

Árna saga biskups / Kafka / Bureaucracy / Desire

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“Where one believed there was law, there is in fact desire and desire alone” – so wrote the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their groundbreaking assault on the work of Franz Kafka, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*. Deleuze and Guattari expose the exploitative power-plays and the sometimes awe-inspiring (sometimes grubby) workings of desire in moments which superficially appear to be sombrely official or legalistic. *Árna saga biskups*, an early fourteenth century saga concerning the life of Bishop Árni Þorláksson, readily presents itself for reconsideration through this theoretical lens. Often dismissed as dull and unfinished, the saga actually contains many episodes of narrative deftness and moving drama. In this article, attention is focused upon the narrative voice’s ambivalence towards Bishop Árni, the bishop’s essentially bureaucratic aspirations, and the merit of *Árna saga biskups* not only as a historical source, but as a literary triumph.

Introduction

Árna saga biskups (henceforth abbreviated to *ÁBp*) is the saga of Bishop Árni Þorláksson, who held the bishopric of Skálholt, Iceland from the 30th June 1269 until his death on the 17th April 1298. It was written within living memory of his episcopal career, quite possibly by his nephew and successor, Árni Helgason (d. 1330), or at least by another member of the Skálholt literary milieu (Þorleifur Hauksson 1993: 20). The text has received very modest attention by literary critics, and the little said about it has been far from flattering. Joseph Harris has pointed out the lack of aesthetic embellishment in the saga, and politely observed that “the tone is dryly official” (Harris 1975: 501). Rory McTurk congratulated its editor, Þorleifur Hauksson, for being “undeterred by the saga’s somewhat dry subject matter” (McTurk 1975: 113). Most damning of all must be Sverrir Tómasson’s evaluation that *ÁBp* is little more than a “simple report fill of Latin loanwords” (Sverrir Tómasson 2006: 90).

As shall be seen, I do not entirely agree with the implication that *ÁBp* lacks literary merit, although it is hard to deny that its narrative structure is indeed somewhat stunted. The plot lends itself to a division into five episodes (see table on p. 39). However, the length and relative pathos of each episode is not organised in a manner conducive to traditional notions of “a good story”. The first, and probably most

powerful, begins with an understated sense of drama. There is an engaging account of Áрни's childhood, the instability of his early years, and his ability as a tradesman (he is particularly noted for his woodworking skills). During this period, two escalations propel Áрни towards the clerical vocation. Firstly, he severely injures his knee during a tug-of-war, which causes him to withdraw from the social frivolities of communal games or dances. Secondly, when his brother, Magnús, marries Ellisif Þorgeirsdóttir, Áрни leaves home and presents himself to the learned Abbot Brandr Jónsson (d. 1264) at Þykkvabær. From Brandr's side, Áрни manages to manoeuvre himself into the bishopric at Skálholt, thus beginning the second episode charting his early antagonisms against the secular elite, i.e. the dispute over secular or ecclesiastical control of land known as the *staðamál*. This brief episode foreshadows the third and by far largest section of *ÁBp*, where Hrafn Oddsson (d. 1289) emerges as a leader of the bændr to resist Áрни's campaign of property confiscation. When Hrafn dies, 126 chapters later, it prompts a new episode, consisting of just one chapter, where Áрни prays for Hrafn and attempts to subdue the deceased's followers by making them do penance. Þorleifur Hauksson has convincingly argued on codicological grounds that the saga originally ended on this cliffhanger (Þorleifur Hauksson 1972: cx–cxi. cf. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 2008: lvi). Áрни's ultimate success in the *staðamál*, and his death a year later before he could see it implemented, is not discussed at all. An ending of sorts was added fairly early on in the transmission of the saga, perhaps out of an awareness of the saga's narrative deformity. This is a rather *non secquiturs* miracle tale, where St. Magnus and the Virgin Mary intercede to drive out demons who have possessed Þorvaldr Helgason while on a trip to Orkney. There is a slender connection to Áрни: Þorvaldr was a priest who defected to Hrafn's faction in the *staðamál*. But the narrator makes no attempt to connect this incident to any agency on the part of the bishop. Ultimately, this intervention only exacerbates the disunity of the plot.

Further to its obvious generic identity as a *biskupasaga*, the text's composition within living memory and the themes of social upheaval and competition over resources fortify *ÁBp*'s qualifications as a *samtíðarsaga*. Still, our text remains somewhat exceptional here too. After the first episode, where Áрни's family are depicted as landless minions of the Svínfellingr clan, the saga abandons all interest in the internecine struggles of the various Icelandic clans. Neither does the saga engage at all with struggles surrounding the union of Iceland with Norway in 1262. In the chronology of *ÁBp*, the acceptance of Norwegian suzerainty and the end of more than three centuries of rule by the Alþingi passes completely without comment. Neither is the author lacking opportunities to discuss it; Gizurr Þorvaldsson, the architect of the very same union, makes a cameo appearance in the saga. However,

Episode	Content	Chronology
Chs. 1–7.	Árni's early life, entry into the church, and appointment to the bishopric	1237–1269
Chs. 8–18.	Consolidation of power, struggles against the <i>bændr</i> .	1269–1271
Chs. 19–145.	Árni vs. Hrafn Oddsson, his nemesis. Culminates in Hrafn's death.	1271–1289
Ch. 146.	Árni prays for Hrafn, and attempts to enforce penance on his followers.	1290
Ch. 147.	A later addition to the saga. The exorcism of Þorvaldr Helgason.	1290–1291
Not in the saga at all:	The final resolution of the <i>staðamál</i> in Árni's favour in 1297 by King Eiríkr Magnússon. Árni's death in 1298.	1291–1298

Árni quickly sends him away with his tail between his legs. At their parting, Gizurr turns and grudgingly admits: *Þess vænti ek, frændi, at flestum munir þú verða ekki fyrirlátsamr þótt þú eigir málum at skipta, þar sem þú lézt ekki fyrir mér* (ÁBþ: 11) – “This is what I think, mate. You won’t be forgiving with most people when you have things to get done, especially as you didn’t give way to me”.¹ Árni’s easy dispatch of one of the most important people in the country, the Jarl of Iceland, a man who was also arguably amongst the most pivotal figures in Icelandic history, does not only serve to glorify the bishop. It can also be read as a bold statement: that this is not like other sagas the audience has heard before. It is concerned with a power that emanates neither from king nor *þing* - and given the aforementioned lack of religious sentiment in ÁBþ, it seems hard to believe that Árni’s power should be understood as holy, either. Rather, as we shall see, the might which Árni wields is an awesome assemblage of bureaucracy and desire.

The aim of this paper, then, is to create a literarily-minded apparatus which will facilitate the further consideration of ÁBþ outside its traditional value as a historical source. We will not cast a source critical eye over the manifold disingenuous and implausible moments in the saga. Rather, we will attempt to evaluate its affective properties as literature, to look beyond and perhaps to explain its strange structure and stilted style. This is not to say that our reading will be totally ahistorical. It is

¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. I would like to thank Judith Ryan, Joel Anderson, Joseph Harris, and the members of the Harvard Germanic Circle for their learned advice and suggestions. Eldbjørg Haug, Stefka Georgieva Eriksen, and the anonymous peer reviewers are also to be thanked for their diligence in overseeing the publication. Any shortcomings are, of course, entirely my own.

only by drawing on the historical context which shaped the text then, in combination with literary theoretical perspectives which can colour the text now, that its hitherto lost sense of drama can be restored and appreciated.

Bishop, interrupted

It might be said that the openings of most sagas promote the vision of an “Icelandic dream”. Much like its modern American counterpart, the Icelandic dream is that an emigrant can flee persecution and seek fresh opportunities in a new land. At its core lies the pretence of a rags-to-riches story. Auðr djúpúðga Ketilsdóttir in *Laxdæla saga*, Eyrbyggja saga and *Njáls saga*, Qnundr tréfótr Ófeigsson in *Grettis saga*, Skalla-Grímr Kveldúlfsson in *Egils saga*: these are all Norwegians who escape the supposed tyranny of Haraldr Hárfagri by bundling their property and their followers onto ships and establishing a new life for themselves in Iceland. There, they prosper as free men and women “not confused by loyalties other than those naturally imposed by kinship, friendship and the free contract they freely make” (Foote 1984a: 55). It is an idyllic image, and one that has enticed some of today’s scholars just as much as it must have appealed to some of the original audiences of the sagas. But as an ode to social mobility, it is seriously flawed. Even if we ignore the fact that characters like Auðr, Qnundr and Skalla-Grímr already seem to be fairly powerful and prosperous when they leave Norway, by the time any classic *Íslendingasaga* gets round to introducing its eponymous protagonist, they are always relatively wealthy. For example, Njáll Þorgeirsson, Grettir Ásmundarson and Egill Skalla-Grímsson are all sons of *bændr*. Even if they are not spectacularly powerful or opulent, they are nonetheless born onto estates that their families own. When landless characters are introduced in the sagas, their lives are usually sad and short (think of Einarr in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*), if not also dislikeable in character (Narfi in *Kormaks saga*, Glámr in *Grettis saga*).

Against this general trend in the canon, *ÁBp* goes to great pains to highlight just how deprived its hero was growing up. It ought to be noted at the outset that Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir has, contrary to my reading, described Árni’s lineage as quite prominent: *Árni Þorláksson biskup var að ætterni sem sprottinn úr kristnisögu landsins* (Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 2008: xii) – “Bishop Árni was of the family which was rooted in the country’s Christian history”. This assessment is made on the basis that he was distantly related to Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson, an early adopter of Christianity in the late tenth century. There are arguably some historical problems here. In a country with a population as small as Iceland’s, many people of various social classes would have been descended from Síðu-Hallr. Moreover, even if Árni had a direct

patrilineal connection to the rich and powerful of the 1000s, more than two centuries had passed since. This would therefore be no guarantee of wealth and power by 1237. As an anonymous peer reviewer has pointed out to me, Áрни did have a wealthy and powerful uncle in Magnús góði Guðmundarson. How much this propinquitous eminence would have reflected on to Áрни's father is unclear. Gizurr Þorvaldson was also Áрни's second cousin, although Iceland's small population meant that such a degree of consanguinity may not have been considered as proximal as it would be today.

Regardless of how Áрни's family tree really looked, his saga makes no effort to ennoble his forebears. Indeed, the impression given is thoroughly pathetic. His father has the rather denigrating sobriquet Þorlákr Guðmundarson gríss – “the pig”. There are a few viable interpretations of this nickname, none of them suggestive that Áрни's father is at all well-to-do. Porciculture was practiced in medieval Iceland (Björn Þorsteinsson & Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1989: 83; cf. Rohrbach 2009: 37–39), so we might infer that this was the role of Þorlákr on the estates (*staðir*) at which he found lowly employment. Alternatively, *gríss* is not a reference to what Þorlákr does but what he is. Even as they were reared for their meat, pigs largely retained negative connotations of ignobility and uncleanness in medieval European culture at large (Steel 2011: 179–220) and the West Norse-speaking sphere too (Rohrbach 2009: 286–287 n79). There are obviously Biblical precedents for this perception, e.g. Leviticus 11:7 “And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be clovenfooted, yet he cheweth not the cud; he is unclean to you”, Proverbs 11:22 “As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion”. Þorlákr may well have acquired his epithet for his supposed exhibition of undesirable, supposedly porcine traits. The name might also be a reference to his feeble dependence on the eastern Icelandic Svínfellingr clan, whose name roughly translates to “the men of swine-mountain”. I have been able to find only two other examples of the nickname *gríss*, these being Áрни's grandfather, Guðmundr gríss Ámundason, d. 1210 (*Sturl* I: 189) and Páll gríss Kálfsson, a captain on the ship Trékyllir during the 1240s (*Sturl* II: 49). The clan affiliations of these two men cannot be ascertained for certain. Guðmundr was most likely a Svínfellingr, as was his son. Given that Páll is recorded operating in south-west Iceland, Oddaverjar or Sturlungar are thinkable possibilities, but there is no reason that he could not have been a Svínfellingr by birth.

When the saga opens, Þorlákr and his family are in the service (*at ráði*) of Ormr Svínfellingr, the clan's chieftain (*ÁBp*: 3). From there, Þorlákr briefly owns his own land at Rauðalækur, but he proves incapable and squanders his chance at independence: *Þar gekk fé afhendi honum, ok unði hann sér lítt þann tíma er sundrþykki*

gerðiz millum Sæmundar Ormssonar ok Ögmundar Helgasonar (*ÁBp*: 3) – “Wealth slipped through his fingers there [alt. ‘cattle wandered away from him there’] and he gave up around the time of the fracture which took place between Sæmundr Ormsson and Ögmundr Helgason”. Following this failure, Þorlákr ends up as a landless labourer again, now in the service of Jörundr Sigmundarson, his own son-in-law; Árni’s father by this point has proved a rather disappointing *pater familias*. During Árni’s childhood the Þorlákssynir go through five estates in as many years: Svínafell, Rauðalækur, Reynivellir, Hof and Skál (*ÁBp*: 3–5).²

Árni’s humble roots are reflected by his profession as he grows older. Saga heroes from wealthier backgrounds seem comparatively extravagant in their juvenile antics. Gréttir warms himself by the fire and indulges in idiopathic cattle mutilation. In accordance with a hagiographic staple, Guðmundr Árason plays at being a bishop with a toy mitre and crozier before being sent away for an exacting education: *tekr hann þat fyrst í föðurbétt, at hann var barðr til békr* (*GBp*: 416) – “The first compensation he got for his father’s slaying was that he was beaten for the sake of books”.³ The young Árni appears more as a representative of the usually unseen underclass of labourers who generally appear in the sagas only to be dispatched in grisly ways. *ÁBp* states that he was taught to read and write alongside his vocation as a wood carver, but it seems that for much of his youth it was these latter, practical skills which were chiefly valued by the Svínfellingar:

Þessi Árni var í fyrstu fálátr á ungum aldri ok aktaði mjök ýmisligar íþróttir, hagleik ok áskurð ok allt trésmíð, rit ok bóknám ok allar klerkligar listir, var hann af þessu öllu saman fáskiptinn við almenning. En þaðan frá er Þorlákr fór frá Rauðalæk gerði hann sik léttan við alþýðu ok átti hann alþýðliga gleði . . . Fór hann í þessa staði alla nokkora vetr til þess er menn þóttuz þurfa í hagleiksgerðum. (*ÁBp*: 5–6)

This Árni was, at a young age, sullen and studied many diverse pursuits, handicraft and carving and all kinds of carpentry, writing and literature and all the clerical arts. Because of all this he was quiet around people. But from the time when Þorlákr left Rauðalæk, he became easy with the

² Rauðalækur did have recognition as a *staðr*, apparently in uncontested total ownership by the church (Magnús Stefánsson 2000: 52, 263, 274). However, Þorlákr’s lay stewardship would suggest that the estate lay inside a Svínfellingr sphere of influence.

³ Guðmundr’s circumstances in early life are by no means fortunate, but having a relatively powerful guardian, he is afforded more station than Árni.

common people . . . He went to these [Svínfellingar controlled] estates all winter whenever people reckoned they needed some handicrafts done.

Note that it is not for his aptitude in *klerkligar listir* that Árni is valued by the proprietors of the *staðir*. His literacy makes him atypical amongst ignominious workers we know elsewhere from the sagas. Nonetheless, on the whole it remains true to say that there is nothing in the first two chapters of *ÁBp* which suggest that Árni will proceed to do anything distinguished. He is a craftsman, unremarkable by blood and character, moving between Svínafellingr estates at the will of his betters. He has more in common with an ill-fated *verkmaðr* such as Einarr Þorbjarnarson in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* than he does with the episcopally destined prodigies of the other *biskupa sögur*. The words spoken by Þorlákr gríss's mouth to the young Árni: *Eigi veldr ástleysi þessari brottkvæðning við þik, því at þú ert mér þarfastr barna minna. Meira veldr því efnaleysi mitt ok fátækð. En önnur börn mín gerazk verkmenn. Mun þér þó verða betra til vista en þeim* (*Hrafnkatla*: 101) – “It is not for lack of love that I have this departure from you, for you are to me the most beloved of my children. It is more because of my poverty and lack of means. And my other children have been made workers. But you will go to a better place than them”. There is perhaps a small hint that Árni bore a little trauma from his unstable early years. As seen in the passage cited above, he is noticeably reserved until his arrival at Reynivellir, following his father's doomed stewardship at Rauðalækur. However, this putative souring does not remain a noteworthy character trait in the eyes of the narrator, who otherwise employs no dramatic foreshadowing to suggest that Árni has a great destiny before him. The divergence of Árni from the life trajectory of a cheerful, anonymous woodcarver takes place in the third chapter. Having just described Árni's newfound gregariness following his arrival at Skál, the narrator relates that:

Helt því fram til þess er hann var í Skál. Þá fór hann til skinnleiks í Kirkjubæ með öðrum mönnum; í þeim sama leik rak hann niðr annat kné á arinellu þar í stofunni svá at sprakk mjök, lá hann af því í rekkju nær viku. Þaðan af var hann aldrei at þess kyns leik né at dansi hvárki áðr né síðan, ok kenndi sik í þessu marki hirtan af óskynsamligri skemmtan. (*ÁBp*: 5–6)

So it was right up until he was at Skál, going to play tug-of-war in Kirkjubær with other people. In that same game he tumbled on his

folded knee onto the paving stone around the hearth there in the parlour, so that it broke badly. Because of that he lay in bed nearly a week. From then on he was never again the type to play or dance, and in this he felt he would be saved from foolish pleasures.

From this moment, Árne's character becomes increasingly grave, inscrutable, and ascetic. It is tempting to say that he becomes more "bishop-like", but it ought to be noticed that while he doubtless becomes more "churchly" (i.e. increasingly involved ecclesiastical politics), he does not necessarily become more godly. *ÁBp* does not suggest that any profound spiritual contemplation or pursuit of advanced Christian esoterica accompanies his rejection of *óskynsamligri skemmtan*. There are worthwhile comparisons to be made here with *Guðmundar saga* in its views on idealised behaviour for a young bishop-to-be. One striking affinity between the two narratives stands out: both depict a leg injury as a spiritual turning point for their protagonists. As *Guðmundar saga A* says of its titular hero following his mishap: *þeir sá sík hvern dag úlíka hans atferðum* (*GBp*: 431; cf. Ciklamini 2004: 62) – "Every day they saw for themselves a difference between his behaviour and their own". On the whole, however, the two bishops follow divergent trajectories. While Árne, still a journeyman woodworker, decides to refrain from dances and games, Guðmundr at a comparable stage in his development was demonstrating the supernaturally efficacious nature of his prayers and ability to invoke an arcane "highest name" of God to miraculous effect (Foote 1984b). This is not to say that the author of *ÁBp* somehow intended to diminish Árne's piety. How could Árne ever compete with Guðmundr, when the latter was to be elevated to a saint? Indeed, Guðmundr's extravagant holiness as depicted in his saga surely contributed to his characterisation by Gabriel Turville-Petre as "a fanatic" (1972: 117). Rather, the comparison is intended to illustrate the aberrance of *ÁBp* from *hagiographic* norms; the form of a *biskupasaga* is being deployed to tell a quite radically idiosyncratic kind of story – a contention which will be illustrated further later. Greyed by his injury at Kirkjubær, a second decisive blow sees Árne projected into the clerical profession. *ÁBp* relates this pivotal moment with its characteristic blend of opacity and disingenuity:

Helt þessu fram nokkora vetr til þess er Magnús bróðir hans fekk Ellisifjar, dóttur Þorgeirs ór Holti. Vóru þeira börn Andrés prestur og Guðfinna er átti Þorsteinn Hafrbjarnarson. Lagði þá Árne fram allan sinn hlut af peningum þeim sem faðir hans varðveitti við hann utan hest ok ígangsklæði; réðz hann þá í burt frá Svínafelli sakir sundrþykkis þess er

varð milli þeira frænda, mest um gipting Þorgerðar systur hans, ok fór í Þykkvabæ til fyrrnefnds Brands ábóta ok batt sik honum á hendi ok gerðiz hans klerkr, því at hann sá þenna mann mikinn atgervismann í hagleik ok riti ok hvassan í skilningi til bóknáms svá at um þann hlut var hann formenntr flestum mönnum at jöfnu námi. (*ÁBp*: 6–7)

So it was for a few years until Magnús, his [Árni's] brother married Ellisif, the daughter of Þorgeirr of Holt. Their children were Andrés the Priest and Guðfinna, who married Þorsteinn Hafrbjarnarson. Then Árni renounced all his share of the money which his father had left him, keeping only a horse and the clothes he was wearing. Then he rode away from Svínafell because of the fracture which came to pass between those kinsman, mostly concerning the marriage of Þorgerðr, his sister, and he went to Þykkvabær to the aforementioned Abbot Brandr [Jónsson] and put himself in his hands and was made his secretary, because he [Brandr] saw in this man a fellow of great promise in handicrafts and writing and a readiness in the acquisition of literary learning to the extent that in this regard he was the most able of many men of an equal level of learning.

There is much barely concealed dissimulation here. Although the narrative voice seems to wish to stress the esteem in which Brandr held Árni's intellectual capabilities, it is still written that the bishop was appreciated his *hagleikr* – “skill in handicraft” (Cleasby & Vigfússon 1874: 231) before his *riti* – “writing”. Why not dispense with this detail entirely, rather than enhance the impression that most of Árni's contemporaries consider him a useful manual labourer rather than a towering intellect? Then there is the curious qualifier that Árni was only *formenntr* – “most able” – when compared to people *at jöfnu námi* – “of an equal level of learning”. This qualification rather smacks of an insulting back-handed compliment. It would have been easy for the author to omit this detail, which naturally limits the stature of Árni's achievements. Still more duplicitous is the later statement that:

Þessi sami Brandr ábóti talaði svá sinna lærisveina at engum manni kallaðiz hann jafn minnugum kennt hafa sem Jörundi, er síðan varð byskup á Hólum, en engum þeim er jafn kostgæfinn var ok jafn góðan hug legði á nam sitt sem Runólfr er síðan var ábóti í Veri. En til Árna, er fyrr nefndum vér, talaði hann svá at hann skildi þá marga hluti af guðligum ritningum er hann þóttiz varla sjá hví svá mátti verða. (*ÁBp*: 7)

This same abbot Brandr reckoned of his students that no man he had known could be called equal in memory to Jörundr, who then became bishop of Hólar, and none of those who were as gifted put their mind to their studies so well as Runólfr, who then was abbot of Ver. But of Árne, whom we have previously discussed, he then said that he interpreted many things from the divine scriptures where he could hardly see why they ought to be so.

The passage can be interpreted that Árne was such a promising student that his exegetical insights exceeded even those of Brandr, a man whose Biblical scholarship included a translation/adaptation of Maccabees 1 & 2 into Old Norse (Wolf 1988; Wolf 1990; Kirby 1986: 169–181). However, given the wording deployed by the narrator, it is also more than reasonable to read Brandr's evaluation as gentle ambivalence; that Árne's scriptural readings were eccentric, perhaps even syllogisms inspired by previously held conclusions to which Brandr was not party. I would contend that *ÁBp*'s disingenuity concerning how Árne was received on his entry into his vocation also characterises its description of why he entered therein. As seen, *ÁBp* maintains that Árne's dramatic renunciation of his possessions and his ride over to Þykkvabær was precipitated by: *sundrþykkis þess er varð milli þeira frænda, mest um gipting Þorgerðar systur hans* – “the fracture which came to pass between those kinsmen, mostly concerning the marriage of Þorgerðr, his sister”. However, we might well doubt whether the narrative voice is any more invested in this proposition than he is in Árne's exegetical excellence or how esteemed he was for his literary talents. We hear no more of why the marriage was contentious, nor why Árne should have felt more strongly about it than any of the other Þorlákssynir. Recovering in a literary mode the attitude of *ÁBp* is more methodologically important to this study than the reconstruction of historical circumstance, but we ought to note that nowhere else are there any records of a dispute over Þorgerðr Þorláksdóttir's marriage to Guttormr kórtr “Shorthorn”. Indeed, very little about this supposedly divisive figure has been preserved in other sources. According to *Íslendinga saga*, he assisted the Sturlungar clan in an attack on the Oddaverjar, about which he composed a competent *dróttkvætt* verse, and elsewhere in the same work he is briefly recorded as a companion of the grammarian Óláfr Þórðarson (*Sturl* II: 130–131, 188) but otherwise he is lost to history.

If *ÁBp* is not unequivocal in its endorsement of the “Þorgerðr hypothesis” to explain the change in Árne's psychology, it does sustain an alternative reading, one which we might call the “Ellisif hypothesis”. Note that in the case of the last shift in

Árni's personality (his knee injury at Kirkjubær), the verb-phrase *at halda fram til* – “to be so until” was used to introduce the point of aberration. We see the same formula in the aforementioned episode, but here it does not point to the marriage of Þorgerðr. Rather, it points to the marriage of Magnús, Árni's brother, to Ellisif Þorgeirsdóttir: [*h*]elt þessu fram nokkora vetr til þess er Magnús bróðir hans fékk Ellisifjar, dóttur Þorgeirs ór Holti – “it continued for some winters until Magnús, his brother, was married to Ellisif, daughter of Þorgeirr of Holt”. The next order of questioning must be to ask what could have offended Árni to such an extreme degree about this union? Or indeed, can a more convincing scenario be theorised involving Magnús/Ellisif than the flaccid authorial afterthought concerning Guttormr/Þorgerðr? To pursue this problem, we can turn to the manner of Árni's reaction (one of the sparse moments of melodrama in *ÁBþ*). The suggestion that Árni renounced his belongings and fled from his family to join a monastery because he felt that Guttormr was a poor match for Þorgerðr does not ring nearly so true as one of the most commonplace interpersonal reasons for joining monasteries which we know elsewhere in medieval literature, i.e. the failure of transgressive or doomed love. Consider Lancelot and Guinevere, Abelard and Heloise. Closer to (Árni's) home, we might cite Þorsteinn drómundr and Spes in *Spesar þáttir*, or Guðrún Osvifrsdóttir in *Laxdæla saga*.

Thus, by the same system of “nods and winks” used by *ÁBþ* to suggest one thing even as it superficially maintains the opposite, the saga prompts us to infer that Árni had some kind of infatuation with Ellisif. The trope of a man harbouring unrequited love for his brother's bride is a narratological staple, after all. In the absence of any authorial guidance following the metaphorical manicule after *at halda fram til* (i.e. the demarcation that Magnús's marriage is when things changed), the clichés of storytelling are a perfectly natural recourse. Renouncing all possessions and setting off for a monastery because of a heartbreak is a trope more appealing to literary sensibilities – not to mention common sense – than doing so because of an unwanted marriage in the family. Considering *ÁBþ* holistically, the Ellisif hypothesis would also chime with the saga's principle narrative of a man from humble beginnings proceeding to commit mighty deeds. In contrast to Guðmundr in his saga, Árni according to the initial chapters of *ÁBþ* has no innate divine favour propelling his rampage towards greatness. If not God, then why not heartbreak? Romantic failure functioning as fuel for character development can be observed elsewhere in the sagas, particularly *Kormaks saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*. Romantic themes are not unknown in the *biskupasögur*. In their respective sagas, Jón Ögmundarson marries, then remarries, and Laurentius Kálfsson has a Norwegian concubine. Indeed, *ÁBþ*

enjoys some liberty amongst its generic peers to give its titular character a more rounded character in this regard. Unlike *Guðmundar saga Árasonar* or *Þorláks saga helga*, this is not the story of a man born to be a saint, but a story of a very ordinary Icelander (so ordinary, in fact, that men of his class tend scarcely to feature in the sagas) who rises to extra-ordinary heights.

Let us recapitulate what has been postulated concerning the first phase of the young Árni's life. Born to humble beginnings, Árni's early years demonstrate the illusory nature of what I have termed "the Icelandic dream". Árni seems destined to follow in the footsteps of his father, Þorlákr gríss: landless, servile (consider how easily he and his family are moved like chattels between Svínfellingr estates), and a dismal failure at independence. However, there is an ambiguous sign that, even at this young age, Árni is not blithely indifferent to his circumstances. His reticence after seeing his father humiliated by the fiasco at Rauðalækur faintly suggests that he will not be entirely compliant. Nonetheless, he grows up to become a cheerful woodworker in Svínfellingr service. The first dramatic alteration to his personality comes when he falls and breaks his knee at a tug-of-war at Kirkjubær. He declares that he will thenceforth renounce "foolish pleasures". He thus acquires the dour countenance of a classic *biskupasaga* protagonist, but still has no clerical position and remains a woodcarver. Following his brother's marriage to Ellisif Þorgeirssdóttir (a chronological connection which *ÁBp* itself makes, even if one otherwise rejects the Ellisif hypothesis) he leaves home for the monastery at Þykkvabær with nothing but a horse and the clothes on his back. In my reading, the story here is of a young man who was born a victim of a social order in which his family were unable to compete. Having seen his father humiliated in his effort to own his own *staðir*, both father and son become labourers – powerless articles of the means of production - on the *staðir* of others. With his knee injury, a strangeness descends over Árni, an apparent renunciation of pleasure. When his brother marries Ellisif, he sees his desires frustrated romantically, just as the *staðir* system has done socio-economically. Now a fully-fledged ascetic, he presents himself to Abbot Brandr and enters the monastery at Þykkvabær, leaving behind the two spheres, sex and *staðir*, which have been instruments of suffering throughout his youth. With Árni's appointment to the clergy, he will soon be granted the opportunity to re-enter those spheres not as a bruised supplicant, but as a bureaucratic master. In short, this is the story of a boy who was not so much destined to become bishop by divine providence, as he was driven by the psychic wounds inflicted by his fellow man.

Towards a literary (or Arnian) definition of bureaucracy

It will be remembered that several pages previous I indicated that the means by which Bishop Árni asserted his control over the Skálholt diocese are in some measure bureaucratic. Much excellent scholarly thought has been directed towards bureaucracy, particularly in the fields of history and social sciences (see Derlien 1989; [Ben] Kafka 2012). While I will draw on such praiseworthy advancements, I hope the reader will permit me to advance my own, literary definition – one which I believe Árni, as he appears in *ÁBp*, would have sympathised. I say that the perspective here will be literary because it pertains to the phenomenon of bureaucracy in its protrusion as a narrative device, rather than its quotidian appearance as a tool of administrators rulers. While sociological scholars are necessarily historically bounded in their definitions of bureaucracy (e.g. [Ben] Kafka 2012: 19–49), literary readings inevitably tend towards transhistorical essentialism, i.e. the proposition that bureaucracy exists as a Platonic form which has certain defining features which transcend the specifics of how they are implemented. Ergo, my first contention is that bureaucracy is not necessarily bound up with paperwork, nor indeed writing at all. Granted, it usually is. The historical Árni was quite a prodigious bureaucrat of the “vanilla” pen-wielding type. He exercised power through a system of formulaic oaths, through numerous penitentials, and through a great deal of correspondence. The author of *ÁBp* had these documents at his disposal, and at several points in the saga reproduces letters and penitentials verbatim (e.g. *ÁBp*: 86–90, 99–100, 180–181). Nonetheless, when the bureaucrat appears in literature, his function is not so much to deploy pen and ink, as it is to frustrate desire. Indeed, much of what is said of literary bureaucracy may well be true of real bureaucracy (although we ought not to hang too much on that particular contention). Why do we tolerate the bureaucrat, be he/she a clerk at the Job Centre in the modern UK, a Linear B-literate scribe in Mycenae, a quartermaster in the United States military? Surely, it is not out of patience. We tolerate the bureaucrat because he does not pretend to deny us our rights. Indeed, he/she positions himself as a humble facilitator. So long as we abide by his/her requests, accommodate the protocols with which he/she is charged with enforcing etc. The bureaucrat promises not to limit our rights, but to realise our desires. One does not require literacy to establish such a position, although it is obviously an advantageous technology in this travail. Let us consider bureaucracy alongside two alternate modes of social dominance, 1) kingship and 2) “*þing*-ship”, i.e. the system of governance by assembly practised during the Icelandic Commonwealth (c. 930–1262). At the level of individual liberty, rulership by *þing* (a judiciary without an executive) essentially functions thus:

Individual commits an action → assembly rules on legitimacy thereafter.

As William Ian Miller has highlighted, this was a legal system so dependent on the importance of retrospective permission that, according to *Njáls saga*, it could even lead to people being declared outlaws after they had already been killed (Miller 2014: 126–129). In (idealised) kingship individual agency ought to function rather differently.⁴ Drawing on Walter Ullmann’s notion of “descending power” (Ullmann 1962 & 1969) we might depict the model thus:

God legitimates royal power → King issues order → Individual obeys
→ or else, suffers the consequences of state violence.

Consider the example of *Odds þáttur Ófeigssonar*, where the titular character must work out how to escape his direct clency to King Haraldr Harðráði (r. 1046–1066). Or, as Preben Meulengracht Sørensen puts it concerning the famous pronouncement of William of Sabina: *Det ideologiske argument var, at al verdslig magt og autoritet af Gud er givet til kongen, som så overdrager en del af den til sine vasallers og undergivnes bestyrelse* (Meulengracht Sørensen 1977: 74) – “The ideological argument was that all worldly power and authority is given by God to the king, who then transfers a part of it to the command of his vassals and those submitted to him”. However, in bureaucratic conditions, as they tend to appear in narrative, we encounter a radically divergent paradigm:

Individual wishes to commit an action → bureaucracy guarantees liberty to do so, as long as certain conditions are met → Conditions met (or not), individual commits action (or not).

It ought to be noted that almost all bureaucrats, from Árni to K.’s tormentors, will pretend to the Ullmannic schema detailed previously when questioned on the source and targets of their powers. However, their actions speak louder than their protestations. The model detailed immediately above can be clearly observed in the literary bureaucracy par excellence, Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* – the work with which I wish to bring *ÁBp* into productive dialogue. Widely congratulated as world literature’s most insightful examiner of bureaucracy, there is conspicuously little

⁴ On the meeting of these two ideologies, see: Andersson 1999 and Ármann Jakobsson 1994. See also Ashurst 2007.

paperwork in any of Kafka's works. In the entirety of both *The Trial* and *The Castle*, for example, we do not see a single character fill out a form. There are also very few tyrants, malevolently asserting their wills. Naturally, this faceless antagonist is part of the immanent sense of menace to Kafka's writing. Rather than a palpable villain, there is instead much insouciant shrugging towards Kafka's persecuted and baffled protagonists, sentiments which any reader who has spent time facing the bureaucratic mechanisms of any sizeable social organ (not least modern universities) will surely recognise: "I don't make the rules! But I do enjoy sadistically enforcing them" (e.g. the character Franz, *Trial*: 6–7) ... "I don't personally have anything against you, nonetheless, you must meet the following criteria for the restoration of your liberty" ... "Jump through these hoops, moderate your expectations, and the action which you wish performed will be facilitated" (e.g. the painter Titorelli, *Trial*: 150–160). Essentially, this literary bureaucracy is a technology by which our desires are impersonally managed. A new infrastructure for the realisation of our desires is constructed by authorities, who are able always to say truthfully "it is not I who do this, but external forms, to which even I am subject". Both the frustrated protagonist and the implacable bureaucrat are equally enmeshed in the bureaucratic edifice, so that neither can understand a mode of existence beyond it. Bureaucracy becomes a kind of language for articulating and managing desire; and like Wittgenstein's model of language, it becomes impossible to deconstruct from the inside (Wittgenstein 1933: §5.6) – how often, both in Kafka and in the actual, everyday experience of bureaucracy, is a plea for sanity met with a gentle, blank, but unyielding countenance? Eventually, bureaucracy begins to warp the desires of its constituent persons. Inveigled into the internecine world of warders, lawyers, their assistants etc., K. finds himself becoming more concerned with his erotic entanglement with Leni – a personage of the bureaucratic process – than winning back his freedom: "[M]ust you be eternally brooding over your case?" she queried slowly. 'No, not at all,' said K. 'In fact I probably brood far too little over it' ... he could feel her body against his breast and gazed down at her rich, dark, firmly knotted hair." (*Trial*: 108). We might well read this relationship as a metaphor for the perversion acquired when we are mired in bureaucracy too long: of beginning to desire the signature upon a form more than whatever the form was supposed to achieve in the first place. The French post-structuralist philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, were particularly attentive to these qualities in bureaucracy as it appeared in Kafka's work. Here, they depict bureaucracy not only as a means to power, but also as an assemblage, in which clerk and applicant unconsciously collaborate on way to channel desire:

Take the example of bureaucracy, since it fascinates Kafka ... There isn't a desire for bureaucracy, to repress or to be repressed. There is a bureaucratic segment, with its sort of power, its personnel, its clients, its machines. Or rather, there are all sorts of segments, contiguous bureaus, as in Barnabas's experience. All the gears, which are in fact equivalent despite all appearances, and which constitute the bureaucracy as desire, that is, as an exercise of the assemblage itself. The divisions of oppressor and oppressed, repressors and repressed, flow out of each state of the machine, and not vice versa. (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 56–57)

Put another way:

Bureaucracy is desire, not an abstract desire, but a desire determined in this or that segment, by this or that state of the machine, at this or that moment ... Bureaucracy as desire is at one with the functioning of a certain number of gears, the exercise of a certain number of powers that determine, as a function of the composition of the social field in which they are held, the engineer as well as the engineered. (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 57)

These poetically put propositions are propitiously pertinent to the Arnian order, established once Árne is made bishop of Skálholt in chapter 8 of his saga (*ÁBp*: 12–14). Initially passed over for the bishopric in favour of one Þorleifr, Árne is actually a second choice. When Þorleifr passes away unexpectedly, Árne succeeds him. The saga makes Árne's promising episcopal qualities clear. He is said to be *bæði vitran ok góðviljan til allra nauðsynligrar hluta ok byskupligrar þarfinda* (*ÁBp*: 14) – “both intelligent and benevolent in all necessary matters and episcopal requirements”. However, at this early juncture it keeps his intentions suspensefully ambiguous. Árne's actions immediately following his appointment have a dramatic urgency, but, the reader may wonder, to what end? What is Árne's vision for Skálholt, and will his first move as bishop be to assert personal authority, to win over his new flock, to preach on moral matters, etc.?

Stefndi hann þá saman fólki [í Eyjafjörð] ok voru frammi hölð erindi erkibyskups ok þær siðbætr er hann hafði þeim boðit. Eptir þat ríðu þeir báðir samt suðr um Kjöl ok kómu í Skálholt in decollatione beati

Johannis. Stefndi Árni byskup þá fund við presta ok bændr. Lét hann upp lesa boðskap erkibyskups ok stóðu þar þessir hlutir í: ... (*ÁBp*: 15)

He then summoned together the people [of Eyjafjörður] and the orders of the archbishop and those customs which he had enjoined upon them were read aloud. After that they both [Árni and Bishop Jörundr of Hólar] rode south around Kjöl and arrived at Skálholt on the mass of St. John. Then Bishop Árni called a meeting with the priests and farmers. He had the archbishop's commandments read aloud, and the following matters were contained therein: ...

Interestingly, the first order of business at the birth of Arnian Skálholt is the setting forth of rules – rules are predicated upon two important bureaucratic conventions: 1) they are not my (here Árni's) rules but rather someone else's, it is only my job to oversee their implementation. 2) these rules belong more to the realm of how things ought to be done, as opposed to what is and is not permissible. Thus, Árni maintains that he is merely repeating the orders of Archbishop Jón in Niðarós (*boðskap erkibyskups*). Obviously, for Árni the former is an extremely suspect claim. If the Archbishop had sincerely wished to reignite the *staðamál* with the decree *at allir staðir ok tíundir skyldi gefaz í byskupsvald* (*ÁBp*: 16) – “that all estates and tithes should be given to the authority of the bishop”, then he would have been unlikely to choose for the task unknowns such as Árni or Þorleifr. Moreover, he would also have given Árni a little more support in his campaign. Even *ÁBp* does not attempt to disguise the fact that Árni received extremely scant assistance from the Norwegian mitre. It is an altogether more plausible prospect that Árni's motivations are personal, rather than professional. Perhaps this is even intended as one of the *ÁBp* author's innuendos by incredulity. Having seen his father humiliated by the estate-owning classes after he failed to join them, and having himself been made a faceless tool in the *staðr* mode of production as a young craftsman, it would be narratively compelling were Árni driven to thence driven by bitterness to destroy the secular *staðr* system once and for all. The latter pretence, to be an enforcer, or a reformer, but not a prohibiter, will be recognised from Kafka. Consider K.'s early meeting with the benign-yet-somehow-insidious figure of the Inspector: “How can I go to the Bank, if I am under arrest? ... ‘You are under arrest, certainly, but that need not hinder you from going about your business. Nor will you be prevented from leading your ordinary life’. ‘Then being arrested isn't so very bad,’ said K. ... ‘I never suggested that it was,’ said the Inspector” (*Trial*: 14–15). This is a masquerade with which Árni is very much *au fait*.

ÁBp phrases Árni's first decrees so that they always acknowledge reality alongside their proscriptions. For example, rather than baldly proclaiming that people should not have concubines outright, Árni states that *frillumenn skulu fyrirbjóðaz at taka Krists líkama at páskum útan þeir festi frillur sínar til eiginorðs eðr skilji við þær fullkomliga* (*ÁBp*: 16) – “men who have concubines should be forbidden to take the body of Christ at Easter, unless they become engaged to their concubines or split from them entirely”. Just as K. is free to go about his business as he wishes, the men of Skálholt may well keep a concubine if they so choose. They would not have broken any Arnian prohibition. However, a “free” choice brings a repressive mechanism swinging into action from the inscrutable face of an impersonal bureaucracy. Note the passive voice used by the author of *ÁBp*, *fyrirbjóðaz* – “shall be forbidden”. Like any good bureaucrat, the subject who governs the regulatory machine attempts to keep himself hidden within his deep, oppressive web.

However, the bureaucrat cannot only be a man (or woman) of abstract rulemaking. He/she must also know when to make coercive interjections. The anonymous court in *The Trial* has its wardens, emissaries and knifemen. In *ÁBp*, the eponymous bishop similarly relies on the physical presence of delegated officials, but he is also not above making personal appearances to ensure that desire is being appropriately manipulated by the bureaucratic edifice. A particularly striking example of his policing tendency is the case of Egill Sólmundarson (d. 1297) and Þórunn Garða-Einarsdóttir. The episode warrants a minimally excerpted reproduction:

Litlu eptir messudaginn hóf byskup heimanför til Borgarfjarðar ok tók vezlu í Reykjaholti. Þar bjó þá Egill Sólmundarson. Hann hafði fyrir búi sínu Þórunni, dóttur Garða-Einars, ok fengit til eiginkonu at frænda ráði. En því at Egill var subdjákn at vígslu, ok hann hafði þessa konu fengit í óleyfi herra Sigvarðar byskups, mislíkaði herra Árna byskupi þeira samband ok talði mjök á þau bæði ok neyddi drjúgum til skilnaðar með hótum stórmæla ok banns. Nú því at sakir fórn landssíðar, ætternis ok ástar, ok þess er þau vóru áðr börnum bundin svá framarliga at þau áttu tvá sonu, Snorra ok Jón ... ok dætur þrjár ... gekk Egill tregt at borði um þetta mál. En því at herra Árni byskup þrengði fast bæði með valdi ok skynsemðum tók fyrrnefndr Egill þann kost at sverja eptir boði Árna byskups þessa sömu Þórunni sér af hendi með þeim eiðstaf sem í kirkjulögum er til skipaðr. Var sú Þórunn gipt öðrum manni þeim er Sigmundur hét ... Tók þá herra byskup í sætt þau bæði ok skriptaði eptir

Því sem honum líkaði ... Nokkoru síðar fylgði Egill Þórunni Valgarðsdóttur ok vóru þeira börn Þórðr lögmaðr, Andrés, Helgi, Gyða ok Álfheiðr. (*ÁBp*: 44–45)

A little after the day of the mass the bishop began his journey homewards to Borgarfjörður, and he took lodging at Reykjaholt. Egill Sólmundarson was living there then. He had for his companion Þórunn, the daughter of Garða-Einarr, and took her as a wife with the consent of the family. But because Egill had been ordained a subdeacon, and he had married this woman without the express permission of Lord Sigvarðr the bishop, Lord Árni the bishop disliked their union and disapproved very much of the both of them and compelled them fiercely to divorce with a great deal more arguments and prohibitions. Now, because of the ancient customs of the land, of their family and of love, and because they had already been bound together so much by having children, for they had two sons, Snorri and Jon ... and three daughters ... Egill protested strongly against this matter. But because Lord Árni the bishop stuck fast both with authority and with righteousness, Egill accepted according to Bishop Árni's orders the penalty of forswearing from his arms that very same Þórunn with that oath which is decreed for that purpose in canon law. This Þórunn was [then] married to another man, who was called Sigmundur. Then the Lord Bishop received them both and made them do penance as he wished ... A little later Egill followed suit with Þórunn Valgarðsdóttir [a different Þórunn] and their children were Þórðr the lawman, Andrés, Helgi, Gyða and Álfheiðr.

Some context is necessary here. Firstly, clerical continence in thirteenth century Iceland does not appear to have been a widespread phenomenon. There had certainly been attempts at enforcing the ideal, most notably by Árni's predecessor, Þorlákr Þórhallsson (d. 1193), and there was no (unwillful) ignorance of canon law (Anderson 2013). Icelanders were by no means the only Christian people whose priests often married and/or had sons, but together with the other Scandinavian nations they were particularly reticent in their adoption of clerical celibacy (cf. Gunnes 1982). As Jarl Gallén observes, sources from the twelfth, thirteenth and fifteenth centuries lament the sexual and marital inclinations of Scandinavian clergy. Gallén also notes that the last Catholic bishop of Skálholt, Jón Arason (d. 1550), fathered a quite numerous brood, hinting that the tradition of optional celibacy in Iceland was never very much

eroded (Gallén 1957). Árni's own mentor, Brandr, himself had a son after taking holy orders (Jón Sigurðsson 1857–1876: 520).⁵

Secondly, we should not consider Egill really to be a cleric – a late thirteenth century or early fourteenth century Icelandic audience certainly would not have done. Until Árni's near-monomaniac pursuit of the *staðamál*, the secular elite so completely controlled the church that it had become common for local magnates (*stórbændr*, lit. “great farmers”) to have their retainers ordained with clerical titles (Byock 1993: 158). Churches were usually built not by ecclesiastical power but by the owners of *staðir*, who then used the resident church as a pretence to collect the tithe tax. They also kept “pet” priests, called *staðarprestir* (Cleasby & Vigfússon 1874: 586), trained on the *staðr* and far more aligned with its owner than the episcopal authorities. Thus, Egill may well have been a subdeacon *at vígslu*, but it is highly unlikely he ever was in practice. Elsewhere in the Old Norse canon, he is only ever once seen in a church. In his solitary moment of intimacy with the divine, Egill is cowering in the church on his estate while his enemies search for him. He was woken by surprise and did not have time to put any clothes on. As one of his pursuers, Þorgils Þoðvarsson, wryly puts it: [*Sýndisk sem eigi væri klæð-margr* (*Sturl* II: 199) – “he doesn't seem like he's overdressed”. Ideally, a character intended to be seen as a practicing priest should make an appearance in church more than once, and then they ought not to be naked. A third important piece of context is that Árni is wielding the bureaucrat's trusty weapon of deferred responsibility – “these aren't my rules!”. The debate over clerical celibacy and continence obviously far predates Árni (Callam 1977: 10–14, 63–102, et passim; Parish 2010: 87–122). The specific piece of ecclesiastical legislation which Árni appears to be citing in Egill's case is canon VII from the Second Lateran Council (1139):

Ut autem lex continentiae et deo placens munditia in ecclesiasticis personis et sacris ordinibus dilatetur statuimus quatenus episcopi presbyteri diaconi subdiaconi regulares canonici et monachi atque conversi professi qui sanctum transgredientes propositum uxores sibi copulare praesumpserint separentur. Huiusmodi namque copulationem quam contra ecclesiasticam regulam constat esse contractam matri-

⁵ As the editorial board of *Collegium Medievale* has pointed out to me, there are some interesting parallel cases in Þorvaldr Gizurarson's marriage to Jóra Klængsdóttir, and indeed there are many further notable cases of conflict between secular marriage and canon law from medieval Iceland. See: Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir 1995: 110–111; Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir 2010: 87–93, 179–194; Bandlien 2005: 120–126, 151–188.

monium non esse censemus. Qui etiam ab separati pro tantis excessibus condignam poenitentiam agant. (*Decreta*: 198)

So that the law of continence and the purity, which is pleasing to God, may spread amongst people of the church, and of those in Holy Orders, we decree that bishops, priests, deacons, subdeacons, canons regular and monks, together with professing converts, who have transgressed the holy principles by daring to take a wife, shall be separated. For such a union which has been established contrary to church law we do not consider to be matrimony. Also, those who have been separated from each other will do penance proportional to their excesses.

There are striking parallels between the language of the canon and *ÁBp*, e.g. Norse: *neyddi drjúgum til skilnaðar* “compelled them to separate”, Latin: *separentur* “shall be separated” ... Norse: *Tók þá herra byskup í sætt þau bæði ok skriptaði eptir því sem honum líkaði*. – “Then the Lord Bishop received them both and made them do penance as he wished” Cf. Latin: *Qui etiam ab separati pro tantis excessibus condignam poenitentiam agant* – “Also, those who have been separated from each other will do penance proportional to their excesses”. Indeed, it is not unthinkable that the author of *ÁBp* had access to original materials pertaining to ecumenical councils in the diplomatarium which he so often used elsewhere in the saga. When Árni wishes to attend the Council of Lyons (1274) in chapter 21, *ÁBp* states that the council was called in order: *at tala um lausn hins heilaga Jórsalalands, ok at kalla þær þjóðir er Greciam byggðu aþtr til almenniligrar trúar af þeiri þrætu sem þeir höfðu í staðit* (*ÁBp*: 31) – “to discuss the liberation of Holy Palestine, and to call those nations settled by Greece back to the Catholic faith from the disagreement they had instead”. Meanwhile, the self-declared aims of the council itself read:

Zelus fidei fervor devotionis et compassionis pietas excitare debent corda fidelium ut omnes qui christiano nomine gloriantur de sui contumelia redemptoris tacti dolore cordis intrinsecus potenter et patenter exsurgant ad terrae sanctae praesidium et adiutorium causae dei ... statueremus et ordinaremus in Christo per quae dictae terrae liberatio proveniret et nihilominus reducerentur Graecorum populi ad ecclesiae unitatem. (*Decreta*: 309)

May zeal of the faith, fervent devotion and compassionate piety stir faithful souls so that all who pride themselves on the name of Christian and who are struck with anguish in their innermost hearts by the insult to The Redeemer will rise up boldly and forcefully to be protectors of the Holy Land and servants of God's cause . . . May we plan for and establish [this council] in Christ, through whom it is said that a free land might be brought about and that the people of the Greeks might also be brought back to a united church.

Naturally, it is hard to believe that in the Egill-Þórunn episode Áрни is really selflessly serving as a blind enforcer of canon law according to the decrees of the Second Lateran council, acting without any ulterior motive or agency. In *Íslendinga saga*, Egill Sólmundarson is listed as one of the *trúnaðarmenn* – “confidantes” of Hrafn Oddsson, Áрни’s nemesis in the *staðamál* (*Sturl* II: 82). It is reasonable to expect that an audience hearing the saga within living memory of the events in question would have been familiar with this pertinent backstory – one which *ÁBp*, with its characteristic sangfroid, neglects to mention.

Despite its roots in canon law, the dominance which Áрни exercises over Egill and Þórunn is far from dogmatic. He compels the couple to divorce, much against their will, but Egill then remarries, in open contravention of the same prohibition, and Áрни apparently takes no action at all. What then has Áрни really achieved? The answer is what every bureaucrat really wants: not only to frustrate but if possible to reroute desire. When K. in *The Trial* aches with desire for Leni and forgets Fräulein Bürstner, he has been made a victim in just the same way as Egill and Þórunn (that the relationship with Bürstner was hardly viable anyway is not meaningful here). The process of false consciousness with which bureaucrats smother their prey is construed to control not what we have, but what we want. In other words, Áрни does not break up Egill’s marriage because he wishes him to be a celibate bachelor. He does so because he knows that Egill and Þórunn desire each other. As *ÁBp* makes clear, theirs is a union of love – *ástar*. That is what Áрни cannot bear. As for all bureaucrats in literature, to witness desire operating undirected is anathema to him.

Therefore, it is this *ást* over which he must demonstrate his power. He is happy for Egill to remarry in stark contravention of canon law, because there is no way for Egill or Þórunn to do anything other than confirm the supremacy of Arnian bureaucracy. If they enter loveless marriages then Áрни’s intervention has succeeded in blocking the realisation of their desires. On this note, Deleuze and Guattari remind us that blocks, be they physical or metaphorical impediments, are crucial to the

Kafkaesque assemblage with which *ÁBp* so frequently harmonises. “The theme of blocks is constant in Kafka and seems affected by an insurmountable discontinuity” (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 72). On the other hand, if Egill and Þórunn do come to feel attraction to their new spouses, Sigmundur and Þórunn Valgarðsdóttir, then they have granted Árni an even greater victory: mastery over the very objects of their desires. With an anti-clericalism that rivals that of Hrafn Oddsson himself, Deleuze and Guattari pertinently assert that: “every time desire is betrayed, cursed, uprooted from its field of immanence, a priest is behind it” (Deleuze & Guattari 2011: 171). The universality of their claim is clearly suspect, but it is worth noting that as an aphorism, it deftly captures the essence of *ÁBp*. In the Egill-Þórunn case, just as in the similar case of Oddi and Ólöf Broddadóttir in a preceding chapter (*ÁBp*: 9–11), Árni proves that he is more powerful than *fórns landssiðar*, *ættarnis ok ástar* – “the ancient customs of the land, family, and love”. In such moments of triumph, the curious reader will be forgiven for wondering whether the memory of his servile family, themselves victims of *förnir landssiðar* which privileged *staðir* owners and humiliated humble *verkmenn*, perhaps flickered across Árni’s mind’s eye. In seeing Árni defeat love itself, it is hard for the reader not to recall Ellisif, and to recoil at the dreadful power of bureaucracy suffused with bitterness.

ÁBp as Minor Literature

The ultimate aim of Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of Kafka was to bring into relief a category that they called “minor literature”. In their view, minor literatures were the products of minority interests, sitting awkwardly within a canon whose worldview, identity, history, and even vocabulary they did not fully share. By obstinately – even needfully – making their home within traditions at which they were at odds, minor literatures challenge the major literatures whom they live alongside. Writing in 1975 (context provided to explain the “today” of their statement, and indeed their designation for African Americans), Deleuze and Guattari allotted Kafka’s Prague German, more accurately his Prague-Jewish-German-dry-officialese *Papierdeutsch*, to just such a literary species:⁶

... the impossibility of writing in German is the deterritorialization of the German population itself, an oppressive minority that speaks a language

⁶ On Kafka’s own feelings concerning a minor literature, namely Yiddish, see: Suchoff (2012: esp. 4–7, 64–71) and the *Diaries*: esp. 64–66, 76–78.

cut off from the masses, like a “paper language” [cf. *Papierdeutsch*] or an artificial language; this is all the more true for the Jews who are simultaneously a part of this minority and excluded from it, like “gypsies who have stolen a German child from its crib.” In short, Prague German is a deterritorialized language, appropriate for strange and minor uses. (This can be compared in another context to what blacks in America today are able to do with the English language.) (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 16–17)

Deleuze and Guattari considered the same of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, as Irish Diaspora intelligentsia writing in English or French (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 19). For a reader with a background in modern Scandinavian Studies, it might be illustrative to point out that William Heinesen and Jørgen Franz Jacobsen perform a similar function in Danish. We should be aware that it is not simply ethnic minorities who produce minor literatures, though this is very often the case, but more specifically minority interests and minority ways of life. The vocabulary of such writers often becomes peppered with loan words, dialectal forms, strange toponyms which disturb the homogeneity of a text’s linguistic flavour, or the jargon of various subcultures. Writing under such circumstances, the authors of minor literatures cannot help but reflect the inherently political struggle of living a minority lifestyle. Their language is an obvious articulation thereof. We will permit one final lengthy quote from Deleuze and Guattari here:

The second characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political. In major literatures, in contrast, the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as mere environment or background; this is so much the case that none of these Oedipal intrigues are specifically indispensable or absolutely necessary but all become as one in a large space. Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it. ... Even he who has the misfortune of being born in the country of a great literature must write in its language, just as a Czech Jew writes in German, or an Ouzbekian writes in Russian. Writing like a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow. And to do that, finding his own point of

underdevelopment, his own patois, his own third world, his own desert.
(Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 17–18)

With the hitherto outlined theses in mind, let us return again to some of the pointed criticism to which *ÁBp* has often been subjected by scholars. It will be recalled that Sverrir Tómasson condemns the saga as a “simple report full of Latin loanwords”. Furthermore, he asserts that “[t]he saga in its preserved form seems to be an author’s draft” (Sverrir Tómasson 2006: 90). The reasoning behind this claim is not made explicit, but it seems probable that the source is *ÁBp*’s stilted style and shoddy structure. Although made in passing, Sverrir Tómasson’s apparent explanation for the text’s deficiencies is quite remarkable. To my knowledge, we have no other drafts of sagas extant, although we know that such things did exist, for example as Latin prose recycled into the vernacular (Phelpstead 2001: xii–xvii; Ciklamini 2004: 56–57). Moreover, the saga continued to be copied for as long as Árni’s legislation, the *kristinnrétt*, was being largely observed, i.e. until the early sixteenth century (Þorleifur Hauksson 1972: xlv–xlvi). This would be an unparalleled longevity for a defective text to remain in circulation.

Deleuze and Guattari’s minor literature may provide a more satisfying explanation than Sverrir Tómasson’s putative prototype. When we consider the milieu in which *ÁBp* was written, we are certainly looking at a minority interest group. It is worth noting at the outset, though, that it was probably not a *sympathetic* minority in need of emancipation, as Deleuze and Guattari’s model implicitly prefers (but does not necessitate). Árni Helgason, or the man very much like him who wrote our text, probably did not feel that he was in a position of power. Naturally, it is manifest that during Árni’s lifetime, the bishopric at Skálholt became intensely powerful. In resolving the *staðamál* in the church’s favour, Árni succeeded in the largest land-grab in Icelandic history. Whether the secular owners of the *staðir* were right to assume churchly rights such as tithe collection is highly questionable, but at the same time the *staðir* had originated as farmsteads. Jón Sigurðsson describes them as *þeim jörðum sem kirkjur stóðu á* (Jón Sigurðsson 1857–1876: 245; cf. Magnús Stefánsson 2000: 37–41, 192–216) – “those plots of land on which churches stood”, i.e. the churches, built largely by secular chieftains, were the adornments to the hitherto agricultural establishment. They had equally never been church property, as Árni proposed: *þat vóru frá upphafi kirkjulögin at eigi skyldu leikmenn heldr klerkar varðveita allar kirkjueignir* (*ÁBp*: 28) – “It had from the beginning been in the laws of the church that it should not be laymen but rather clerics who looked after church property”. That is to say, Árni was successful in a massive and daring enterprise, even though he stood on far

from unassailable legal grounds. This astonishing accomplishment highlights how personal the concentration of power must have been in Arnian Skálholt. Árni belongs to a certain category of historical anomalies – of powerful personalities who are mercurial, unlikely, and whose victories rest entirely on the sheer force of one individual. We might think of any number of examples here: Queen Zenobia (d. c. 275) commanding the Palmyrenes against the vastly stronger Romans, Julian the Apostate (r. 355–363) briefly driving back Christianity against the tide of history, Josep Broz Tito steering Yugoslavia between East and West, Pierre Gemayel making his obscure pseudo-Phoenician, Maronite Christian *Kataeb* party a serious force in predominantly Arab, Muslim Lebanon etc. Of course, none of these projects could last, but none could be possible without exceptional characters to realise them.

One of the consequences of such historical “flashes in the pan” is that, being so dependent on the lifetime of one crucial person, they endure long enough to draw in peons who become totally immersed in their world. Importantly, they are also sufficiently short-lived that many of those same peons must later confront the dramatic collapse of their new order. In other words, they leave behind a minority who have once enjoyed tremendous power, but without their leader have no feasible way of preserving or restoring that authority. It is to just such a minority that our Árni-Helgason-ish author must have belonged. Skálholt in the early fourteenth century would have been an unusual power complex, drawn between contradictory trajectories of vitality. Owing to the late bishop’s efforts, it would have enjoyed considerable land holdings. Árni (Þorláksson)’s laws would have remained in place. However, while defeat in the *staðamál* would have greatly diminished secular power, the various offices of the Norwegian crown in Iceland largely remained in secular hands. Wealthy – or now not quite so wealthy – magnates would continue to send embassies to Norway. The survival of so many of Árni’s oaths and penitentials in the manuscript record (*DI II*: 23–52, 58–61, 92–93, 123, 128) suggests that there was a theoretical commitment to enforcing his rigid control of libidinal matters amongst the clergy, if not the flock too. But as the previously mentioned case of Jón Arason shows, the Arnian regime of sexual restraint did not last beyond Árni’s lifetime. It seems fair to characterise post-Arnian Skálholt as secure in its territorial holdings, but also aware that its powers had recently peaked. *ÁBþ* looks back to a time when Skálholt’s power was ascendant, and when its bureaucratic control over the lives of individuals subdued both Icelandic political tradition and personal desire.

We can reconstruct the (post)Arnian bureaucracy as an aberrant subculture inside the Icelandic body politic: a hard core of celibate clergy who were accustomed to

exercising control over their congregations, administering oaths and threatening excommunication. Before the Arnian hegemony, great churchmen in Iceland had always had to be involved in the wranglings of the secular elite. Guðmundr the Good and, to take a case closer to Árni's own age, Brandr Jónsson are particularly good examples of this necessity. As Guðrún prettily puts it: *Brandur ábóti var af ætt Svínfellinga, lærður á kirkjunnar lög, sáttleitinn tignarmaður, gjörkunnugur valdaþrætum Sturlungaaldar og mikilmennum veraldarsögunnar* (Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 2008: xiii) – “Abbot Brandr was of the lineage of the Svínfellingar, learned in the laws of the church, a true man of distinction, thoroughly familiar with the power struggles of the *Sturlungaöld* and of the great figures of the history of the world”. By aiming for the acquisition of every single *staðr* in Skálholt, Árni cut the Gordian knot of church involvement in clan warfare. In doing so, we might imagine that he also created a unique generation of Icelandic clergy. Unmarried, without concubines, without allegiance to prominent farming families, the young men who ran the Arnian regime would have had a lifestyle and worldview that could hardly have been further removed from those of the people they bureaucratically controlled.

ÁBp reads like the product of just such a subculture. To Sverrir Tómasson's disliking, its points of reference are baldly Latinate and churchly. Latinisms are not uncommon in the *biskupasögur* as a whole, although they are certainly most prolific in *ÁBp*. Chronology and titles tend to be particularly aimed at an ecclesiastical audience, with Latin phrases grafted on to the vernacular saga style. For example, concerning the Council of Lyons, we hear that clerics: ... *sóttu þat generale concilium, sem út vórit var haldit í Leone III Kalendas Maii mánaðar* (*ÁBp*: 48) – “visited the general council, which was held out in Lyons on the 3rd calends of the month of May”. The ordination of John XXI, who deliberately skipped the title John XX, in 1276 is introduced thus: *Þá var tekinn til þafa meistari Petrus hispanus cardinalis á drottinsdag fyrir krossmessu ok kallaðr Johannes vicesimus primus* (*ÁBp*: 54) – “Then Master Peter the Spaniard, a cardinal, was taken as Pope on the Lord's Day before the Mass of the Cross. and he was called John XXI”. There are directly loaned nouns too, e.g. when Árni receives gifts from King Magnús, they are Scando-Latin *presentr* rather than Old Norse *gjof*: *Lét hann ok fylgja þessu bréfi fagnar presentr; silfrker gyllt utan ok innan, ormstungr tvær, buðk af electuario, gott við frosti.* (*ÁBp*: 29) – “He also had this letter accompanied by beautiful presents; a silver bowl gilded outside and in, two dragon tongues [slivers of precious metal?], a small box of *electuario* [a kind of balm], good against the cold”. To the Arnian administrators, wholly devoted to a purely clerical lifestyle, such Latinisms must have seemed perfectly natural. Judging from the absence of Latin phrases from the canonical *Íslendingasögur* and *Fornaldarsögur*,

they would have been foreign and perhaps even inaccessible for wider saga audiences. The language of *ÁBp* is thus an articulation of the very special world of the Arnian authority, retaining its sense of difference in the wake of their leader's passing. As we have seen, the ideology of *ÁBp* is equally sharply defined against the world of the *stórbændr*. *ÁBp* stalwartly rejects the "Icelandic dream" peddled by much of saga writing. The unconvincing *peripeteia* in the family history of classic saga heroes serves implies that prosperity is the result of virtue, that independence is the prerequisite of greatness, and that "the little people" do not matter. For the secular elite of the central thirteenth century, this metanarrative would have been a pleasing affirmation of their privileges under the *status quo*. Árni in *ÁBp*, on the other hand, comes from a humble, landless background, and makes himself master of both the landed and their land. Importantly, the saga does not position him as a man without a *staðr* who achieves success by coming to own one, i.e. by joining the *staðir*-owning classes. Rather, Árni destroys the entire *staðr* system. When all the farms are united under a singular ownership, and are no longer personal means of wealth production, they have arguably become quite different entities from their secular-established pre-Commonwealth origins (Magnús Stefánsson 2000: 206–209). In *ÁBp*'s patois, the estates are seldom even referred to as *staðir*, but instead normally called *kirkjueignir* – "church properties".

With its heterodox worldview, structure, and language, *ÁBp* works to subvert the saga canon from within. The parallel with Kafka, as interpreted by Deleuze and Guattari, is arresting. Kafka fashions his *Papierdeutsch* into a viable literary vehicle, reconstituting the fabulous inner life of a German-speaking Czech Jew as a minor literature which challenges and enriches the major literature in which it squats. The author of *ÁBp* commandeers the priests' jargon of Old Norse peppered with Latinisms (like *Papierdeutsch*, also a species of officialese), and deploys it to create a saga that tells a very different story in a very different way to the classics of saga literature. I would not deny that compared to much of the rest of Old Norse literature it is a rather uninviting read. Even one of the few people to appreciate it, Magnús Stefánsson, wrote: *Den er da også utpreget vanskelig, innfløkt og ofte meget dunkel* (2007: 13) – "It is, of course, markedly difficult, complicated, and often very obscure". However, these features do not have to be read as authorial dullness or incompetence. They may yet be the hallmarks of a minor literature. *ÁBp* belonged to a minority subculture who had produced a text which simultaneously celebrated their own peculiar experience and attacked the opiate lie of the Icelandic dream. It appropriated the form of a *biskupasaga* (though of course that label is a modern genre, surely *ÁBp* would have been called simply *saga*). However, rather than commemorating its

protagonist's holiness, *ÁBp* is rather uniquely a celebration of bureaucracy's triumph over desire. Perhaps this is why the author did not feel bound by the common narrative convention of giving his tale an ending. The audience does not need to hear about Árni's death because "his" saga was never truly about Árni as a life. For its minor Arnian readership, it was about Árni as a process, Árni as the architect of a labyrinth in which desire could be frustrated and disorientated. *ÁBp* is the literary embodiment of an anti-saga-ideology. Put another way, we might reconsider this rambling gargoyle of a saga as an attempt to denature Old Norse literature from the inside.

Conclusion

It is prudent to remember that even if *ÁBp* can be rehabilitated as a literary product via interlocution from Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari, and via reconsideration as minor literature, it does not necessarily follow that a saga hero emerges with whom the non-Arnian reader can readily identify. True, the world into which Árni is born and which he ultimately destroys does not feel particularly fair. In its opening chapters, *ÁBp* conveys the sense of frustration and outrage which we assume is fomenting somewhere beneath the young *verkmaðr's* apparently cheerful countenance. Nonetheless, the Arnian regime's effort to smash the *stórbændr* oligarchy does not result in anything more appealing. What happens to characters such as Egill and Þórunn may have felt like a victory to the small minority around Skálholt who felt very strongly about the theoretical commitment to clerical continence, but it is hard not to feel sympathy for them. *ÁBp* must have been intended in some sense as a platitude to the Arnian regime (though as seen its occasional disingenuous slips compromise it in that role) yet the arbitrariness of the bishop's rule is not substantially disguised. For example, perhaps the matter was self-evident to its pro-episcopal audience, but it's worth noting that *ÁBp* never really confronts the most awkward area in the *staðamál*: that indeed church estates ought to belong to the bishopric, but the Icelandic churches had largely been built by secular authority. This is the problem of those *staðir* which derive their ecclesiastical identity from the presence of a *bændakirkja* – "farmers' church" (Magnús Stefánsson 2002: 139, 146, 155–163). This lacuna means that while Hrafn Oddsson may emerge as the villain of *ÁBp*, it is not clear at all that Árni is therefore its hero – at least not in any straightforward, moralist sense.

Nonetheless, for all its dissimulation and ambiguity, *ÁBp* in its capacity as a work of literature can still yield at least one beautiful, slightly frightening truth (in its

capacity as a historical source, it surely yields many more). Kafka must once again be on hand to help us seize this pearl. If Kafka tells us the story of mankind trapped and wounded by bureaucracy, then *ÁBþ* is the story of the man who sets the traps. It is as though Árni is the anti-Kafka, a man who does not recoil at bureaucracy but delights in it. *ÁBþ* is his anti-saga (I thank Joel Anderson for coining the term). Crucially, Kafka could never show us the face of his tormentor. K. is always pursued and arbitrarily harassed by forces that are not quite knowable. *ÁBþ* needs no such suspense. Perhaps this is why Árni's strange, inscrutable, seemingly half-formed personality has to me the vague sense of an insect scuttling in the shadows. We cannot with any comfortable certainty understand how his mind works, much as we might propose some biographical hypotheses. He works industriously, but not in a manner that feels plausibly human. It is as though *ÁBþ* has turned a light on an area where Kafka did not expect us to look, i.e. into the office of the bureaucratic *prima causa* who masterminds K.'s hell. We have been surprised to find Árni glaring back, a man with the drive, mystery, and alterity of some dismal arthropod. This is the compelling revelation in *ÁBþ*. If there is an overlord at the top of The Castle, or a Grand Prosecutor at the head of *The Trial*, it is someone very like Árni Þorláksson.

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