

*The Saga of St Jón of Hólar*, translated by Margaret Cormack with an introduction by Peter Foote, Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies 2021, ISBN 9780866986373, 218 pp.

Translations of Icelandic saints' lives into English have lagged far behind translations of the sagas of Icelanders. So, it is extremely good news that we now have up-to-date complete translations of the lives of both St Þorlákr and St Jón, whose relics were translated in the hagiographic sense within a couple of years of one another: Þorlákr in 1198 and Jón in 1200. St Þorlákr was bishop of Skálholt in 1178–1193, while Jón was appointed as the first bishop of the new Northern diocese in Hólar from 1106 to his death in 1121. Yet, as both Cormack and Foote point out, there is quite a difference in their popularity: while Þorlákr's cult flourished very soon after his death, the cult of Jón remained stubbornly localised around the cathedral in Hólar and the Northern diocese (pp. 6–9). Just one half-church is consecrated to him at Akurar, alongside a chapel in the cathedral. While Þorlákr's sanctity was confirmed by the Roman Catholic Church in 1984, Jón remains obscure.

Despite this, there are several versions of Jón's life, which Peter Foote's edition in *Íslensk fornrit* labels as S (for Skálholt), H (for Hólar) and L (for Latinate). Cormack has previously translated S (without the posthumous miracles), and parts of L have been translated by Jacqueline Simpson, but this is the first translation of H. It survives in just two manuscripts from the seventeenth century, based on an exemplar from c. 1500, but contains material and proper names not found elsewhere, and has the largest collection of posthumous miracles. A couple of lacunae are filled with material from S (in italics), and the appendices provide the reader with some of the lengthier interpolations in L.

Jón is best known for some of his severer innovations: forbidding the practice of *mansöngur* (or erotic verse), banning the reading of Ovid among his clerics, and renaming the Icelandic days of the week to remove the presence of pagan gods. Yet, overall, his life suggests a much more attractive character. A number of stories revolve around the eloquence of Jón's speaking and the beauty of his voice, while others emphasise his enormous compassion for others: "he was so kind-hearted [...] that he could hardly bear to see anything that caused pain to others" (p. 43). The relative paucity of miraculous events during his life is balanced against his administrative efficiency: "it was no less noteworthy how well he maintained the estate and the clergy who were with him" (p. 50). The slight embarrassment of the fact that Jón had married twice (which should have barred him from episcopal office) does not prevent the writer from admiring his wife's management of the estate or approving the punishment of those who maligned her after his death, "adding sorrow on top of sorrow for this good woman" (p. 53). The description of the cathedral school set up by Jón in Hólar is nothing short of an academic idyll:

Here industry and activity could be seen in every building of the cathedral estate. Some read Holy Scripture, some wrote, some sang, some learned, some taught. There was no envy of discord among them, no aggression or arguing. (p. 96)

This is certainly a model that we could all emulate.

Perhaps most interesting is the focus on women in this version of Jón's life, which might suggest a prospective female readership, perhaps the nuns of Kirkjubær or Reynistaðr. Cormack describes Hildr as "the nearest figure to a female saint in medieval Iceland" (p. 11) and the account of her life certainly shows hagiographic shaping of its own: she is described as "the shield-maid of the Lord, armed with prayers and prepared for battle against the devil and his hosts" (p. 54), just as an anchorite should be. The story of how she runs away to fulfil her vocation against the wishes of her parents, is not so far from that of her contemporary Christina of Markyate (d. c. 1155); the plague of mice in Hildr's cell, from which Jón saves her, is reminiscent of Christina's own bad experience with toads. Most compelling, though, is the story of how the *kirkjukerling* or 'church crone,' Guðrún, is attacked by *draugar* (translated here as 'corpses') in Hólar Cathedral, while Hildr watches through the window of her cell unable to move or even close her eyes. The details of this story are authenticated through a female chain of transmission: Hildr told Oddný Knútsdóttir, who told Gunnlaugr Leifsson, the probable author of Jón's first (lost) Latin life.

The miracle section of Jón's life adds yet more vignettes to these colourful pictures of female lives. The mother of seven-year-old Svanhildr promises that her daughter will sing as many Pater Nosters as she is years old, if only Jón will cure her (p. 61). Two servant women, Arndís and Sigríðr, are at the hot spring washing the clothes of Gýríðr, wife of an eminent chieftain, when a raven flies away with and then returns Arndís' shoes (pp. 71–72). The writer clearly enjoys the comedy of this and provides tart snippets of dialogue between the two women. In one of the most elaborate miracle stories, Þorfinna, a single mother of many children, is too unwell to beg for food over Epiphany, and falls into an uneasy dose in which several saints including St Þorlákur appear to her. The writer draws a vivid image of her mental state: "heavy-hearted," "bitter," and "distressed in mind" (p. 73). Another woman, Þórdís, begs Jón to save the sick cow which is her only means of subsistence. Jón makes her a generous offer: "we shall make an agreement, that I shall take care of your cow, and you shall commemorate me daily in some way that is convenient for you" (pp. 75–76).

The translation itself is excellent—vivid, accurate and readable—with useful textual notes that point out differences of wording between the different recensions of the saga and define Icelandic terms that can't easily be translated. In addition, the volume provides readers with two introductions as well as an index and bibliography. Part I consists of a general introduction by Cormack followed by the translation of the saga. Part II contains an English translation of the late Peter Foote's modern Icelandic introduction to the Íslenzk fornrit volume of *Jóns saga helga*, with some additional material that was deleted in the published edition. These two introductions have different emphases: while Foote's introduction focuses on the relationship between the recensions, and their sources, style, authorship and date, Cormack usefully summarises some of the more technical aspects of Foote's introduction, while also providing an important overview of the saga's literary qualities and its relationship to vernacular saga tradition. Together they cater both for the general reader and

for the scholar of philology and palaeography. The volume as a whole is a valuable contribution to ongoing research on the cults of saints in Iceland.

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