

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON MARTYRDOM
IN POST-CONVERSION SCANDINAVIA

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THE IRISH *COGADH CÁEDHAL RE GALLAIBH* ('The War of the Irish with the Foreigners'), composed in the early twelfth century, tells in an epic fashion of the battle of Clontarf which was fought in 1014 between the followers of Brian Boru, king of Munster, and the Vikings of Dublin and their Irish allies (Todd 1867, 51–59). The late-thirteenth-century *Njáls saga* also tells in detail of the same encounter (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 440–53), possibly following here a lost **Brjáns saga* which may have dated from the late twelfth century (1954, xlv–xlix). For a study of the two texts I refer to Goedheer's monograph (1938; see also Hudson 2002), but for the present purpose I wish only to draw attention to a single comparative feature: their presentation of King Brian's death in battle.

In the *Cogadh* Brian stays away from the battle and instead occupies himself with prayers in his tent. There is no explicit reason given for Brian's conduct although it is implied that he is kept from fighting by old age. Nevertheless, when Brian is attacked by the Viking Bróðir the king is still able to wield his sword. In the ensuing combat both Brian and his assailant are slain. *Njáls saga*, on the other hand, is more forthcoming about Brian Boru's absence from battle. The king will not join the fight because the day is Good Friday; even when Bróðir has fought his way through the king's shield-wall, Brian refuses to draw his sword. Instead he is defended by the young Taðkr, but to no avail; Bróðir's sword slices through the boy's hand and the same stroke decapitates the king of Munster. In turn, the Viking is killed by Brian's retinue. Two miracles are noted: the king's severed head re-attaches itself to his body and Brian's blood heals Taðkr's wound.

King Brian Boru's death scenes in both the *Cogadh* and *Njáls saga* are clearly influenced by hagiography. In the case of the Irish work this is scarcely surprising, for it was composed, at least partly, with the purpose of bestowing an aura of greater legitimacy and lustre on his descendants, the kings of Munster (Ní Mhaonaigh 1995, 359–61). Brian Boru is presented as an heroic figure of an *almost* saintly status: like many a saint he foresees his own death and in the well-known eulogy he is

compared to Moses, the Emperor Augustus and the heroes of antiquity. It is interesting to observe, however, that at no point does the *Cogadh* explicitly refer to Brian's sanctity, although the so-called *Debide scáilte*, a poem which relies on the *Cogadh*, may hint in that direction when it says that angels from Paradise 'carried away the soul of Brian without sin'.¹ *Njáls saga*, in contrast, brings the saintly dimension to the fore with greater clarity. Emphasis is placed on the day of Brian's death, Good Friday, which naturally evokes Christ's passion, as indeed does his refusal to fight his foes on principle. Moreover, the posthumous miracles which the king performs leave little room for doubt that he has joined the ranks of the blessed. The gruesome fate of Bróðir also follows a hagiographical tradition: he suffers disembowelment, which is the punishment allotted to apostates and slayers of martyrs (Hill 1981).² Thus in the Icelandic saga, unlike the *Cogadh*, Brian Boru dies as a martyr. Naturally the saga's presentation of the battle of Clontarf as a conflict between Christians and pagans may have contributed to this portrayal.

I have chosen to begin my discussion of martyrdom in post-Conversion Scandinavia with this particular example for two reasons. First, it brings into contrast two cultural zones with notably different ideas and traditions about sainthood. In Ireland there are few references to royal saints and none at all to princely martyrs (Ó Corráin 1982, 226–29); in Scandinavia, by contrast, martyrdom was in effect the sole form of saintliness until the late twelfth century. Second, the example illustrates that even in Iceland, where royal cults were understandably absent, the literary paradigm of martyrdom was so deep-rooted and familiar that the unknown author was effortlessly able to place an Irish king within it. Brian Boru was the only Irish king to receive this treatment in the medieval period.³

I

Martyrdom—here defined as the perceived attainment of sanctity through the suffering of violent death—is widely attested in early Scandinavian

¹ See the translation of this poem in Goedheer 1938, 45–55. The verse in question is no. 50, p. 55.

² It is worth observing that, whether by design or not, Brian's martyrdom is echoed in the death of another stoic figure in *Njáls saga*. Before the burning of Bergþórshvoll Njáll Þorgeirsson refuses to fight his enemies, and after his death his salvation (if not sanctity) is indicated by the incorrupt state of his body.

³ On the Irish attitude towards sanctity achieved through martyrdom see Gougaud 1907, 360–70; Stancliffe 1982.

written sources. The first martyr-cult, that of King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway, emerged in the 1030s, only a decade or two after what can be termed the official conversion of the country. It must be noted, however, that the earliest indigenous sources for his cult, Þórarinn loftunga's *Glælognskviða* (c.1034; Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, B I 300–01) and Sighvatr Þórðarson's *Erfidrápa* (c. 1040; 1912–15, B I 239–45), do not dwell on St Óláfr's status as a martyr. The earliest depiction of Óláfr's death at the battle of Stiklastaðir as martyrdom appears in Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* composed c.1080 (Schmeidler 1917, II xvi, 121). Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson's *Passio et Miracula Beati Olavi* (probably from the 1170s), the oldest preserved prose hagiography on the Norwegian saint, further elaborated on the nature of Óláfr's martyrdom (Metcalf 1881, 71–72). Adam's *Gesta* also refers to the martyrdom of Alward (Hallvard), a Norwegian nobleman, who 'was killed by friends' while he 'was protecting an enemy' (Tschan 2002, 161; Schmeidler 1917, III liii, 199). Hallvard's cult is attested in the third decade of the twelfth century in Oslo (Bjarni Einarsson 1985, 331) and his Life may date from as early as the 1170s (Gunnes 1949–51, 133–54). In Denmark, in the anonymous *Passio Sancti Kanuti*, written soon after Knud II's exhumation in 1095, the king's death at the hands of his subjects is presented as martyrdom (Gertz 1908–12, 68–71), and in his *Gesta Swenomagni* (c.1120) Aelnoth of Canterbury lingers on Knud's martyrdom in greater detail and places the event within the context of Danish and indeed universal history (Gertz 1908–12, 78–85). In a *Necrologium* for Lund Cathedral, brought into use in 1145, the assassination of King Erik emune (d. 1137) is referred to in words which cannot fail to suggest martyrdom (Weeke 1884–89, 37; Brengaard 1986, 39–44). The murder of Knud Lavard in 1131 by his cousin led to his promotion as a martyr; his sanctity was papally sanctioned in 1169 and a year later his relics were translated at the Ringsted assembly (Gertz 1908–12, 239–40). Sven Aggesen in his *Historia brevis* (c.1185) also describes the murder of King Knud Magnusson in 1157 in 'martyr-like' language (Gertz 1917–22, II 137) and in the Icelandic *Knýtlinga saga* he is referred to as holy, albeit not as a martyr (Bjarni Guðnason 1982, 288). In 1176 a certain Margrete from the town of Roskilde was executed, although guilty of no crime, and soon afterwards she was regarded as a saint (Gertz 1917–22, II 57).

Twelfth-century Norway did not produce a princely martyr-cult to rival that of St Óláfr, but still there is ample evidence that killed or murdered kings, pretenders and leaders of political factions were

considered holy by sections of the population. According to Snorri Sturluson, King Haraldr gilli, murdered in Bergen in 1136 by his rival to the throne, was considered a saint (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, III 303), as was his son King Eysteinn Haraldsson, executed in 1158 by a supporter of his co-ruler, King Ingi (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, III 305). *Sverris saga* mentions a certain Þorleifr who claimed to be King Eysteinn's son and who in the 1190s began an insurrection against King Sverrir Sigurðarson. Þorleifr and his followers were routed and he himself was killed, but rumours of his sanctity began to circulate, and one of King Sverrir's poets, Blakkr, deemed it necessary to mock these claims in verse (Indrebø 1920, 121–22).

The earldom of Orkney also had its share of martyr-cults, most notably that of Earl Magnús of Orkney, who had been killed by his cousin and co-ruler in 1116/17 (see Haki Antonsson, forthcoming A). There is also evidence of two late-twelfth-century cults: those of Earl Rǫgnvaldr Kali (d. 1158), who was killed in an ambush in Caithness, and Earl Haraldr ungi, who fell in battle against Haraldr Maddaðarson and his retainers in 1197/98. While Rǫgnvaldr's sanctity was recognised and promoted by Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson of Orkney in the 1190s, the only trace of Haraldr ungi's cult appears in *Orkneyinga saga*, which notes that a church was dedicated to him in Caithness and that miracles had occurred at his grave (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, 322).

As I have already suggested, Iceland was obviously not a good breeding ground for princely martyrs, but this did not prevent the murders or killings of regional chieftains from being narrated in the language of martyrdom. Of particular interest in this respect is Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, a prominent chieftain from the Vestfirðir, whose feud with a rival chieftain ended in his beheading in 1213. *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, which was later incorporated into the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, is clearly influenced by hagiographic literature on martyrs, notably by a *Vita* of St Magnús of Orkney and an early Life of St Thomas of Canterbury (Guðrún P. Helgadóttir 1987, lxi–lxxiv; Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2004). *Sturlunga saga* itself contains numerous references to participants in the thirteenth-century Civil War whose dying moments are described in a noticeably martyr-like fashion. Whether the authors of contemporary sagas were here influenced by hagiographic literature or whether these descriptions represent an actual pattern of behaviour among dying Icelanders (or perhaps both) is difficult to judge (Cormack 1994; Guðrún Nordal 1998, 203–11). Lastly, mention must be made of King Erik Jedvardsson, the first native saint of Sweden, who was killed c.1160

while battling against a Danish pretender to the throne. His cult is attested at the end of the twelfth century (Cross 1961).

What is to be made of the apparent prevalence and popularity of the idea of martyrdom in post-Conversion Scandinavia? Before an attempt is made to answer this question it is advisable to broach a different question. In discussing martyrdom in Scandinavia in this period are we in danger of picking and choosing features from diverse sources and different regions in order to establish some sort of common pattern? This is a valid objection that cannot be dismissed lightly. One key observation should be considered: namely, the absence of native confessor saints in Scandinavia until the last quarter of the twelfth century. It is only from this period onwards that cults of non-martyrs begin to appear. The earliest is Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson of Skálholt, who was locally canonised in 1199. In 1187 Archbishop Absalon of Lund tried to gain papal recognition of the saintly status of Bishop Ketill of Viborg (d. 1150) (Gertz 1908–12, 251–52) and in 1229 the Norwegian Church began a lengthy campaign to secure papal approval for the sanctity of Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson of Nidaros (Bjørge 1978, 55–57).

Naturally this late emergence of native confessor saints does not signify that Scandinavians were only familiar with the martyr-type of sanctity. My point is rather that *native* saints' cults, whether officially recognised or not, were exclusively confined to secular figures who had suffered a violent death. There is a considerable difference between adopting foreign, established, confessor saints into the liturgical calendar and generating enough enthusiasm among the general population to institute and maintain a new saint's cult. Indeed until the last decades of the twelfth century there is a conspicuous lack of references in the Scandinavian sources to either secular or ecclesiastical figures who were deemed worthy of sainthood on account of their exemplary conduct, pastoral activity or miraculous powers.

Scandinavia is not the only region in Christian Europe where native princely saints preceded the appearance of bishops and abbots as objects of veneration. In the more peripheral, relatively newly converted regions, such as Kievan Rus' and Bohemia, the earliest native saints were also rulers who had met a violent death. In the eleventh and the twelfth centuries the princely martyrs Boris and Gleb (1015) were the sole native saints of Kievan Rus'. In Bohemia the cults of St Wenceslas, murdered in 929, and the Princess Ludmilla, killed in 921, took root in the eleventh century, and the Bohemians had to wait almost a century for their next native saint (Graus 1975). The kingdom of Poland is something of an

exception in this context. There the earliest native saints were not rulers but bishops, St Adalbert and St Stanislas, who had both suffered martyrdom in the tenth century in their efforts to convert the Poles (Kloczowski 2000, 210). In Hungary the royal saints Stephen (d. 1038) and Ladislas (1095) did not suffer martyrdom; their sanctity rested rather on the ideals of just Christian kingship (Klaniczay 2002, 134–94). But in general it appears that martyrdom as a form of sanctity was particularly popular in these more recently converted lands of Christian Europe (Ingham 1973).

Although the nature and scarcity of the sources does not allow us to answer conclusively the question why martyrdom as a form of sanctity proved so attractive in Scandinavia, some general observations can nevertheless be presented. First, it is evident that Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics were involved in introducing the notion of princely martyr-cults to Scandinavia. An Anglo-Saxon bishop, Grímkell, was instrumental in establishing King Óláfr's sanctity and the authors of the hagiography on Knud of Odense and St Magnús of Orkney were also of English provenance. Moreover, martyrdom as a form of sanctity received an added impetus with the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket in 1170; it is clear that subsequent Lives composed in his honour influenced the writings on Scandinavian martyr-princes (see Haki Antonsson 2004; Haki Antonsson forthcoming B).

Secondly, these martyr-cults were promoted by Scandinavian princely dynasties (or by particular branches of dynasties) in order to consolidate their power and present themselves as divinely ordained to rule. The most blatant example of this sort of dynastic advertisement is the assembly at Ringsted already mentioned, where the relics of Knud Lavard were translated in the presence of his son, King Valdemar. On the same occasion, Valdemar's son was crowned his co-ruler and heir.⁴

Thirdly, the fledgling Scandinavian Church was not averse to bestowing sanctity on royal or princely figures. After all it was only with the support of the secular authority that the Church was able to establish itself within a deeply traditional society. Until the second half of the twelfth century the organisation of the Scandinavian Church (if that term can be applied in this period) was weak, and the figure of the saintly bishop or abbot was probably far removed from the experience of most people. The only ecclesiastics who were in fact associated with sanctity

⁴ For a dynastic interpretation of the emergence of the Scandinavian princely cults see Hoffmann 1973; 1994.

within Scandinavia in this period were those who had been killed in their missionary efforts, for instance the somewhat mysterious Erik ‘the pilgrim’ whom Adam of Bremen mentions in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (Schmeidler 1917, III liii, 199).

Fourthly, it could be argued that the very idea of achieving heavenly reward/sanctity through suffering violent death struck a particular chord in post-Conversion Scandinavia. For example, the concept of dying while fighting against overwhelming odds, and in the heroic defence of one’s lord, was probably easily adaptable to the notion of the heavenly reward for martyrdom. Otherwise it is difficult to explain the attempt in 1095 by the clerical community of Odense to promote the cult, not only of Knud II himself, but also of the brave retainers who had died in his defence (Gertz 1908–12, 61–62).⁵ Naturally it would be wholly wrong to argue that such sentiments were particularly ‘Nordic’ in nature. A similar interpretation has been proposed for the popularity of royal martyrs in Anglo-Saxon England (Cormack 2002, 65–70) and in a twelfth-century Old French epic, *Garin le Loherenc*, those who have given their lives for their lords are celebrated as true martyrs.⁶

In addition, judging from the skaldic and runic evidence, acts of treachery and murder were seen as the most heinous of crimes in late Viking-Age Scandinavia (Jesch 2001, 254–65). For instance, the following inscription is found on a Christian memorial stone from Bornholm (D 387; Jesch 2001, 255): ‘Ásvaldi set up this stone in memory of Alfarr, his brother. A noble *drengr* killed shamefully, and Skógi betrayed him innocent.’ It is not hard to envisage that when Anglo-Saxon missionaries introduced martyr-cults into Scandinavia they found it easy to relate to sentiments of this kind. In passing one may note that a praise-poem for Waltheof, earl of Northumberland and Huntington, executed on the orders of William the Conqueror in 1076, presents the earl as a victim of treachery (Jesch 2001, 256). Waltheof, of course, became the focus of a saint’s cult. In the thirteenth-century *Sólarljóð* this combination of betrayal and heavenly reward is powerfully brought home: a former brigand shows an act of kindness by offering lodgings to a traveller who in turn betrays and kills his host. Angels escort the former brigand’s soul to his reward: a place in paradise (Fidjestøl 1979, 60–61).

⁵ For a discussion of this attempt within the context of men dying for their lords see Frank 1991, 104–05.

⁶ For the relevant Old French text and accompanying English translation see Frank 1991, 103.

Lastly, Peter Foote has noted that in the course of the turbulent twelfth century in Scandinavia, political factions, royal pretenders and incumbent kings frequently claimed that their cause was hallowed by the divine will. Thus in Halldórr skvaldri's half-stanza in *Haraldsdrápa*, the ruthless machinations of Haraldr gilli, which eventually brought him to sole power in Norway, are seen as part of God's plan (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, B I 461): 'Now, wealth-sender, the whole of Norway has fallen under your sway. Your fortune lies on the green land. That is God's plan.' (Foote 1984, 36) Similarly, shortly after King Valdemar defeated King Svend Eriksson in battle in 1157, he issued a letter of donation in which he claimed that God had been on his side during the conflict (Weibull 1963, 226). An even earlier attestation of a similar sentiment appears in Þorleikr fagri's stanza from his *Sveinsflokkur*, composed in honour of King Svend Estrithsson (Úlfsson) of Denmark (1047–74/76). There God is said to choose between Sveinn (Svend) and King Haraldr harðráði of Norway; the one he favours will rule Denmark (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, B I 368).

All these factors go some way to explain the popularity of martyrdom in eleventh- and especially twelfth-century Scandinavia. But in order to understand this phenomenon more fully it is imperative to place the Scandinavian experience within the context of a broader development of the idea of martyrdom in Christian Europe.

II

In the early centuries of Christianity violent death at the hands of persecuting pagans was the commonest road to sanctity. The 'Age of the Martyrs', which can be dated roughly between the death of the proto-martyr St Stephen *c.* 35 AD and the adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire in the fourth century, produced a body of 'sanctae vitae' which formed the bedrock of saints' cults in the early medieval period and beyond. But the official acceptance of Christianity effectively ended the supply of Christians who underwent 'baptism through blood', and a different type of saint then came to the fore: the bishop or ecclesiastic who through his missionary efforts, miracles and holy and/or ascetic life proved himself to be a vessel of God's grace. This development was concomitant both with the spread of Christianity to the outlying regions of the Roman Empire and with the increasing strength of ecclesiastical organisation in the more central lands. The main model for this type of saint was of course St Martin of Tours (d. 397) whose life, as presented by Sulpicius Severus (d. *c.* 430), struck the ideal balance between the

contemplative, the active and the miraculous. It should be emphasised, however, that the distinction between martyr saints and confessor saints was never completely clear-cut; the language of martyrdom was reinterpreted and applied to the confessor saints, so that their renunciation of worldly pleasures and dedication to their task was equated with martyrdom.

In the early Middle Ages the ideal of achieving sanctity by dying for the faith was still very much alive. For instance, Rimbert tells in his *Vita Anskari* that Anskar regretted the fact that he would not suffer martyrdom in his efforts to convert the Scandinavians (Waitz 1884, 87). Other ecclesiastics who undertook missionary works among the more peripheral peoples of Europe had their wish fulfilled. As I have already mentioned, Bishop Adalbert of Prague was killed by pagan Slavs during his mission to the Prussians and the same fate befell Boniface on his mission to the Frisians (d. 754). In exceptional cases the death of a secular ruler at the hands of pagans was deemed worthy of being regarded as martyrdom. Thus Count Gerold, who was killed in combat against the Avars in 799, was upheld as a martyr by the monastery of Reichenau (Noth 1966, 156), and the same status was bestowed on King Edmund of East Anglia, killed by a Viking war-band in 869/70.

In the early Middle Ages, by far the largest category of martyrs consisted of princes and kings of the Christian dominions of Northern and Eastern Europe who had been murdered by rivals or enemies; Edward the Martyr and St Wigstan (d. 840) in England, and the East European saints Wencelas, Boris and Gleb, to name only a few. Their cults were established and maintained through cooperation between rulers and monastic foundations and/or episcopal authorities.⁷ In Scandinavia the cults of St Óláfr of Norway, St Knud of Odense and St Magnús of Orkney should be placed within the same context.

So in the early Middle Ages the crown of martyrdom was the preserve of royal and princely figures whom the local ecclesiastical authorities deemed worthy of being regarded as saints for various reasons. But in the eleventh century there are signs that the idea of martyrdom was escaping the confines of official cults and acquiring a dynamic of its own. There were two main interrelated reasons behind this development. First, the Gregorian papacy adopted the idea of martyrdom in its efforts to further ecclesiastical independence and moral reform (Cowdrey 1991). An echo of this can be heard in Pope Gregory VII's letter of 1077, addressed

⁷ See for instance Rollason 1983; Ridyard 1988.

to the Danish King Harald hen, in which he is exhorted, if necessary, to suffer a glorious death in defence of the fledgling Danish Church (Cowdrey 2002, 255):⁸

Quapropter monemus et obsecramus, ut posthabito omni humano odio, invidia, postposita etiam, si incubuerit, morte eam eruere protegere fovere tueri et ab insidiantium faucibus luporum eripere pro posse labores sciens pro certo, quod nullam orationem nullumque gratius sacrificium in supreme arbitri oculis poteris offerre (Casper 1920–23, 363).

Wherefore we warn and beseech that, disregarding all human hatred and envy, disregarding also, should it come to that, even death itself, you should labour to deliver, protect, foster, and safeguard her, and seize her from the jaws of marauding wolves, knowing surely that you will be able to offer no prayer and no sacrifice that is more pleasing in the eyes of the supreme judge.

Although it is a moot point whether the letter implies that Harald's death on behalf of the Church would count as martyrdom, it makes a clear connection between offering such a sacrifice and heavenly reward.

Secondly, from the last decades of the eleventh century onwards the European knightly class, which now increasingly began to identify itself with the Christian cause, appropriated for itself the idea of martyrdom.⁹ Both these factors, I believe, are relevant to the twelfth-century Scandinavian scene.

III

At this point I wish to introduce another exhortation which was composed about a century later than the one Pope Gregory aimed at King Harald hen (Skånland 1969, 22):

Volumus autem ut episcopi, abbates et reliqui sacerdotes per singulas ciuitates, burgos et uillas populum sibi commissum modis omnibus exhortentur quatenus contra excommunicatos et turbatores pacis uiriliter studeant dimicare, eos pariter commonentes quod si pro defensione pacis et saluatione patriae fideliter morientur, regna celestia, consequentur.

We wish, however, that the bishops, abbots and other priests in every city, town, and village should by every means exhort the people entrusted to them that they strive to fight manfully against excommunicates and disturbers of the peace, reminding them at the same time that if they should die faithfully for the defence of peace and the safety of the fatherland, they shall attain the heavenly kingdom.

⁸ For the background to this letter see Cowdrey 1989, 330–31.

⁹ This development is succinctly summed up in Green 1966, 228–95.

This passage derives from the so-called *Canones Nidrosienses*, which contains fifteen *canones* (or decrees) addressed to the clergy and people under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the archbishop of Nidaros/Trondheim. The *Canones Nidrosienses* is only preserved in a single English manuscript, dated to c.1200, which Walter Holtzmann discovered in the British Library in the 1930s and published soon thereafter (Holtzmann 1938). There has been a long-standing debate about the date of the *Canones*. Thus the creation of the document has been connected with the establishment of the archbishopric of Nidaros in 1152/53 (Johnsen 1970); the assembly (*riksmøtet*) which met in Bergen in 1163 and paved the way for the coronation of Magnús Erlingsson (d. 1184) shortly thereafter (Gunnes 1970); the latter part of Magnús's reign (1170s) (Skånland 1969); and even with the early years of King Sverrir Sigurðarson's rule (1177–1202) (Sandaaker 1986).

There is, however, a general consensus that Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson of Nidaros (1161–88) was intimately involved in drawing up the *Canones Nidrosienses*. Eysteinn's general contribution to the political and intellectual life of late twelfth-century Norway has long been recognised. As the second archbishop of Nidaros, Eysteinn is credited with composing an ecclesiastical law-code for Norway (*Gullfjǫðr*), drawing up the ground-breaking *Coronation Oath* and *Letter of Privileges* (*Priviligebrev*) for King Magnús Erlingsson, writing a hagiographical work on St Óláfr Haraldsson, *Passio et Miracula Beati Olavi*, and, perhaps most impressively, with initiating the building programme which made Nidaros Cathedral the pre-eminent example of Romanesque architecture in Scandinavia. In all this Eysteinn, who had studied abroad (perhaps at the monastery of St Victor in the emerging university of Paris), served as conduit for new ideas between the mainland of Europe and his homeland.¹⁰

The fifteen articles of the *Canones Nidrosienses* deal with various issues relating to the status of the Church within Norwegian society. Among other things the document defines the rights and duties of church-owners, the procedure for ordaining priests and the extent to which the clergy should participate in secular affairs. The passage quoted above derives from *Canones* 2, which deals with the duties and responsibilities of ecclesiastics at times when the kingdom is threatened by external or internal enemies. For instance, it decrees that if a pagan army invades the realm the king can seek help from the Church. Our particular passage,

¹⁰ On Eysteinn in general see Gunnes 1996.

however, is an exhortation to the population at large that they should be ready to lay down their lives in defence of the *patria*.

It has been established that the author(s) of the *Canones Nidrosienses* appropriated, sometimes in a creative manner, passages from Gratian's *Decretum*, a textbook on canon law compiled c.1140, which contains a collection of patristic texts, conciliar decrees and Papal pronouncements relating to all fields of Church discipline.¹¹ In his section on *bellum iustum*, or the 'just war', Gratian cites a passage from a letter issued by Leo IV in or around 853 in which he expresses the hope that anyone who dies fighting the enemies of the faith will attain eternal salvation. This is the authority from which the author of the *Canones Nidrosienses* derived his inspiration when he wrote the passage under discussion.

The immediate background to Pope Leo's words was the threat posed by Saracen marauders to the Papal lands in general and the city of Rome in particular.¹² Reminding the Franks of their earlier victories against the same enemies, the Pope held out the promise that those who died combating this menace could expect a reward laid up for them in heaven. James Brundage, the eminent authority on medieval canon law, has pointed out that Leo's words should not be confused with any sort of papal indulgence, that is, the power of the pontiff to remit temporal punishments owed for sins in return for fighting on behalf of Christendom. Rather, 'it was a hortatory expression of pious hope and prayer comparable to the *absolutio super tumulum* of the burial service' (Brundage 1976, 23). For the first time, however, the papacy had made a clear link between death on the battlefield against the heathen and spiritual rewards, that is a place in paradise.

This notion gained an added momentum following Urban II's launch of the First Crusade in 1095. It was in the course of this undertaking that the idea became prevalent that not only did those who were killed in battle receive eternal life but that they would also join the ranks of the saints. It should be emphasised that although there is no evidence that Urban II promised the rewards of martyrdom to those who died on the armed pilgrimage to the Holy Land (as opposed to a general remittance of penance), the chroniclers of the First Crusade were in no doubt that this was the case (Riley-Smith 1986; Morris 1993; Flori 1991). From the perspective of the Church there is naturally a great

¹¹ See Skånland 1969, which is largely a study of the relationship between the *Canones Nidrosienses* and Gratian's *Decretum*. On can. 2 see pp. 20–29.

¹² On the context of this letter see Herbers 1996, 120–27.

difference between gaining eternal salvation and attaining the status of a martyr. The former signifies entry into heaven, the latter denotes sanctity as well. By their nature, however, it is not difficult to envisage how the perceived promise of salvation could be easily conflated with the promise of the crown of martyrdom to anyone who died fighting for Christendom. Thus from the First Crusade onwards the boundaries between the two concepts became blurred (as they would remain throughout the Middle Ages).¹³

This is clearly revealed in the earliest chronicles of the First Crusade (like the *Gesta Francorum*), but also in Crusading songs composed about the same expedition. In addition, from the early twelfth century onwards, a particular stock-scene begins to appear in both epic poetry and semi-historical works: the bishop who promises heavenly reward, even the status of martyrs, to those who die fighting for the fatherland against the enemies of Christianity. Thus in the *Chanson de Roland* Archbishop Turpin addresses the soldiers before a battle against the Saracens in the following manner:

Seignurs baruns, Carles nus laissat ci,
 Pur nostre rei devum nus ben murir:
 Chrestientet aidez a sustenir!
 Bataille avrez, voz en enstes tuz fiz,
 Kar a voz oilz veez les Sarrazins.
 Clamez voz culpes, si preiez Deu mercit!
 Asoldrai vos pur voz anmes guarir.
 Se vos murez, esterez seinz martirs,
 Sieges avrez el greignor pareis.

My lord barons, Charles left us here,
 We must die well for our King:
 Help us sustain Christianity!
 You are to fight a battle, you are all certain of that,
 For you see the Saracens before your eyes.
 Say your confessions and pray for God's mercy!
 I will absolve you to save your souls.
 If you die, you'll be holy martyrs,
 You'll have seats in highest Paradise.

(Brault 1978, 71–73)

In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*, Bishop Dubricius delivers a rousing speech to the army of King Arthur as it prepares for battle against the pagan Saxons (Wright 1985–91, 183):

¹³ For the hesitant attitude towards martyrdom of crusaders as late as the thirteenth century, see Smith 2003.

Lectio sacra docet Christum posuisse sub hoste
 Pro nobis animam: pro Christi ponite uestras
 Membris, que laniat furiis inuecta tyrannis
 Saxonice gentis; patriam defendite uestram
 Ecclesiasque Dei, quas destruit hosticus ignis.

The sacred text teaches that Christ laid down His soul at His enemy's feet for our sake; lay down your souls for Christ's limbs, which are being torn by the insanely motivated tyranny of the Saxon people. Defend your motherland and the churches of God, which are being destroyed by hostile fire.

Bishop Dubricius then directly associates death in battle with martyrdom (Wright 1985–91, 182–83):

Si uos contigerit mortem pugnando subire,
 Perpetuum regnum capietis pro perituro.
 Purpura martirii, precio preciosior omni,
 Preminet in cello cunctosque excellit honores:
 Martiribus debetur honos cum martire Christo,
 Cui laus et uirtus et honor per secular cuncta.

If it happens that you die in battle, you will receive the Eternal Kingdom in return for one that is transient. The purple of martyrdom, precious beyond all price, is foremost in heaven, excelling all honours; reverence is owed to martyrs along with Christ, Himself a martyr, to Whom be glory, power, and honour for all time.

It appears that in the twelfth century exhortations of this sort by real-life preachers became so prevalent (and perhaps so extravagant) that they laid themselves open to parody. Thus in the *Couronnement de Louis*, which forms a part of the twelfth-century cycle on Guillaume d'Orange (William of Orange), the Pope tells the hero that he can eat flesh on all days of the year, take as many wives as he desires and that in the end he will forever rest in paradise because all his sins will be forgiven if he takes up arms against the Saracens (Ferrante 1974, 74).

Erik Gunnes has argued that our passage in *Canones Nidrosienses 2* encapsulates Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson's ideology of cooperation between Church and Crown, an ideology which is also expressed in the coronation oath he composed for the young King Magnús Erlingsson. For this purpose Eysteinn recruited, among other things, Pope Leo IV's letter of 853 (Gunnes 1970). I concur here with Gunnes's analysis but I would like to emphasise the startling novelty of the passage, which has hitherto not been commented on. The decree draws together and modifies a potent set of ideas which had come to the fore in the course of the twelfth century. Namely, *Canones 2* expresses *within a legal context* the notion that death for *patria*, the homeland, merited heavenly reward.

From Late Antiquity onwards, as Ernst Kantorowich has demonstrated, the notion of dying for the *patria* had been interpreted within the framework of the celestial homeland of Christians, i.e. paradise. In other words those who gave up their life for the *patria* did not do so in defence of a political entity or a temporal lord but rather for God and the celestial body of the saints or, alternatively, the advancement of Christianity here on earth (Kantorowicz 1951; 1957). This changed in the thirteenth century: with the growing self-confidence of the main monarchies of Western Europe (and the accompanying growth in nationalism) it happened that 'the crown of martyrdom began to descend on the war victims of the secular state' (Kantorowicz 1957, 244).¹⁴ In a sense *Canones 2* represents an interesting intermediary stage in this process. True, the people of Norway are exhorted to defend the Norwegian realm, but this political entity is not in the possession of the temporal lord, King Magnús Erlingsson. Rather it is the preserve of the saintly Óláfr Haraldsson, who resides in heaven and whose sacrifice his countrymen are in a sense being encouraged to imitate.

The other striking feature relates more specifically to the promise of heavenly reward. In the wake of the First Crusade, as I have mentioned, it became commonplace to equate death in battle against the Saracens with automatic entry into paradise or even the attainment of martyrdom. At no point did the Papacy state that those who died on the battlefield would be guaranteed eternal salvation. Urban II, as far as his words at Clermont can be reconstructed, only promised commutation of penance to those who took the cross, i.e. satisfaction for the penance meted out by a confessor for sins confessed. In the twelfth century other popes followed in Urban's footsteps and issued encyclicals which promised those who participated in the Crusade that their temporal punishments for all confessed sins would be commuted (Brundage 1976, 119–20). But, and this is the main point, there was no question of issuing *carte-blanche* promises of eternal salvation. True, Eugenius III's bull *Quantum praedecessores* (1145/46), which launched the Second Crusade, promised not only commutation of penance but also the remission of all sins confessed (i.e. full indulgence) and, by implication, everlasting life for

¹⁴ This model of development, although generally accepted, is of course a simplified one. Thus Abbo's Life of St Edmund of East Anglia (from the later tenth century) portrays the king dying in defence of his realm: 'realising how glorious it would be for me to die for my country [*pro patria*]; and now I will of my own free will surrender myself' (Hervey 1907, 27). For the Latin see Winterbottom 1972, 75.

those who died in the East (see further below). Indeed in formulating his bull *Eugenius* himself had been influenced by chronicles of the Crusades that had simply assumed (incorrectly) that Urban II in 1095/96 promised full indulgence (Robertson 1990, 322–48). But his successors would be more circumspect, as is illustrated by Alexander III's letter *Non parum animus* which he addressed in 1171/72 to the Scandinavian princes who made war on the pagan Estonians.¹⁵

Nos enim eis, qui aduersus sæpe dictos paganos potenter et magnanimiter decertauerint, de peccatis suis, de quibus confessi fuerint et poenitentiam acceperint, remissionem unius anni, confisi de misericordia dei, et meritis apostolorum Petri et Pauli, concedimus, sicut his qui sepulcrum dominicum uisitant concedere consueuimus. Illis autem, qui in conflictu illo decesserint, omnium suorum, si poenitentiam acceperint, remissionem indulgemus peccatorum (Christiansen 1976–77, no. 27, p. 38).

Trusting God's mercy and merits of the apostles Peter and Paul, we thus concede to those forcefully and magnanimously fighting these often mentioned pagans one year's remission of the sins for which they have made confession and received a penance as we are accustomed to grant those who go to the Lord's Sepulchre. To those who die in this fight we grant remission of all their sins, if they have received penance (Schmidt 2003, 56).

In other words, even when the papacy offered full remission of sins to those who would die on the Crusades, this was always related to the developing system of indulgence. This is not the case in the *Canones Nidrosienses*, which without any caveats simply promises eternal life to those who fight against enemies of the fatherland and usurpers.¹⁶

But interestingly, the archbishopric of Nidaros was not the only regional ecclesiastical authority which connected defence of the realm with spiritual rewards in this period. In 1166 a synod was held in Segovia in the Spanish kingdom of Castile. The synod, which was led by the Bishop of Toledo, decreed that anyone who fought against the threat posed by the enemies of Castile would enjoy a remission of their sins identical to those which had traditionally been granted to pilgrims to the Holy Land (Linehan 1981; Housley 1985, 24–25; Vann 1997,

¹⁵ For the context and significance of this letter see Schmidt 2003, 56–60. I thank Iben Schmidt for discussing this passage with me and allowing me to use her translation of it.

¹⁶ This considered, it appears unlikely that the papacy would ever have ratified *Canones Nidrosienses*, and even more unlikely that the papal legate to Norway who oversaw the establishment of the archbishopric of Nidaros in 1152 was behind the decree in question.

49–50). It is particularly interesting to observe that the political circumstances which shaped the provincial statute of Segovia are comparable to what we encounter in Norway in the early years of King Magnús's reign.¹⁷ When the synod was called in 1166 Alfonso VIII of Castile (1155–1214), only eleven years of age, was caught in a power-struggle between two political factions, the Laras and the Castos, who both strove to dominate the young king. Previous kings of Castile had provided the archbishopric of Toledo with considerable rights and privileges, which the Synod of Segovia was keen to defend against any potential threats, whether internal or external. At the Synod the archbishopric threw its weight behind the Laras as the protectors of its interests. Hence the Synod insisted on the spiritual rewards that would be bestowed on those who fought in defence of the anointed King Alfonso VIII. In Norway the archbishopric of Nidaros, under the leadership of Eysteinn Erlendsson, supported unswervingly the kingship of Magnús Erlingsson. In 1164 the archbishop crowned the four-year-old Magnús (the first ecclesiastical coronation in Scandinavia) and on the same occasion, or shortly thereafter, a document was produced that established not only the sole right of Magnús and his descendants to the Norwegian throne but also their obligations to the archbishopric of Nidaros. Composed in the 1160s, or possibly in the 1170s, the decree in the *Canones Nidrosienses* should be placed within the same political context. In it the mutual cause of the Church and Crown is hallowed with divine blessing and protection against any potential enemies. This is precisely the notion behind the decree issued in 1166 by the Synod of Segovia.

Thus we have here two cases of regional, and one can say peripheral, Church authorities promising spiritual rewards for those who fought in defence of the 'rightful' royal authority. It is of particular interest that the enemies to be combated are not only Muslims or pagans, but also Christians who threaten the divinely established order. There is, however, a subtle difference between the stipulations of the Synod of Segovia and the decree in *Canones Nidrosienses*. Like Alexander III's *Non parum animus*, the former document firmly connects the spiritual rewards on offer with the evolving system of penance. Those who fought under the banner of Alfonso VIII would be rewarded with the same benefits that were extended to pilgrims to Jerusalem, presumably the remission of all temporal punishments owed for confessed sins. In this

¹⁷ For a succinct overview of the minority of Alfonso VIII see Vann 2003, 61.

respect the Synod of Segovia adapted for its purpose an idea that had developed in relation to Crusades in the East as well as the *reconquista* of the Iberian peninsula. The Norwegian statute, on the other hand, goes much further and promises what *in effect* amounts to a full and unequivocal indulgence to those who die in the defence of the *patria*: no sins need to be confessed for they will simply be washed away by suffering death in battle. So far as I can establish, this is one of the earliest such promises given in a legal context by any Church authority in the Middle Ages.

IV

Knýtlinga saga, the saga of the kings of Denmark, an Icelandic work composed around the middle of the thirteenth century, tells how after the fall of Jerusalem the news reached Denmark that Pope Eugenius III had decreed

at hverr skyldi lauss af öllum syndum, þeim er hann hafði til skripta borit, hvat sem hann hafði hent, þegar hann var krossaðr til útferðar. Ok fyrr skyldi önd hans í himinríki, en blóð hans væri kalt á jörðu, ef hann létisk í þeiri ferð. (Bjarni Guðnason 1982, 273).

that everyone who took up the cross for the great journey should be forgiven all the sins that he confessed to, no matter what he had done, and were he to die on that journey, his soul should be in Heaven before his blood grew cold in the earth (Hermann Pálsson 1981, 147).

As we have seen, in 1145 (and again in 1146) Pope Eugenius III did indeed issue a papal bull, *Quantum praedecessores*, in response to the fall of Edessa two years before (not Jerusalem as the saga claims). The encyclical referred back to Urban II's speech at Clermont and decreed that the pope granted such remission and absolution of sin

ut qui sanctum iter devote incœerit et perfecerit, sive ibidem mortuus fuerit, de omnibus peccatis suis, de quibus corder contrito et humilito confessionem susceperit, absolutionem obtineat, et sempiternæ retributionis fructum ab omnium remuneratore percipiant (Migne 1855, col. 1065–66).

that he who shall devotedly begin so sacred a journey and shall accomplish it, or shall die during it, shall obtain absolution for all his sins which with a humble and contrite heart he shall confess, and shall receive the fruit of eternal retribution from the Remunerator of all (Henderson 1910, 336).

A comparison of the passage in *Knýtlinga saga* with *Quantum praedecessores* reveals some notable similarities. The saga clearly echoes the encyclical's emphasis on confession as the prerequisite for any absolution of sins. It adds to Eugenius's words, however, when it claims that

any committed sin will be forgiven, reminding one somewhat of the parodic scene in the French epic on William of Orange, mentioned above. More noteworthy is the statement that the soul of the crusader ‘should be in Heaven before his blood grew cold in the earth’. No such promise was made by Eugenius III or, for that matter, any other pope before or after the Second Crusade. From where did the author of *Knýtlinga saga* adopt this phrase? Obviously not from Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* (c.1200) which only relates in general terms the papal call for a new Crusade and makes no mention of the spiritual privileges involved (Christiansen 1981, 364).¹⁸ The phrase does however bear, I believe, the mark of a rhetorical device which may have been applied by those who distilled the papal pronouncement for general consumption. It certainly adds an emotive dimension to the significant, albeit somewhat dry, message of the *Quantum praedecessores*. It is possible that the author of *Knýtlinga saga* had encountered this in a now-lost Danish annal or annals from which, as Bjarni Guðnason has argued, he derived much of his material on the history of Denmark in the twelfth century (Bjarni Guðnason 1981, clv–clxxix).

The hypothesis that this particular expression originates in preaching or oral exhortations which aimed at illustrating the spiritual merits of fighting against ungodly enemies is strengthened by its appearance in a still earlier saga, *Sverris saga*, composed at the turn of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. It appears in the well-known speech which King Sverrir Sigurðarson made in Nidaros in 1179 at the grave of his sworn enemy, Earl Erlingr skakki, who had been killed in battle along with many of his men (Indrebø 1920, 42–43):

her ero nu morg tíþindi at sia oc vita. þau er mikils ero verþ. oc monnum mego vera þacsamleg. at bæði til þesarrar kirkio. oc annarra ero bornir margir licamir þeira manna er fylgt hava Magnusi konungi. En þat er sem morgum man cunnict vera at Eysteinn erkibyscup oc margir aðrir lendir [‘Feil for lærðir’, Indrebø 1920, 42, n. 5] menn. hafa iafnan sagt at allir þeir menn er berþiz með Magnusi konungi. oc verþi land hans. oc letiz með því. at salur þeira manna allra væri fyr í Paradiso. en bloðit væri callt a iorðunne Nu megum ver allir fagna her sva margra manna heilagleic sem her muno helgir hava orðit ef þetta er sva sem erkibyscup hefir sagt. at allir se þeir orðnir helgir menn er fallit hafa með Erlingi Jarli.

¹⁸ Pope Eugenius III, with Bernard of Clairvaux’s encouragement, also stipulated in a later bull that Danish aggression against the pagan Wends should be placed on par with the crusades to the East. For the background to this development see Villads Jensen 2001, 67–70.

Much to be seen and known is taking place here now, of great importance and a cause of thankfulness to men, in that both here and to other churches are carried the bodies of many who followed King Magnus. For, indeed, it is known to many that Archbishop Eystein and many other learned men have constantly said concerning all who die fighting for King Magnus and defending his land, that their souls will enter Paradise before their blood is cold on the ground. We may here rejoice at the holiness of many men who have become saints, if it is correct what the archbishop has said, that all those who died fighting under Earl Erling have become saints.

The sarcastic nature of Sverrir's speech has been noted (Foote 1984, 40–42); the king effectively implies that the followers of Erlingr and his son, King Magnús Erlingsson, have been duped into believing that they would attain paradise if they died in the struggle against him. The speech also echoes the promise of *Canones Nidrosienses* 2 that those who were killed while fighting the enemies of the *patria* would be granted eternal salvation.¹⁹ Considering that *Sverris saga* was composed at least partly under the guidance of Sverrir himself, it is safe to assume that the speech reflects what the king actually said in Nidaros in 1179 or, at least, what he wanted the reader to believe he had said.

Did Archbishop Eysteinn really promise the rewards of martyrdom to those who fell in Magnús Erlingsson's cause, or is the wily Sverrir here distorting the message of the *Canones Nidrosienses* for his own polemical purposes? The answer to this question can only be guessed at. I believe, however, that the following observations can be made with some confidence. First, the clause from *Canones Nidrosienses* 2 was used in the propaganda war between the rival factions in the Norwegian Civil War. This in itself is a remarkably early example of the Church offering spiritual rewards to those who fight against *Christian* enemies. Secondly, it is likely that rhetorical and emotive language was used to convey this message to the rank and file of King Magnús's supporters; the words that 'their souls will enter Paradise before their blood is cold on the ground' may well stem from arguments of the kind alluded to by Sverrir. Finally, Sverrir says that Eysteinn and his men promised sanctity, i.e. the rewards of martyrdom, to those who gave up their lives for Magnús and Erlingr. Although the veracity of this claim is impossible to establish, it is to be expected that the subtle, albeit important, distinction between eternal salvation and martyrdom would have become blurred in the course of the bitter Civil War. This, as already noted, is precisely what also happened in the minds of participants in the Crusades.

¹⁹ This connection has been made by Gunnes 1996, 103.

V

In conclusion I would propose the following model for the introduction and development of the idea of martyrdom in post-Conversion Scandinavia. The notion of martyrdom was introduced in the eleventh century by Anglo-Saxon missionaries, who are known to have been instrumental in establishing the two earliest Scandinavian saints' cults, those of King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway and King Knud II of Denmark. They may well have taken advantage of prevailing attitudes towards heroic death (St Óláfr, St Knud and his retainers, St Erik, and Earl Haraldr ungi) and the shamefulness associated with betrayals and covert killings (St Hallvard, St Magnús, St Knud Lavard and Earl Rognvaldr of Orkney). But the many references to murdered factional leaders during the turbulent twelfth century must be placed within the context of changing attitudes towards martyrdom, which began with the Gregorian papacy and gained momentum with the Crusades. This involved what can be termed a 'democratisation' of martyrdom, whereby death for a perceived divine cause provided not only eternal salvation but also a place in the company of the saints. The most conspicuous attestation of this development is contained in *Canones Nidrosienses 2*, which promises a place in paradise to those who die in defence of the fatherland. This appears to be the earliest known instance in Europe of such a promise being included in ecclesiastical law, an especially striking fact considering that the enemies involved are not pagans or Saracens but fellow Norwegians and Christians. The introduction of this idea into Norwegian society in the 1160s (or, less likely, the 1170s) must be connected with the popularity of martyr-cults in the same period. We have seen how these ideas were connected at least in the mind of King Sverrir Sigurðarson, and they were probably also linked in the minds of preachers and the population at large.

In Gerald of Wales's *Topographia Hibernica*, composed in the 1180s, the following words are put into the mouth of the bishop of Cashel in Ireland: 'bloodthirsty though they [the Irish] are, they have never slain any of the saints who are so numerous in the land; the holy men who have dwelt there have died on their sick bed' (Dimock 1869, 178–79). The author of the Norwegian *Konungs skuggsjá*, composed around the middle of the thirteenth century, found this observation interesting enough to warrant inclusion in his work (Finnur Jónsson 1920, 57). By contrast, in eleventh- and twelfth-century Scandinavia saints did not die on their sickbeds. Indeed, the narrative of the martyrdom of Brian Boru of Munster in *Njáls saga* is an indication of the popularity of the

literary paradigm of martyrdom among the Norsemen: a thirteenth-century Icelander was the only medieval writer to associate this form of sanctity with an Irish king.

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