is replaced by a flurry of activity in the form of pastoral reforms and appropriation of church farms. Although the latter effort meets opposition from Iceland's secular elite, Árni secures partial success by soliciting the support of both king and archbishop. Thus, in 1272 Jón of Nidaros rules in favor of Árni's appropriation of Oddi, which, at least temporarily, quells the bishop's adversaries in Iceland.[34] The saga observes that Árni returned from Norway "in great friendship with both lords, king and archbishop."[35]

The first part of the saga links Árni's political success with the general harmonious state of *regnum* and *sacerdotium* in Norway. The bishop, it soon becomes evident, is not a warrior for *libertas ecclesiae* against an oppressive or unjust secular authority. Rather, he champions the "right order of the world" that is jointly supported by King Magnús and Archbishop Jón rauði of Nidaros. This happy state, however, is juxtaposed with post-Commonwealth Iceland, where the country's secular elite clings to ancient familiar traditions and privileges.

At this point, Bishop Árni is compared to St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, who became a model in the Middle Ages for the supporters of Church liberty due to his courageous confrontation with Roman authority. Thus, in the eyes of Archbishop Thomas Becket, he was a paragon of a prin-

33. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. 199–200.
34. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 43.
35. "með mikilli blíðu við hvárntveggja höfðingjann konung ok erkibyskup." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 43.

cipled and heroic churchman,[36] while the aforementioned *Prestssaga* of Guðmundr Arason highlights Ambrose's special association with the future bishop of Hólar.[37] In the following century, this comparison was further elaborated by Arngrímr Brandsson (d.1361) of Þingeyrar Abbey in his biography of the saint.[38] In *Árna saga*, however, the hero's link with Ambrose relates less to the saint's defense of the Church and more to the lamentable state of Iceland's secular sphere:

> He [i.e. Árni] often presided over peoples' cases, and although he did not possess secular power, like Bishop and Saint Ambrose had in his days, they still wished to bring their cases to him as long as they were able to without interference from royal representatives. At that time it was thought that cases were best brought to him.[39]

Before becoming archbishop of Milan, St. Ambrose held a noble title (*jarl* in the Old Norse translation), but, even assuming episcopal authority, he continued to exert the judicial authority associated with his earlier status. The comparison, echoing as it does the preserved version *Ambrósius saga*,[40] underlines Árni's sense of justice, which, in turn, contrasts with the deficient performance of the king's representatives in Iceland. The "right order of the world" can only be effected through the mutual engagement of *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, but when the former is corrupt or incompetent, it behooves the latter to fill the void. The comparison thus prepares for the dispute between Árni and the king's men, most significantly with *hirðstjóri* (governor) Hrafn Oddson, regarding the boundaries of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. In another sense it evokes the older image in the aforementioned "Skálholt corpus" of the Icelandic bishops, essentially combining episcopal and princely authority in one and the same person. Here, however, Árni is forced into this role due to deficiency of a secular side that should, all things being equal, reign in harmony with the episcopal power.

36. Michael Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, Studies in the History of Medieval Religion, 28 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006), pp. 122–23.

37. *Sturlunga Saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, I, 149–51.

38. Stefanie Würth, "Thomas Becket: Ein literarisches und politisches Modell für die isländische Kirche im 13. Jahrhundert," in *Samtíðasögur: The Contemporary Sagas. Níunda Alþjóðlega Fornsagnaþingið. Akureyri 31.7–6.8*, 2 vols. ([Reykjavík: Oddi], 1994), II, 878–91.

39. "Hann [i.e. Árni] sat optliga yfir málum manna, ok þótt hann hefði eigi veraldligt vald sem hinn heilagi Ambrosius byskup hafði á sínum dögum, vildi þó hverr hann til síns mál kalla meðan menn vóru sjálfráðandi fyrir konungligum valdsmönnum, ok þóttu þann tíma þau mál mönnum bezt komin er hann sá yfir." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 22.

40. "Nu finnaz af þvi frásógninni, at Ambrosius hefir optliga setit yfir domstoli veralldlig mal at dæma, at hann vard veitti saman veralldliga tign ok iarldomsins med gudligu velldi byskupsdomsins." *Heilagra manna søgur. Fortællinger og legender om hellige mænd og kvinder*, 2 vols., ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania [Oslo]: Bentzen, 1887), I, 31.

As mentioned, the first part of *Árna saga* concludes in 1280 with the death of King Magnús Hákonarson. The bishop's early success had rested not only on his exemplary leadership but also on his special relationship with the king and archbishop. The death of Magnús removed one of the two pillars that supported Árni's strong position in Iceland, whereas the second disappeared with the exile and death of Archbishop Jón in 1282. A notable change in the rhythm of *Árna saga* follows these events, as Árni is forced to confront his enemies alone. The qualities that Árni shows in the first part are amplified in the second part.

A parallel can be drawn here with *Sverris saga's* division into two parts, each of which, according to its prologue, reflect different elements of Sverrir's strength vis-à-vis his opponents. In the first part, the king carries everything before him, but in the second half, his trials and tribulations are increased, enabling his qualities to emerge with greater clarity.[41] The parallel with *Sverris saga* can be taken further for, as has been observed, "*Sverris saga* . . . deals with events and actions, not with individual character."[42] Similarly, *Árna saga*, unlike, for example, *Lárentíusar saga*, a biography of the Bishop Lárentíus of Hólar (1324–31), does not aim to illuminate the bishop as an individual but rather to highlight the nature of the office he holds (though *Lárentíusar saga* also does the latter). Instead of focusing on Árni Þorláksson's personality, for instance his piety or learning, the saga reveals the very essence of episcopal authority through his actions. Such an approach, I argue, both served as a projection of power and a source of self-affirmation. This perspective was important at a time when the bishopric of Skálholt, and, by extension, the Icelandic Church, was emerging from a stage of rapid transformation.

An illustrative example of how *Árna saga* compresses these topical elements into dramatic scenes appears in an episode that focuses on the posthumous fate of Oddr Þórarinsson, an Icelandic chieftain who had died in 1255.[43] Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* describes in vivid detail how Oddr had defended himself heroically, but ultimately unsuccessfully, at Geldingaholt, Northern Iceland, against the force massed against him by his regional rivals, Hrafn Oddsson and Eyjólfr "ofsi" Þorsteinsson.[44] The saga reveals that Oddr had been denied burial in consecrated ground

41. *Sverris saga*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, Íslenzk fornrit, 30 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2007), p. 3. On the division of sagas into two parts, see Sverrir Tómasson, "Skorið í fornsögu. Þankar um byggingu Hrafnkelssögu," in *Sagnaþing helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum, 10 apríl, 1994*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson, Guðrún Kvaran, and Sigurgeir Steingrímsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka bókmenntafélag, 1994), pp. 778–99.

42. Sverre Bagge, "The Individual in Medieval Historiography," in *The Individual in Political Theory and Practise*, ed. Janet Coleman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 45.

43. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. 66–69, 72–75.

44. *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, II, 512–17.

because he had been excommunicated by the bishop of Hólar shortly before his death. But twenty-two years later, the archbishop of Nidaros dispatched letters to the Icelandic bishop in which they were instructed to absolve Oddr. The archbishop was following a request from the papacy, which had ruled in favor of Oddr's pardon. In spite of this pressure, Bishop Jörundr of Hólar procrastinated in bringing the case to a close.[45] Árni eventually travelled to the northern diocese and effectively coerced his episcopal colleague to join him in the required ceremony of absolution, which had to be performed at the location of Oddr's initial burial. Even at this late stage, Jörundr attempted to stall proceedings, and he only relented when Árni invoked a decretal of Innocent III (1198–1216) about (presumably) the papal prerogative of pardoning those who had died in a state of excommunication[46] Following Oddr's exhumation and absolution, his remains were personally escorted to Skálholt by Árni. It was said that during the journey only the bishop's prayers could calm Oddr's restless body. The affair concludes with the bishop ceremoniously burying the long-dead chieftain at Skálholt.

The "Oddr episode" again distils in dramatic form one of the principal themes of the saga, namely Árni's zealous furthering of Church Law even in the face of local opposition or recalcitrance. The Skálholt bishop is shown to follow God's command, whereas his Hólar colleague is depicted as dithering and weak, thus foreshadowing their respective roles in *Staðamál*. But it should also be considered why the author chose to narrate this affair in such detail just for this purpose—the episode runs to some six pages in the modern edition. The answer, I argue, relates to the episode's underlying idea, namely, that the authority of the bishop over seculars extends beyond the grave. Indeed near the saga's close the bishop exhumes and posthumously pardons a supporter of Hrafn Oddsson and hence his own former adversary. This is a certain Björn Dufgusson, who had died in a state of excommunication, "on account of lord Hrafn's

45. Jörundr may have feared the politically sensitive dimension to the whole affair. In particular he may have balked at collecting the fines from Oddr's powerful relatives, which he owed the diocese at the time of his death. This payment owed to Hólar was a prerequisite for his posthumous pardon.

46. Innocent III had issued a decretal on the absolution of those who had died in such a state. See Elisabeth Vodola, *Excommunication in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), pp. 38–39. This idea is also reflected in the Church Ordinances (*Kristniréttur*) introduced by Árni Þorlákssonin 1275. See Lára Magnúsardóttir, *Bannfæring og kirkjuvald á Íslandi 1275–1550. Lög og forsendur* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2007), pp. 247–49. Lára discusses briefly the case of Björn Dufgusson but not that of Oddr Þórarinsson. It can also be noted that the translation of Grettir Ásmundarson's remains from Drangey to Reykir at Reykjaströnd essentially follows the same pattern as the reburial of Oddr. Grettir's outlawry equates to an excommunication whereas the leading role of Ísleifr Gizurarson (1006–80), the future first bishop Skálholt, in the posthumous pardoning parallels Bishop Árni's participation in the case of Oddr. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 7 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1936), pp. 269–70.

overbearing behavior."[47] Sworn witnesses, however, testified to Björn's penitential state of mind at his time of death.

Thus, through the bishop's power, Árni is able to bring former enemies into his fold, even those who have left the earthly life. As we shall see, these themes—penance and posthumous pardon—play a significant part in the death of Hrafn Oddsson himself and, indeed, the saga as whole. In this and his courageous confrontation with those in power, Árni is cast in the mold of the Old Testament prophets, such as Elijah, who alone hold their ground as the forces of disobedience and apostasy rage all around them.

III.

A subtle, yet unmistakable, change in the narrative texture can be noted in the second part (according to my division) of *Árna saga biskups*. Before the death of King Magnús, the text includes a number of annalistic references describing important events in Catholic Christendom, whereas thereafter these all but disappear.[48] The near absence of contemporary "world history" amplifies the localized nature of Árni's disputes with Icelandic chieftains as he is isolated from outside aid. But while annalistic references nearly evaporate, another narrative feature comes to the fore, namely the use of Biblical comparisons to comment on the unfolding events. Not one such comparison features in the previous fifty-four chapters, yet half a dozen distinguish the saga's second part.

The first Biblical comparison appears at the death of Magnús Hákonarson: "This harm was as grievous to the kingdom, especially the ecclesiastical orders, as the loss of the excellent King Joshua."[49] The inclusion at this point of the first scriptural reference suggests that it marks a watershed in the saga. The comparison is pointedly chosen: Joshua succeeded Moses and directed the Israelites into the Promised Land. He achieved this by holding the Israelites to the laws that had been bestowed on them by his predecessor. A note here should be made of *Árna saga*'s reference to Joshua as a "king," whereas *Stjórn*, a fourteenth-century Old Testament translation, only refers to him as *hertogi,* (leader), of the host.[50] By associat-

47. ". . . sakir ofríkis herra Hrafns." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 194.

48. On the author's use of annals, see *Árna saga biskups*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, pp. lxii–xcix.

49. "Var sá skaði svá mikill öllu landsbúinu, en einkanliga klerkunum, sem forðum var fráfall hins ágæta Jósúa konungs." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 78.

50. *Stjorn. Gammelnorsk bibelhistorie fra verdens skabelse til det babyloniske fangenskab*, ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania [Oslo: Feilberg og Landmarks forlag, 1862), p. 376. "Hertogi" can also signify a ducal rank, but here it is clearly applied in a less formal sense.

ing Joshua with kingship, *Árna saga* amplifies the parallel with King Magnús, whose lawgiving earned him the cognomen *lagabætir* (law-mender). The comparison thus builds on the previous portrayal of Magnús as a ruler who wields the sword of secular authority while upholding divine justice. Also intrinsic to the Magnús–Joshua comparison is the equation of the Norwegian elite with the Israelites, who abandoned the Law and began idolizing foreign gods after the death of their leader. Similarly, the king's death and the subsequent minority of Eiríkr Magnússon usher in a period of godlessness during which the council of nobles destroys the just order that Magnús (and indeed Archbishop Jón) had upheld so strenuously. The time of turmoil also allows those who had always harbored ill will against this order to emerge from the shadows.[51]

Following Magnús's death, the saga reports, in a kind of flashback mode, the king's speech to his closest followers some three year earlier. Magnús recounts the trials and tribulations he had endured in his effort to balance ecclesiastical and secular interests. The king also prophesies that those present shall understand the measure of his achievement before "his head had been in the ground for three years." The king's foretelling of the dissension and destructive forces that will be unleashed after his death seems partly modeled on Joshua's "farewell address" (Jo. 23). There he recounts his success in keeping the Israelites in concord with God while foreseeing the calamity that will ensue if they stray from the right path. Indeed subsequent to Magnús's address, the saga describes how the council had ruined the balance between *regnum* and *sacerdotium* and, how this calamity extended to the more peripheral parts of the Norwegian kingdom: "This sharp whirlwind first hit the hearts of the inhabitants of Norway where it pressed with zeal on the leaders of the Church, but then it scattered to our outlying promontory."[52]

Árna saga byskups strongly condemns the lay and learned alike, who exploited the king's minority to further their own interests. These are rebels against God and Christianity, and in Iceland it rests upon Bishop Árni to stem this tide of iniquity. The saga describes how, at the height of *Staðamál* in 1287, Árni "stood as a warrior with few followers in the ranks of his blessed lord."[53] The emphasis is on Árni's heroic isolation as he

51. "Eptir þetta flotnuðu upp margir öfundarmenn lærdómsins þeir sem sinn munn höfðu byrgðan sakir vanmáttar meir en góðvila meðan sannr faðir fóstrjarðarinnar lifði ok sæmð klerkanna, hinn mildi Magnús konungr." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 101.

52. "Laust þessi hvass hvirfilvindr fyrst hjörtu þeira manna sem Nóreg byggðu ok knúði þar kappsamliga kirkjunnar formenn en dreifðiz síðan til várs útskaga." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 102.

53. "Á þessu sama vári stóð fyrrnefndr Árni byskup frammi fáliðaðr vígmaðr í fylking síns signaða herra." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 168.

combats the foes of God's order.[54] This notion is further stressed by the conspicuously (and probably historically inaccurate) limited role allotted to the bishop of Hólar in the fierce dispute over church-farms.[55] Thus, in the second part of the saga, Bishop Árni Þorláksson must alone shoulder the burden of divine justice that he had previously shared with king and archbishop.

Árni's unique mission is further underlined by the Biblical references associated with his righteous stance. Following the agreement at Brautarholt in 1284, which temporarily halted secular counterappropriation of church-farms, the saga likens the success of Árni's cause to Christ's entry into Jerusalem.[56] The irony presumably intended in this comparison is that those Jews who greeted Christ's advent into the Holy City failed to support him at his real hour of need shortly thereafter. This line of thought is then developed in a still more daring manner. The joy experienced by Árni's silent supporters, who now behold his success, is likened to the exultation of Christ's covert followers as they recognized the Resurrection. Although this may seem a hyperbolic comparison, it continues the underlying premise of the saga's first Biblical reference: the likening of King Magnús to Joshua, which, as noted, equates the king's subjects with the Israelites who first follow but then stray from the right path. Likewise, the Icelanders of Árni's times are compared to the Jews who either rejected or accepted the Messiah. This parallel is further emphasized by the inclusion of another Biblical reference following the Brautarholt meeting. Here those who were "blinded by the old disease of covetousness" and spurned the bishop's speech are equated with the Pharisees who rejected Christ.[57]

In the Old Testament, plagues are God's instrument for punishing and exacting atonement from the wayward Israelites. Similarly, *Árna saga* relates that Norway was inflicted by many kinds of hardships after the deaths of King Magnús and Archbishop Jón.[58] The breakdown of societal order and the multiple sins of the Norwegians crystalize in the secular caretaker of Archbishopric of Nidaros sleeping with his spouse in the very bed that had previously been preserved for the archbishops. The transgressions of the Norwegians result in a famine and plague, which made their country resemble "Rome following the death of the most independent overseer

54. The tone here is somewhat reminiscent of Asser's description how Alfred, bereft of good council or support, still defended the English against the heathen hordes.

55. Magnús Stefánsson, "Frá goðakirkju til biskupakirkju," pp. 207–8.

56. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 117.

57. "En er byskup hafði lyktat sínu máli rómuðu klerkar ok múgr, en staðamenn ok sumir handgengnir menn, þeira sem blindaðir vóru með sótt fornrar ágirni, tóku þungliga hans orðum sem forðum gerðu Pharisei við várn herra." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttirr, p. 129.

58. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttirr, p. 134.

of God's flock, Gregory the Great."[59] The author of *Árna saga*, as someone familiar with the "Skálholt corpus," would have known the provenance of this historical comparison. In *Hungrvaka*, the death in 1118 of Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson of Skálholt triggers extreme weather that killed both people and livestock and heralded in a period of lawlessness and violence. The state of Iceland's affairs was so dire that "the wisest men thought that Iceland had sunk like Rome following the death of Pope Gregory."[60] In both instances, the deaths of bishops is followed by times of disaster and hardship. Their absence brings God's penitential vengeance to Iceland and Norway, respectively. *Árna saga*'s author seems to have translated the comparison in *Hungrvaka* to the Norwegian scene following the demise of Archbishop Jón rauði.

Matters are not so straightforward, however. Árni Þorláksson is entrusted with upholding God's law in Iceland in the time of crisis that commences with the death of King Magnús. The bishop's main opponent is the aforementioned Hrafn Oddsson, the king's representative (*hirðstjóri*) in Iceland from 1270 to 1288, whose return from Norway in 1284 coincided with the beginning of a famine in Northern Iceland (which soon spread to the diocese of Skálholt). The saga leaves little doubt about the underlying cause of this calamity: "We then saw that on account of the penance owed for our sins that God's true wrath had come over us."[61] The famine is a divine punishment for the acts of those who deserted the correct way. Hrafn Oddsson personifies this turn of events, and it is Bishop Árni's destiny to make a solitary stand against those responsible.

Thus the penitential punishment that befalls Norway after Archbishop Jón's death also strikes Iceland, an occurrence that reflects the country's incorporation into the Norwegian realm. In *Hungrvaka*, on the other hand, the death of an Icelandic bishop merely disturbs the social harmony among Iceland's elite. The shift of perspective in the century or so between the writing of *Hungrvaka* and the composition of *Árna saga* is striking. Not only has Iceland become politically and ecclesiastically beholden to the Norwegian authority, but the inhabitants of both lands are joined in God's providential plan, and so, in a sense, they appearas one *gens*.

Árni is thus forced to fight alone for God's cause in Iceland, a fate that is underlined by two comparisons with the Prophet Eljah. The earlier of

59. "Var þat hit fyrsta tilfelli at yfir kom sótt ok manndauði, sultr ok búfellir sem forðum var í Róma at liðnum hinum frjálsasta forstjóra Guðs hjarðar, Gregorio hinum mikla." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttirr, p. 134.

60. "Svá hugðisk at inum vitrustum mǫnnum, at svá þótti drúpa Ísland eptir fráfall Gizurar byskups sem Rómaborgarríki eptir fall Gregorii páfa." *Biskupa sögur* 2, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, p. 21.

61. "Sáum vér þá sakir várs syndagjalds sanna Guðs reiði yfir oss komna." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 137.

the references appears in 1287, when Árni excommunicates prominent farmers during *Staðamál.* Though facing potentially fierce reaction from his enemies, "like Elijah honorable Bishop Árni did not fear the multitude of his enemies."[62] The Prophet Eljah's is a sole voice in the wilderness as he opposes Ahab, the idolatrous king, who leads the Israelites away from God's covenant. Here the saga again offers a variation on the theme of transgression against divine will. The second likening of Árni to Elijah features as he confronts Hrafn Oddsson about his stance against excommunicating those who had reappropriated church-farms: "[A]nd though Hrafn, like a second Ahab, wished to turn the vineyard of the righteous Naboth into a vegetable lot, Bishop Árni, like a second Elijah, hurled over his enemies the fire of menacing words from the Holy Writ."[63]

Hrafn's opposition to Árni is therefore an act of sacrilege against God's rightful representative. But the comparison runs deeper still, for it evokes Elijah's dealings with the idolatrous King Ahab, whose acts induced God to bring down a devastating famine on the kingdom of Israel. This, of course, brings to mind the divinely ordained famine that hit Norway in 1284 and subsequently struck Iceland on Hrafn's return to his homeland. Further, the story of Naboth's vineyard centers on King Ahab's arbitrary seizure of land from Naboth at the instigation of Queen Jezabel. The vineyard clearly symbolizes the Church, which Hrafn is guilty of harming by leading those who reappropriated the farms. God orders Eljah to confront Ahab in retaliation for his sins against Naboth, and this eventually leads to the king's repentance. The Biblical reference is therefore especially fitting as Hrafn Oddsson fronts the campaign of unjustly seizing land from God. Hrafn, like Ahab, has set himself up against God's law, and for this he must atone.

But Ahab's atonement, which he performs at the behest of Elijah, does not save him from less than glorious death—in battle he is struck by a chance arrow between his armor plates. *Árna saga* subtly reminds the reader that Hrafn's fate is similarly ambiguous as it describes his death in detail. In 1289, Árni and Hrafn join King Eiríkr on a military expedition to Denmark. As the king's army besieges a castle, Hrafn recalls that he had failed to receive Árni's customary blessing earlier in that day. Hrafn is then hit by an arrow in his upper arm, another one hits him in the back, and a third in the little finger. The first two injuries mend quickly, but the finger-wound turns septic, which causes Hrafn to take to his bed and die some three months later. Hrafn's demise is explicitly associated with

62. "En virðuligr herra Árni byskup sem Helias óttaðiz eigi liðsfjölda sinna óvina." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 168.

63. ". . . ok þótt Hrafn vildi sem annarr Achab gera at kálgarði víngarð hins réttláta Naboth, lét Árni byskup sem annarr Helias fljúga yfir sína óvini eld ógnar mála af heilögum ritningum." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 172.

God's judgment when his fellow soldiers exclaim, just before he is struck by the arrows, that "he can still go back so that you will not lack [Árni's] blessing."[64] Although the saga describes Hrafn's final moments, no mention is made of the *hirðstjóri* confessing his sins or receiving last rites. But when Bishop Árni hears of Hrafn's death, he prays for his former enemy to be forgiven for his sins, "not unlike St Ambrose who prayed for many of the dead who had been his opponents in life."[65]

This idea throws the Ahab/Naboth comparison into starker relief, for it is Elijah who attends Ahab as the king seeks pardon by humiliating himself before God. Thus Hrafn's fate is presented as judgment on his sins that he needs to posthumously expiate with the aid of his erstwhile enemy. Put differently, Hrafn is now partly at the mercy of his adversary, as he atones for his earthly transgression in the afterlife. Árni is therefore shown as the Prophet Elijah who serves as a link between Ahab and God's judgment. Viewed from a broader perspective, the comparison emphasizes the role of Árni and, by extension, the Skálholt bishops as intermediaries between secular rulers and God, *both in this life and the next*. Similar ideas are hardly rare in medieval writings. For instance, Ralph Niger (1140–ca. 217), an Anglo-French author, drew a direct link between Ahab's sin against Naboth and the familiar legend of the "hidden sin of Charlemagne." Niger's account of St. Giles, while still alive (anachronistically, as the saint died in AD 710), intercedes on behalf of the emperor to avert his damnation for the sins he had failed to confess.[66] In *Árna saga*, this web of associations further elaborates on and supports the principal idea illustrated in the "Oddr episode," namely, the bishop's power over both the quick and the dead.

Also worth observing is the quite deliberate juxtaposition of Hrafn's death scene with Árni's own near-death episode much earlier in the saga. When at Christmas of 1275, the bishop became gravely ill and foresaw his own imminent demise, Árni assembled his followers and attendants to witness his thorough preparation for the afterlife: "[A]nd as they arrived there he did as a true friend of the laws a legally binding will, which is still preserved in that place [i.e. Skálholt]."[67] Árni's adherence to the

64. "Enn megu þér snúa aptr svá at þér missið eigi blezunar." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 197.

65. "ok veitti Árni byskup honum fagrliga bæn móti mörgum meingerðum, eigi ólíkt þeim Ambrosio er fyrir þeim mönnum bað eptir dauðann er hans mótstöðumenn vóru í lífinu." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 204.

66. See Gesine Oppitz-Trotman, "The Emperor's Robe: Thomas Becket and Angevin Political Culture," in *Anglo-Norman Studies XXXVII. Proceedings of the Battle Conference 2014*, ed. Elisabeth Van Houts (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015), p. 215. On the shifting medieval interpretation of the legend of Charlemagne's unconfessed sins, see Susanne Hafner "Charlemagne's Unspeakable Sin," *Modern Language Studies*, 32.2 (2002), 1–14.

67. "Ok er þeir kómu þar gerði hann svá sem sannr vinr laganna lögligt testamentum, þat sem enn er varðveitt heima þar á staðnum." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. 52–53.

letter of the law is explicitly connected with his restoration to health on Christmas Day. The author underlines this evocation when Árni asks his notary (*ritari*) what he thinks of his prospects: "He answered as for one for all 'Lord,' he said, 'now it seems our sun is about to set.'"[68] This dramatic utterance is carefully chosen, as it connects with a familiar association of the Nativity with the appearance or the rising of the sun. Thus, in the *Icelandic Homily Book*, compiled in the second half of the twelfth century, the sun is a central metaphor in the sermon on the Nativity.[69] This comparison, it should be noted, prepares the later association of the bishop's achievement with the Resurrection (see above).

Hrafn Oddsson's demise reads like a reversal or inversion of Árni's death scene. Most obviously, the saga relates that although bedridden, Hrafn did not deem it necessary to record a will, and, as observed, there is no reference to him making a final confession. The reason for this, the saga states, is that Hrafn believed he still had a long time to live, a stance that contrasts sharply with Árni's expectation of his imminent end.[70] Árni is spared the seemingly inevitable fate of an early death because of the great historical task he was destined to undertake, whereas Hrafn dies in punishment for his opposition to the bishop's cause. This idea is conveyed through the narrative device of echoing or paralleling scenes placed in different parts of the saga where, above all, Árni's humility contrasts with Hrafn's arrogance.

The importance the saga attached to Hrafn's posthumous fate is further reflected in the Biblical/historical characters to whom he is compared as he opposes Bishop Árni's excommunications of laymen in 1287. They are the "destroyers of true religion and the defilers of holy temples"[71]: Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, Julius Caesar, and Þiðrekr af Bern. These are figures that well-read Icelanders of the time would have been familiar with through Gy*ðinga saga*, *Rómverja saga*, and *Þiðreks saga afr Bern*. In the early part of *Gyðinga saga*, compiled and translated by Bishop Brandr of Hólar in 1263/64, the desecration and despoiling of the Temple by the Seleucid king Antiochus, portrayed as the principal enemy of the Jews, is highlighted. And so is the heroism of those, like Judas Maccabeus, who fought against this evil tyrant. In the end, Antiochus is afflicted with a painful disease that he recognizes as a punishment for his arrogant stand against God and, especially, for the Temple's defilement. The saga adds that Antiochus, like Herod the Great,

68. "Hann svaraði svá sem einn fyrir alla: 'Herra,' sagði hann, 'nú sýniz oss sól vár at setri komin.'" *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 53.

69. *Homiliu-bók. Isländska homilier. Efter en hanskrift från tolfte århundradet*, ed. Theodor Wisén (Lund, Sweden: C.W.K. Gleerups förlag, 1874), 45–49.

70. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. 52–53.

71. "niðrbrotsmenn réttrar trúar ok saurganarmenn heilagra mustara." *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 172.

began to experience in this life the pain that he would suffer for eternity in the next.[72] The relevance here to the theme of Hrafn Oddsson's soul needs no elaboration.

The comparison of Hrafn with Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas evokes their failure to recognize God's messenger in John the Baptist and, of course, the killing of Christ. Both rulers pay for their deeds. In *Gyðinga saga*, God punishes Herod by destroying his army, and he ends his life in exile. In the same saga, Pilate commits suicide while the grizzly fate of his corpse is recounted in detail. His devil-possessed cadaver is finally sunk in the River Rodanus (Rhone), which the saga note translates as the "road of Hell."[73] From the context, it becomes clear that Pilate's particularly gruesome fate is less a punishment for his judgment of Christ and more for his desecration of the temple. Pilate has the statue of Emperor Tiberius put into the sanctuary and, moreover, forces its guardians to fund public works.[74] In *Rómverja saga*, Julius Caesar, furious for being denied a *triumphus* in Rome, despoiled the temple of Saturn (Njörðr) and its immense riches, paying no heed to the protestations of its guardians.[75]

Þiðrekr af Bern (Dietrich of Bern or Theodoricus of Verona) is the sole Christian of the five historic or legendary figures likened to Hrafn Oddson. Þiðrekr is the central character in *Þiðreks saga*, a thirteenth-century Norwegian compilation of narratives on legendary Germanic heroes. Although *Árna saga*'s presentation of Þiðrekr as a "defiler of holy temples and the destroyer of religion" may at first sight appear surprising, a closer examination shows both the appropriateness and subtlety with which the author chose his literary comparisons.

In the voluminous *Þiðreks saga*, religious themes only really come into focus in the concluding chapters, especially following Þiðrekr's conversion to Catholic Christianity quite late in the saga. This is particularly evident in the so-called "Heimir section," which recounts the adventures of one of Þiðrekr's former champions.[76] Heimir, a warrior turned robber, enters a monastery in Lombardy (*Langbarðaland*) with the intention of atoning for his numerous sins. The brothers inform him about a giant who has appropriated an especially valuable estate belonging to the monastery. Although deaf to pleadings about God's ownership of the property, the giant offers to engage in single combat that should reveal God's judgment

72. *Gyðinga saga*, ed. Kirsten Wolf, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í Íslenskum fræðum, rit 42 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í Íslenskum fræðum, 1995), p. 450.

73. *Gyðinga saga*, ed. Kirsten Wolf, p. 214.

74. *Rómverja saga*, 2 vols., ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í Íslenskum fræðum, rit 77 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í Íslenskum fræðum, 2010).

75. *Rómverja saga*, ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, pp. 264–68.

76. *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, ed. Henrik Bertelsen, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 34 (Copenhagen: Møller, 1905–11), pp. 375–89.

on the matter. Prompted by this, and the promise that a victory will wipe away his sins, Heimir defeats and kills the brute.

Hearing about this achievement, King Þiðrekr visits the cloister and persuades Heimir to cast off the monastic garb and re-enter his service. Back at court Heimir exclaims that although Þiðrekr has accrued immense riches through taxing his subjects, he could be even wealthier if the prosperous monastery was added to the tally. Þiðrekr responds that although no king of Lombardy has ever taxed a cloister, he shall be the first to do so. Heimir then seeks out his former brothers and demands a sizable share of the monastery's great wealth. The abbot refuses this request on the grounds that the cloister is the possession of the Virgin Mary, and thus it is not the brief of the brethren to dispose of its wealth. This answer so enrages Heimir that he kills all of the monks and burns down their convent. Þiðrekr expresses great satisfaction with the wealth accrued, but soon thereafter he is carried off on a mysterious horse never to be seen again. The steed turns out to be the devil in disguise, and it is clear that hell is Þiðrekr's ultimate destination. The saga, however, concludes with the claim that some German merchants think that Þiðrekr's soul may have been saved through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

With its emphasis on the sanctity of church property and the punishment allotted to rapacious seculars, this story chimes with the principal themes in *Árna saga*. By comparing Hrafn Oddsson to Þiðrekr, the saga underlines the idea that pervades his death scene: after their earthly existence, those who had engaged in the unjust seizure of church property will face a day of reckoning, and, at that juncture, only the prayers of the just and the intercession of the saints (or, of the bishop in the case of Hrafn Oddsson), can save them from eternal damnation. Both historical and Biblical comparisons point in the same direction. In a more general sense, the focus on Hrafn Oddsson allows the saga-writer to define the power of episcopal office in opposition to the mightiest figure in post-Commonwealth Iceland while providing a structural coherence to the saga. It should now have become clear that if we seriously consider the literary references and internal echoes in *Árna saga* rather than treating them as mere medieval ornamentation, the underside of the weave reveals impressive artistry and forethought that throw the work's principal themes into starker relief.

IV.

As noted earlier, the inclusion of administrative documents is a distinctive feature of *Árna saga* in the context of earlier saga writing. There is a possible precedent in Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (composed ca. 1264), which also makes substantial use of letters and

official documents, and similarly adheres to strict chronological (and at times almost annalistic) narrative.[77] It is, however, worth considering texts other than Kings' sagas and Contemporary sagas that were likely known to the author, and especially those that engage with ideological notions relevant to *Árna saga biskups*.

The biographies of Becket fulfill the criteria on both accounts. About a dozen Lives of St. Thomas (d. 1170) were composed in England from 1171 to 1186, and their translation into Old Norse had already commenced by the turn of the thirteenth century.[78] These texts recount Becket's story in strict chronological order from his childhood to his martyrdom in the Cathedral. As in *Árna saga*, the Lives present controversial and highly politicized events that had transpired within the living memory of their audiences. Moreover, like *Árna saga*, a hallmark of the Becket corpus is the copious inclusion of letters and other documents relating to the dispute between king and archbishop.[79] Lastly, in the Becket biographies both the aforementioned temporal immediacy and the process of political dispute give the narrative a texture of "surface realism" that, as Timothy Reuter has observed, in some respects compares with the style of Icelandic saga writing.[80]

The rendering of the Becket Lives into Old Norse, which amounts to the compiling of essentially new works on the Canterbury martyr, seems to have been the preserve of Icelandic clergymen wedded to the cause of Church liberty. Thus a certain Bergr Gunnsteinsson, a priest in the entourage of Bishop Guðmundr Arason (1207–1237), is the earliest known figure to have engaged in such literary activity. Guðmundr Arason's episcopacy was, of course, marked by clashes with secular chieftains that centered

77. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, ed., *Biskupa sögur* 3, pp. xvii–xviii.

78. *Thomas saga erkibyskups. Fortællinger om Thomas Becket Erkebiskop af Canterbury*, ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania [Oslo]: Bentzen, 1869); *Thómas saga erkibiskups: A Life of Archbishop Thomas Becket. Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, 3 vols., ed. Eiríkur Magnússon, Rerum Brittanicarum Mediii Aevi Scriptores, Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1883), III.

79. Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers*, p. 5.

80. "What needs to be asked is whether realism is really involved in this and other scenes in the Becket dispute that are drawn in such "lifelike" fashion. For not only are politics themselves conveyed by symbols, ritual, and game-rules, but so too are our sources' representations of politics. A similar but more sharply contoured problem emerges from the Icelandic family sagas, which offer as fascinating a mixture of precisely observed dialogue and forms of symbolic action as do the sources for Becket." T. Reuter, "'*Velle sibi fieri in forma hac*': *Symbolic Acts in the Becket Dispute*," in *Medieval Polities and Modern Mentalities*, ed. J. L. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 172. See also Haki Antonsson, "The Lives of St Thomas Becket and Early Scandinavian Literature," *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni*, 81.2 (2015), 411–14. On the "objective" or "realistic" narrative mode of episcopal saints' lives, see Stephen Jaeger, "The Courtier Bishop in Vitae from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century," *Speculum*, 58:2 (1983), 286.

on the bishop's claim to *libertas ecclesiae* vis-à-vis the ruling oligarchy. Similarly, around the mid-fourteenth century, writers were keen to promote St. Thomas as a forerunner and model for Guðmundr Arason, whose sanctity they also sought to uphold, not least Arngrímr Brandsson, who composed *Guðmundar saga Arasonar* D, where as noted the Icelandic bishop is compared to the Canterbury martyr. Arngrímr likely compiled the so-called *Thómas saga* II, which is a conflation of assorted Becket biographies.[81]

Still more pertinent for our topic is another Old Norse composite work on Becket, the so-called *Quadrilogus*, completed by Priest Jón Holt (d. 1302).[82] Jón features in *Árna saga* as one of the bishop's most salient allies in *Staðamál*, and someone who personally suffered from the secular reappropriation of church-farms that took place following the death of Archbishop Jón rauði in 1282. The saga recounts how in 1284 Jón Holt was expelled from Hítardalur, a major church-farm in Borgarfjörður, which he had held for the best part of four decades.[83] In 1288, the saga places Jón in Bergen, where he engaged Hrafn Oddsson in a dispute about the ownership of ecclesiastical property; later he appears as the bishop's emissary and confidante.[84]Accordingly, Jón's work on *Quadrilogus* seems inspired, if not directly by his engagement in *Staðamál*, then at least by his personal commitment to the Church's cause. This was the understanding of the anonymous fourteenth-century translator of the so-called "Afv-Vilhjálmia bastarði ok sonumahans" (About William the Bastard and his sons). In a short prologue to tales that focus on how the Norman kings mistreated the English Church, he specifies the Becket translations of Jón Holt (along with those of Bergr Gunnsteinsson) as honorable contributions to polemical literature on Church affairs.[85] It is not my aim to identify Jón Holt as the author of *Árna saga* but rather to emphasize that the Becket biographies, whether in Old Norse or Latin, were familiar in Skálholt in the period of its composition.

This corpus would have provided inspiration and comfort to the Skálholt elite as their diocese emerged from a period of uncertainty and upheaval. Both *Árna saga* and the Becket biographies shape events that

81. Stefán Karlsson, "Icelandic Lives of Thomas a Becket: Questions of Authorship," in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference, University of Edinburgh, 1971*, ed. Peter Foote, Hermann Pálsson, and Desmond Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), pp. 227–39.

82. Stefán Karlsson, "Icelandic Lives of Thomas a Becket" pp. 212–43.

83. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, p. 119.

84. *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. 123, 189, 195, 200.

85. *Islendzk Æventýri—Isländische Legenden, Novellen und Märchen*, 2 vols., ed. Hugo Gering (Halle: Buchhandlungen des Waisenhausses, 1883–84), I, 51–52. Gering reads "Jón hestr," but, as Agnete Loth has shown, the correct reading should be "Jón Holt." Loth, "Introduction," in *Thomasskinna. Gl. Kgl. Saml. 10008 fol. in the Royal Library*, ed. Agnete Loth, Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile, 6 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1964), pp. 10–11.

occurred within living memory into a narrative arch of initial success, subsequent extreme adversity, and eventual victory (Becket's martyrdom, of course, being presented as such). *Árna saga* terminates in 1290, and, as mentioned, it is not clear how much further the text extended in time. Still, it should be observed that by the saga's conclusion, Bishop Árni has essentially recovered the ground that the Church had conceded in the mid-1280s. Thus, irrespective of whether the saga's original version terminated in 1297 or at Árni's death two years later, the structure would have essentially followed a similar trajectory. Indeed it is worth observing that the death of Hrafn Oddsson, Árni's most formidable opponent, occurs at the end of the preserved saga, and, moreover, the detailed description of his death underlines an important theme: that Árni's cause is favored by God and that those who stand against it will therefore suffer punishment both in this life and the next.

The author of *Árna saga* would certainly have been partial to one familiar narrative feature in the Becket corpus. This is the frequent comparison of near-contemporary history with Biblical events and characters of the kind that have been examined in this essay. The tradition of applying Biblical comparisons to Becket's life began even before his death. For instance, John of Salisbury, in his widely circulated letter of 1166, compares King Henry II to Ahab, who appropriated and destroyed Naboth's vineyard.[86] Similarly, Herbert of Bosham, in the last of the "canonical" Becket Lives (completed in 1186), refers to the story of Ahab's unjust seizure of Naboth's vineyard as he comments on the covetousness of kings.[87] In the Becket liturgy, the archbishop is presented as the "guardian of the vine" who "falls in the vineyard." The vineyard denotes the Church, while Becket and Henry II are compared to Naboth and Ahab, respectively.[88] Although it is uncertain whether the author of *Árna saga* was inspired by the Becket biographies to include the Ahab/Naboth comparison, the fact remains that in both works the same Biblical story served as overt criticism of secular appropriation of church property.

Such comparisons may be regarded as a common device in medieval narrative, but it is worth stressing that *Árna saga* is the earliest known Old-Norse text to apply Biblical parallelism in the manner we have seen. Like the Becket biographers, the author of *Árna saga* uses Biblical comparisons to comment on recent and topical events that are presented from a particular

86. *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, vol. 2: *The Later Letters*, ed. and trans. W.J. Millor and C. N. L. Brooke, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), p. 247.

87. *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. James Craigie Robertson, Rerum Brittanicarum Mediii Aevi Scriptores (London: Longmans, 1877), III, 222.

88. Kay Brainerd Slocum, *Liturgies in Honour of Thomas Becket* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 145.

ideological outlook. True, in the oldest saga of Þorlákr of Skálholt (*Þorláks saga* A), which dates to the early thirteenth century, the Icelandic saint is associated with Biblical characters such as King David and the Apostle.[89] Here, however, the comparisons function to illuminate and explain the sanctity of Bishop Þorlákr, which, by its very nature, is timeless and unchanging.[90] In contrast, as I hope to have shown, the Biblical references in *Árna saga* are dynamic and multifaceted in their historical associations. Arguably, *Sverris saga* comes closest to our work in such use of Biblical material, though in this text the overt comparisons are confined to King Sverrir's speeches and symbolic dreams.[91]

The Becket Lives are important primary sources for the career of the Canterbury saint and the history of Church–Crown relations during his episcopacy. They also reflect the issues that engaged the authors of these texts as well as wider literary and institutional communities for which they wrote. In Iceland the hagiography on St. Þorlákr Þórhallsson offers the best comparative example of how contemporary politics shaped the presentation of the past. Shortly after Þorlákr's translation in 1198, a Latin *vita* of the saint was composed at Skálholt. This text served as the basis for a vernacular version composed in the early thirteenth century.[92] In these early works, the depiction of Þorlákr's episcopacy corresponds with the general portrayal in the of the Church's firm foundation in the political structure of the Icelandic Commonwealth in the "Skálholt corpus." Most conspicuously, his attempts to control church-farms and the associated conflicts with chieftains are only dealt with *sub rosa*. In *Þorláks saga* B, however, which dates to the second half of the thirteenth century, Þorlákr is explicitly presented as a champion of ecclesiastical rights. This is especially evident in the so-called *Oddaverjaþáttr*, an independent episode within the saga, which relates how Þorlákr gained control over church-farms in the Eastern Quarter and clashed with Jón Loptsson, Iceland's most powerful chieftain.[93] Irrespective of whether *Þorláks saga* B was compiled in the episcopacy of Árni Þorlákssonand in the maelstrom of *Staðamál*,[94] or even in the fourteenth century,[95] this text, as well as the later sagas

89. See, e.g., *Biskupa sögur* 2, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, pp. 48–49, 51, 68–70, 82.

90. Reidar Astås, "Om bibelanveldense i *Þorláks saga byskups*," *Alvíssmál*, 3 (1994), 73–96.

91. See for instance, *Sverris saga*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, pp. 17 and 152.

92. For the historical and literary context of Þorlákr's cult, see Kirsten Wolf, "Pride and Politics in Late-Twelfth-Century Iceland: The Sanctity of Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallson," in *Saints, Lives, and Cults in Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Thomas DuBois (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2008), pp. 241–71.

93. *Biskupa sögur* 2, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, pp. 164–82.

94. For the general scholarly consensus of dating *Oddaverjaþáttr* to Árni Þorláksson's episcopacy, see *Biskupa sögur* 2, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, pp. xxxi–xli; and *Biskupa sögur* 3, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. xlviii–lii.

95. Susanne Miriam Fahn and Gottskálk Jensson, "The Forgotten Poem: A Latin Panegyric for Saint Þorlákr in AM 382 4TO," *Gripla*, 21 (2010), 227–28.

about St. Guðmundr Arason, focus on conflict between episcopal power and Iceland's secular elite. In this respect these works certainly attest to enhanced ecclesiastical identity from the second half of the thirteenth century onwards.

But *Árna saga* differs from these texts in its engagement with relatively recent events that, moreover, directly concerned the interest of the Skálholt diocese at the time of writing. With the benefit of hindsight, it is not difficult to see that the Treaty of Ögvaldsnes in 1297 had laid the foundations for the powerful late medieval Church. But for Árni Þorláksson's immediate successors and their entourages, this would not have been so apparent. The first quarter of the fourteenth century was essentially a period of the consolidation of Árni Þorláksson's achievement. *Árna saga* reflects this historical context in its recording of how God's providence guided the bishopric through a period of uncertainty. The saga shows how, in the temporary absence of both foreign and native support, the powers at the bishop's disposal sufficed to defend, and even expand, the cause of the southern diocese and by extension the Icelandic Church. To tell this tale, the traditional model of the Church's deep roots in Iceland's history and society, as first introduced by Ari Þorgilsson, was only of marginal relevance. Instead, the saga focuses on how the bishop's authority is grounded in sources of legitimacy external to Iceland, namely, the archbishopric of Nidaros, the Norwegian king, the papacy, or, in lieu of these authorities, God's eternal laws. It is, however, the pivotal figure of the bishop who activates and wields these powers in the interest of his diocese.

The novelty of this approach explains *Árna saga*'s complex and, at first sight disjointed nature. The saga centers on conflicts and disputes (sans violence), and in this sense it owes much to the narrative traditions of secular sagas. Features familiar from Bishops' sagas and hagiography are also present in a modified form, most strikingly through the two principal themes, namely, the nature of episcopal power and the application of eternal law in temporal society. These are embedded in the text through thematic patterning and the paralleling of episodes. The themes are further highlighted by the use of intertextual associations that derive from Christian sources and secular epics that had been translated into Old Norse in the course of the thirteenth century. In this sense, *Árna saga biskups* was intended as the self-projection of a new episcopal ideal in early fourteenth-century Iceland, and, as such, the work conveys the anxieties and interests of a Church in an uneasy state between transformation and consolidation.