



Punitive Miracles in the Old Norse Bishops' Sagas

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This article studies instances of divine retribution performed by God through his bishops in medieval Scandinavia. It focuses on the miracles performed by the bishops of Iceland –both saints and non-saints– as recorded in the *Biskupa sögur* and the miracle collections of the native bishop saints. Such divine retributions can be admonitory acts whose effects are not permanent, as well as supernatural retaliations with permanent effects. While scholars generally agree on the benign nature of the bishop saints of Iceland in comparison to their colleagues on the Continent (Whaley 1994), this study draws the attention to a large number of miraculous punishments than those considered so far. This overview thus unveils the multifaceted nature of the ecclesiastical officials of the northern world and questions the various purposes pursued by saga authors in including these miracles in their narratives.

Introduction

Among the numerous examples that are contained in the first book of his *Dialogi*, Gregory the Great tells his deacon Peter about the miracles of the sixth-century Bishop Bonifacius of Ferento. One day, says Gregory, the bishop was invited to dine at a nobleman's after Mass. Before Bonifacius could even say grace, a poor musician entered the house and began to play his instrument. This displeased the bishop so much, that he declared the musician a dead man. After he had been given some food, the poor musician was struck down by a stone that fell on his head while passing through the door. As announced by the bishop, the blow was the poor man's death. In the Old Norse translation of the *Dialogi*, which was circulating in Iceland as early as the late twelfth century, Gregory's explanation of the meaning of the episode is rendered as follows:

By this example we have to consider what great reverence we ought to give to holy men, for they are the temples of God. And when a holy man is moved to anger, so is He who dwells in that temple. Therefore, we ought to care the most

for the wrath of the just men, since we know that in their souls dwells He who has the power to avenge them.¹

Divine punishments like the one operated by Bonifacius are exemplary of the ambiguity of the power of saints. Saints' miracles are not only tokens of the grace of God and acts of good for the faithful but can also be channels for God's wrath and instruments of correction. As weapons of the saints,² they punish different categories of transgression, such as disbelief in the saints' charismatic power, harm to their devotees and violation of various aspect of their cult, such as sacred spaces and ecclesiastical norms.³ Scholars have noticed the thin difference between miracles and magic,⁴ as reflected for instance in the collection of evidence for the process of canonisation and that for the trial for witchcraft,⁵ and their opposite relation to healing miracles.⁶ However, whether miracles are evidently beneficial in nature or apparently against the teachings of the Gospel, the divine will that is behind these supernatural acts vouches for their legitimacy. Aron Gurevič highlighted how these 'evil' miracles are a con-

¹ *I þessum blut er virdanda, hversu mikil heidsþi er v(e)itandi helgum monnum, þviat þeir ero mus- teri guds. Ok þa er heilagr madr er til reidi eggiaðr, þa reidiz sa er byggvir i musterinu. Af því er mest uggandi reidi rettlatra manna, at þat er vist, at sa er nalegr hiorum þeira, er matt hefir til at hefna þeira.* (Unger 1877: I, 194³⁻⁷; all English translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own). On the Old Norse translation of Gregory's *Dialogi* and its circulation, see Gregory the Great 2001: 266–269; on Gregory's influence on Old Norse literature, see Boyer 1971 and Wolf 2001.

² Cf. *Sancti enim praedicatorum uerbis suis quasi quibusdam iaculis aduersarios ferunt; armis uero, id est miraculis semetipsos tuentur; ut et quantum sint audiendi, sonent per impetum iaculorum, et quantum sint reuerendi, clarescant per arma miraculorum.* (Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob* 30, 2) (For holy preachers strike their adversaries with their words as with darts, but they protect themselves with weapons, that is, with miracles. Thus, as far as they are to be heard, they may sound forth through the force of their darts, and as far as they are to be revered, they may shine through the weapons of miracles). A copy of the *Moralia in Iob* was kept in Hólar cathedral (DI XV, 213) and at the church at Múli (DI II, 435), and fragments and extracts of the work are extant in Copenhagen, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 671 4to (c. 1300–1340), AM Acc. 7 Ms. 100, 1r–12v (c. 1300) and AM Acc. 7 Ms. 101, 1r–2v (c. 1400).

³ Classic studies on this category of miracles include Sigal 1976; 1985: 276–282; Platelle 1978/79; Bozóky 1998. For recent studies, see among other, see Barthélémy 2004; 2010; Helvétius 2006; Johnson 2010; Wieczorek 2014; Bozóky 2017; Rogan 2021.

⁴ See Versnel 1991; Geary 1994.

⁵ Klaniczay 2000.

⁶ According to Klaniczay (2010), miracles of chastisement and punishment operate in the same way as healing miracles insofar they are performed on the proviso that something has been given to or taken from the saint, as in the case of vows for a healing or their lack thereof.

stituent part of the medieval mind, which is prone to translate the metaphysic in physical terms.⁷

Punitive miracles began to be inserted into hagiographical literature to suggest God's support of saints' deeds in Late Antiquity. They were first staged in the accounts of the lives of monks and hermits, and were only later attributed to the secular clergy.⁸ In the *vita* and *gesta* of bishops and bishop saints alike, the presence of miracles of punishment has been interpreted as the expression of a strategy that plays at the level of the supernatural, which church officials used to gain public legitimacy against secular resistance.⁹

In medieval Scandinavia, bishops perform acts of divine retributions in a variety of texts, both religious and secular, written in Latin and in the vernacular. In Iceland, they are a recurrent feature in the *Biskupa sögur* (Bishops' sagas), the saga accounts of the lives and careers of the bishops of the Church in Iceland,¹⁰ which could be taken as the Old Norse counterpart of the Continental *gesta episcoporum*.¹¹ The corpus was composed from the early thirteenth to the fourteenth centuries and comprises the lives of three bishop saints, Þorlák Þórhallsson of Skálholt (1178–1193), Jón Ögmundarson (1106–1121) and Guðmundr Arason of Hólar (1203–1237), and three bishops who were not raised to the altars, Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt (1269–1298), Jón Halldórsson of Skálholt (1322–1339) and Lárentíus Kálffson of Hólar (1324–1331). In recent years, scholars have studied the rather realistic descriptions of healing miracles in the *Biskupa sögur* from a medical perspective,¹² and instances of possessions and cures have been considered towards an understanding of the perception and representation of disability in medieval Scandinavia as a whole.¹³ In the most systematic survey of miracles in the *Biskupa sögur* to date, Diana Whaley concluded that the bishop saints of Iceland and their hagiographers were, on the whole, less prone to punishment and quicker in granting their help than their colleagues on the Conti-

⁷ Gurevič 1988: 202–209. See also Guglielmetti 2021.

⁸ Cracco Ruggini 1997: 34.

⁹ Cracco Rugginoi 2001: 511–512.

¹⁰ For recent introductions to the *Biskupa sögur*, see Cormack 2005; Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2024.

¹¹ On the *gesta episcoporum* as a genre, see Sot 1981; Kaiser, 1994. The relation between *Biskupa sögur* and the Latin accounts of the lives of bishops in the Isles and on the Continent is discussed in Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1992 and 2006.

¹² Cormack 2008; Collins 2018; Van Deusen 2024. Ásdís Egilsdóttir (2001) discusses illness as punishment in the sagas of bishop saints.

¹³ O'Connell 2018; Crocker 2019.

ment.¹⁴ For her comparison, Whaley referred to Pierre-André Sigal's study of eleventh- and twelfth-century French miracle accounts, which considered 5000 miracles across 76 *vitae*, 166 miracle collections, and a dozen composite texts.¹⁵ According to Whaley's analysis, punitive miracles in the Icelandic corpus amount to "a mere 3%", a striking figure, she notes, once compared to the 44.7% of the French corpus:¹⁶

"Even when chastisements which are incidental to a cure or other miracle are included [in the category of punitive miracles], the proportion only reaches 7-8% – a mere dozen or so instances"¹⁷

This article focuses on the divine retribution performed by Icelandic bishops in the broadest sense. First, it takes into account miracle episodes that concern what Whaley distinguishes in "healing" and "non-healing" chastisements: miracles that result in irreversible damage, disfigurement, mutilation or death on the one hand and miracles where the punishment is reversed due to the victims' contrition. These two categories are variably referred to as punitive or retaliatory miracles. Second, this article offers a survey of punitive miracles in all *Biskupa sögur*, analysing sagas of both bishop saints and non-saint bishops. The results of this survey add to Whaley's conclusions and allow for a reconsideration of the role of these miracles in the genre and tradition of *Biskupa sögur* as a whole.

As the study focuses on a comparatively uncharted geographical area in medieval religious studies, the analysis of divine retributions in the *Biskupa sögur* is introduced by an overview of similar instances from Scandinavia. Particular attention is given to texts produced in the cultural milieu of the three archbishoprics that were responsible for the administration of Iceland since its Conversion in the year 1000: Hamburg-Bremen (1000–1101), Lund (1101–1152), and Niðaróss (1152–1153). In so doing, this

¹⁴ Whaley 1994a; 1994b.

¹⁵ Whaley 1994b: 168–169. Cf. Sigal 1985. The implications of such comparison for Whaley's and the present analysis are discussed below.

¹⁶ In the pre-print of her paper, Whaley counted 3 miracles of chastisement (2%) and cautiously warned that the "artificially low" figure was the result of criteria adopted in categorising the corpus; cf. Whaley 1994a: 858. The scholar also states that miraculous chastisements in the French corpus amount to the 44.7% of "non-healing" miracles (Whaley 1994b: 174), a figure which is not found in Sigal's comparative tables (Sigal 1985: 289–291), where these miracles amount to 9.8% of the corpus. One is led to assume that this figure may result from the different grouping of miracles that the scholar discusses in two footnotes: Whaley 1994b: 169 n. 42 and 171 n. 46.

¹⁷ Whaley 1994b: 174.

article also contributes to the ongoing scholarly analysis of medieval miracles in the hagiographical literature produced on the Continent and in the Atlantic Isles and of the mechanisms of composition of the multifaceted genre of *gesta episcoporum*.

1. Divine violence in Viking Age Scandinavia

The interpretation of the Viking phenomenon as divine retribution for men's sins was a popular frame of reference since the start of Viking raids in the eighth century.¹⁸ According to the ninth-century *Translatio sancti Germani* (BHL 3476-3477), the 'Northmen' (*Normanni*) who were besieging Paris in 845 and sacking the abbey of St-German-des-Prés were overcome by St Germanus himself:¹⁹

Since God was fighting on behalf of his people despite their sins, and the blessed Germanus too was manly fighting for them, only four people survived of those who had trespassed the borders of the Christians. They escaped death then, though we believe that they did not escape it afterwards.²⁰

Divine vengeance is also a fundamental instrument in the Christianisation of Scandinavia and in the process of consolidating the power and renown of its archdioceses. Many instances of divine punishment against the enemies of the Church and those who disrespect its precepts are recorded in *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae Pontificum*, which Adam of Bremen (c. 1050–1085) composed when Iceland was under the jurisdiction of the archdiocese.²¹ While God's vengeance (*divina ultiō*) struck the Swedes who have chased the missionary bishop Adalward,²² Adam reports that Archbishop Adalbert made strategical use of this same concept against his personal enemies:

¹⁸ Coupland 1991.

¹⁹ Rowe 2012: 21–32.

²⁰ *Sicque factum est, Deo pro populo suo licet peccatore pugnante, beatoque Germano erga eos viriliter decertante, ut ex tanta populi multitudine qui christianorum fines intraverant, nullus remaneret praeter quatuor qui fuga lapsi sunt, quos nec postea mortis exitium credimus evasisse.* (*Translatio sancti Germani*, De Smedt et al. 1883: 93)

²¹ Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* I, 53 (55); II, 29 (27); 53 (51); scol. 23 (24); III, scol. 72 (73).

²² Cf. Adam of Bremen, *Gesta* III, 16 (15).

Every day he mournfully grieved over this calamity of his times, and for this reason he had special psalms composed, by which he might take vengeance upon the enemies of the Church.²³

In his *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1150–1220) often records the effects of God's wrath,²⁴ especially in the context of the Danish campaigns against the Wends (c. 1130).²⁵ As in the case of the archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen, in *Gesta Danorum* too divine vengeance is often channelled through bishops and their clergy. After they have moved the remains of the holy Bishop William of Roskilde against the bishop's will, Herman, the dean of the chapter, and Arnfast, the cathedral schoolmaster, "suffered a baleful end for their presumption, in such a way that each met punishment answering to his share in determining to profane the tomb".²⁶ Hermann died in agony following an attack of erysipelas that had begun when he had breathed the sweet fragrance that exuded from the late bishop's tomb, whereas Arnfast's liver burst, and he died after repenting for his disobedience and offering up all his properties to the Church.²⁷ As in the case of Archbishop Adalbert, it seems that in the Danish Church too the charismatic abilities of summoning divine vengeance were not confined to the saints but extended to God's ministers on earth. Saxo reports that Archbishop Absalon consecrated priests who later performed many miracles of healing in the interest of winning belief among the heathens, as well as punitive miracles:

But if any spurned Christianity, these same priests would exact severe punishment by causing the ruin of their limbs in different ways, so that you might plainly believe the Almighty bestowed profit on those who embraced His worship, but vengeance on those who despised it.²⁸

²³ *Quam calamitatem sui temporis ipse miserabiliter cotidie deploravit, spetiales ad hoc psalmos habens constitutos, quibus in hostes ecclesiae posset ulcisi.* (Adam of Bremen, *Gesta III*, 55 [54]). On the so-called imprecatory psalms, see Hossfeld 2009.

²⁴ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* 12.1.2; 12.2.1–2; 13.11.8. Cf. Nielsen 2024.

²⁵ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* 14.22.4–6; 14.39.12–24. On supernatural phenomena during the so-called 'Wendish Crusade', see Dragnea 2016.

²⁶ *pestiferum audacie sue exitum experti sunt, tantumque quisque supplicii retulit, quantum uiolandii busti sententie impedit* (11.12.3; Friis-Jensen II, 837).

²⁷ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* 11.12.4.

²⁸ *A quibusdam etiam detracte religionis supplicia uaria membrorum strage graviter exigeabantur, ut manifeste deum et cultus sui premium et contemptus uindictam afferre putares.* (*Gesta Danorum* 14.39.47; Friis-Jensen II, 1312)

Several miraculous reprisals are recorded in the *Passio et miracula sancti Olaui*, where they are performed by St Olaf himself.²⁹ Although the agent of such divine punishments is here a holy king rather than a bishop saint, the fact that the collection was likely sponsored and certainly enlarged by Archbishop Eystein Erlendsson (1161–1188) indicates the awareness and circulation of this mechanism of supernatural propaganda in the Archdiocese of Nidaros.³⁰

1.1 SAINTS AND VIOLENCE IN OLD NORSE-ICELANDIC RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

Divine punishments as retribution for sins and evil doings abound in the Scriptures and in hagiographical literature. The fact that religious texts circulated in Iceland both in Latin and translated in the vernacular, likely made the reception of these instances even more widespread.³¹ Scriptural examples of punitive miracles circulated in the Biblical translations of the Old Testament known as *Stjórn* (I-III) and in the extract from the New Testament that found their ways in the *Postola sögur* (Apostles' sagas). Alongside episodes that stage the direct effects of God's wrath,³² punitive miracles are performed by prophets like Moses, for whom the earth splits and a column of fire is sent to punish the rebel Levites (*Num. 16*), and Elisha, whose charisma avenges him of the insults of a group of children (*2 Kings 2, 23-24*).³³ In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter and Paul act as agents of God's anger and perform miracles of punishment. In *Acts 13*, Paul and Barnabas travel to Cyprus to preach in the city of Paphos, where they are opposed by the false prophet Elymas. Paul announces that God intends to make Elymas temporarily blind, and immediately darkness falls on the eyes of the false prophet.³⁴ In *Acts 5*, Ananias and his wife Sapphira are both struck dead after cheating to Peter about stealing from the communal purse. The compiler of *Pétris*

²⁹ Cf. Metcalfe 1881: 78–79, 84, 90–92, 101–103.

³⁰ Significantly, the archbishop himself recorded a miraculous healing that was granted to him after he had fallen from a scaffold due to his own sins: *Peccatis autem exigentibus ut uite et iniuncte sollicitudinis cautior redderer, ceteris ponti et machinis adherentibus, solus in precipicium feror.* (Metcalfe 1881: 104) (I alone, for my sins, was thrown from that height, to teach me too be more careful of my life and duty, while the others clung to the scaffolding and hoists; trans. Kunin & Phelpstead 2001: 62)

³¹ On the importance of bilingual education in medieval Iceland, see Patzuk-Russell 2021.

³² Among the instances that are found in Old Norse translation, see *Exodus* 20, 5 and 34, 14 (cf. *Stjórn* I); *Leviticus* 10, 1-2 and *Numbers* 16 (cf. *Stjórn* II); *2 Samuel* 6, 6-7 and *2 Kings* 2, 23-24 (*Stjórn* III).

³³ *Stjórn* II, ch. 127, and III, ch. 336, in Unger 1862: 328–330 and 609.

³⁴ *Páls saga postola* I, in Unger 1874: 217–218; *Páls saga postola* II, in Unger 1874: 243–244.

saga postola I attempts to interpret the apparent contrast between the sayings of Jesus and the violence of this punishment as follows:

About this event, one may ask why God Himself sent an immediate chastisement for this fraud, despite what is written in the Gospel: "If anyone slaps you on the left cheek, turn to him the right also". To this, one ought to reply that in the New Covenant God punishes some deeds with immediate chastisement, as one ought to damn to a severe punishment those who go against the law soon after they are sentenced and kept in custody, as one may read at the beginning of the laws of Moses, when it is said about that man who was stoned to death because he had collected wood for his fire on the Shabbat.³⁵

The interpretation of these miracles reached Medieval Iceland through the translation of hagiographical compilation such as Gregory's *Dialogi* and the *vitae* of the desert fathers (*Vitae patrum*, *Antonius saga*) and those of bishop saints, where these miracles are meant to punish demons, criminals, pagans, and those who doubt or offend their sanctity.³⁶ The charismatic power that is granted to this category of saints is clearly summarised in *Clemens saga*, the Old Norse life of Clement of Rome, when Clement is about to heal the heathen Sisinnius, who had become deaf and blind for not believing in Christ. Glossing on *Matthew 16, 19*, the bishop saint makes explicit reference to the ability to channel divine chastisements:

...everyone on earth shall be freed from all ills and obtain a place in heaven when you wish to have it so, and everyone will be bound and condemned and become a fugitive from God when that is your verdict.³⁷

³⁵ *Um þat ma tala, hvi sa himn sami gup hengdi sva skioðt þenna prett, er sagði þau orð, er i guþspialli standa: Ef nöckurr slér þik aa hegri kinn, gef honum orlof at sla hina vinstri. En því er til svaranda, at i nyri kristni hefndi hann suma luti með skiotri refsing, sva sem lofat er at leggia sterri pinur aa niðrbrotzmenn laganna i fyrstu, þa er þau ero lögleidd ok framborin, eptir því sem lesit er, at i upphafi Moyses laga var sa maðr grytrr, er aa hvílldardeginum las saman tre til ellda.* (Unger 1874: 28^o-14). Cf. *Pétrs saga postola II.A*, in Unger 1874: 166.

³⁶ The extant Old Norse corpus of hagiographical sagas of bishop saints comprises the lives of the following saints (in alphabetical order): Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, Basil of Cesarea, Blaise of Sebastea, Clemens of Rome, Dionysus of Paris, Dunstan of Canterbury, Erasmus of Formia, Gregory of Rome, Jerome of Stridon, John Chrysostom of Constantinople, Martin of Tours, Nicholas of Myra, Remigius of Reims, Servatius of Tongeren, Sylvester of Rome, Thomas Becket of Canterbury. This corpus is based on a count of the extant sagas of bishop saints, leaving out *þættir* and *ævintýri*.

³⁷ *At sá shall hverr leysask á iörþu fra 1 öllum meinum ok öþlask eilifa miskunn at Guþi feþr firir*

Overall, the Old Norse translations of hagiographical texts refer to miracles as signs (*jarteign* or *jartegn*, *tákn*) or events (*atburðr*) that are caused by God's wrath (*reiðr*) and that of the saints (*rettłara manna*), which function as acts of vengeance (*begnd*) and punishment (*refsing*).

2. Violence and Miracles in the *Biskupa sögur*

That the concept of divine vengeance had an influence on the composition of Iceland's own *gesta episcoporum* is evidence by the number of similar punitive miracles in the corpus.³⁸ In 1994, Diana Whaley discussed the miracles found in the sagas and miracle collections of the saint bishops of Iceland (Þorlákr Þórhallsson of Skálholt, Jón Ögmundarson and Guðmundr Arason of Hólar) in a paper presented at the 9th Saga Conference held in Akureyri, which were published in the pre-prints of the conference and in a revised version of the paper that appeared that same year in *Collegium Medievalis*.³⁹ Her study is a statistical analysis of 331 accounts of "practical" or "problem solving" miracles: miracles in which the saint's intervention in a human situation is in response to the plight of the suppliant. In most cases, these miracles follow a tripartite structure of 1) exposition of a problem, 2) the saint's intervention, and 3) resolution. Whaley focuses on the exposition stage, analysing in particular miracles that happened *post mortem*, categorised in "healing" and "non-healing" miracles.⁴⁰ The scholar grouped punitive miracles with reversible effects among the "healing miracles", counting miracles with irreversible effect among the "non-healing miracles".⁴¹ Of the latter category, Whaley counts 4 instances: one for St Þorlákr, one for Jón, and two for Guðmundr. In both the pre-prints and the journal article, these episodes are not identified nor discussed in detail, rather mentioned in passing. If my identifi-

bitt heilagt a1rnabarðr ok himinrikis vist er þú vill svá vera láta, en sá hverr bundinn ok fyrdómpur ok Guðs flóttamaðr verþa er bitt atkvæði es þat. (Clemens saga ch. 7; trans. Carron 2005: 38)

³⁸ On the social and cultural context in which the circulation and transmission of *Biskupa sögur* took place, see, among others, Haraldur Hreinsson 2021; Anderson 2023; Salmoiraghi 2025.

³⁹ Whaley 1994a; 1994b. In this article, references shall be made primarily to the journal version of the study, Whaley 1994b.

⁴⁰ In order to facilitate the comparison between the Icelandic miracles with the European corpus, Whaley modelled her system of classification on the one used by Sigal (1985) for eleventh- and twelfth-century French miracles, with minor changes.

⁴¹ Whaley 1994b: 170–171. Whaley uses the term "chastisements" to define punitive actions that take the form of a short-term affliction which is soon healed.

Saint	Miracle/s	Source text
St Þorlákr	1	<i>Jarteinabók in forna</i> , ch. 28
Jón Ögmundarson	1	<i>Jóns saga ins helga</i> [A], ch. 44
Guðmundr Arason	2	<i>Guðmundar saga</i> D, chs. 83 and 87

cation of the episodes the scholar refers to is correct, the breakdown of the episode should be the following:⁴²

Against these 4 instances, my analysis has identified the presence of 34 punitive miracles in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century *Biskupa sögur*. This marked difference in results with Whaley's research is primarily one of corpus and scope. While Whaley focused on those bishops who were considered saints by the Icelandic Church, this research considers the sagas of the non-saintly bishops (Árni Þorláksson, Lárentíuss Kálfsson and Jón Halldórsson) to offer a comprehensive overview of these punitive miracles in the whole genre. To do this, it also evaluates both *in vita* and *post mortem* miracles, as well as two categories of miracles that Whaley explicitly excluded: miracles that do not conform to the usual structure of exposition and interaction with the saint,⁴³ and those that lack an explicit interpretation as miracles by the author.⁴⁴ Under the first category fall both irreversible chastisements and temporary illnesses or delayed cured committed by the saints to sinners or slack devotees. As for the miracles that lack an interpretation,⁴⁵ this second category proves particularly productive in the case of non-saint bishops. Here, divine intervention on their behalf is often implied rather than openly stated, the purpose of the sagas being chiefly that of

⁴² Whaley 1994b: 174. However, Whaley also mentions two instances that are analysed here but which are not accounted for in the breakdown of her results: Whaley 1994b: 163 (*Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups önnur* ch. 133; ÍF XVI: 227–228) and 157 (*GBp^D* ch. 44).

⁴³ “Narratives of remarkable events which exceptionally do not conform to the structural pattern.” (Whaley 1994b: 165)

⁴⁴ “Potential, but not actuated, miracle accounts.” (Whaley 1994b: 165)

⁴⁵ Johnson (2010: 19) uses the expression “passive retaliatory judgement” to indicate punitive miracles that the saints commit no act, either of speech or of gesture, to summon. According to the scholar, this kind of miracles “most clearly display the saint's identity as recipient of God's favour, he or she is a conduit not for his or her own power or authority but for a 'divine strength', a *divina virtus* that moves independently of the saint when necessary.”

recording the bishops' lives rather than collecting evidence for their possible canonisation. In fact, a closer reading shows that authors of these sagas too do clearly rely on these miracles as mechanisms of supernatural propaganda to justify the deeds of their protagonists. The lack of attribution may have been supplied by the audience, especially for those bishops whose sagas were composed as pieces of propaganda in clerical circles.

The following treatment of punitive miracles in the *Biskupa sögur* is divided in saint and non-saint bishops. To compensate for the lack of chronological order in the overall structure, the internal order of presentation follows the chronology of the bishops' years of office.

2.1 SAGAS OF BISHOP SAINTS

In this section, I follow the common scholarly practice in referring to Þorlákr Þórhallsson, Jón Ögmundarson, and Guðmundr Arason as bishop saints. Although the official canonisation of the Church of Rome came only for St Þorlákr in 1984, and not at all for Jón and Guðmundr, popular belief had already considered them as saints since soon after their death.

2.1.1 *Þorláks sögur*

Bishop Þorlákr's elevation to sainthood at the 1193 Alþing was accompanied by a production of official documents in Latin, such as *lectiones* and a rhymed office, and of an account of his life.⁴⁶ Fragments of a *Vita Thorlaci*, which are found in two fragmentary manuscripts dated to the first half of the thirteenth century (AM 386 4to I-II), are attributed to Gunnlaugr Leifsson of Þingeyrar. The first version of *Þorláks saga*, *Þorláks saga A* [PBp^A] was composed before Bishop Páll's death in 1211.⁴⁷

The miracle section of *PBp^A* (chs 19–83) mostly includes episodes that demonstrates the saint's power and the favour offered to those who pray him. In most cases, this demonstration takes the form of healing miracles, a category that outnumbers other kinds of divine intervention. In two instances, these healings are not immedi-

⁴⁶ See Gottskálk Jensson 2005. The saga focuses on the bishop's virtues rather than in a faithful account of his personality (Wolf 2008: 249) and is structured around “clusters of spheres of duty” (Jørgensen 1978: 10), especially matters related to matrimony, adultery, and incest, which are meant to inform the reader of the bishop's main pastoral concerns and interests. The text has been described as having the character of a lesson, a narrative vehicle for Paul's letters and Psalms (Ármann Jakobsson & David Clark 2013: xx).

⁴⁷ The text is extant in a fragment from the mid-thirteenth century (AM 383 I 4to, c. 1240–60), whereas the first extant complete version is found in Stock. Perg Fol. 5 (c. 1360): Wolf. *Legends of the Saints*, 372–378.

ately granted, but the bishop lets the suppliants suffer for a while so that they may learn from their mistakes. These miraculous punishments affect a man with epilepsy and eye-pain, so that he may learn to confess his sins, and a man with a hand injury, so that he may fulfill his vows to the saint.⁴⁸ In ch. 44, it is explicitly stated that the favour granted to the devotees of the saint was not extended to those who did not believe in him:

[In a certain place] people came to an impassable river and those who called upon Bishop Þorlák got over it safely, but those who did not call on him did not.⁴⁹

The second redaction of *Þorláks saga*, known as *Þorláks saga B* [*PBp^B*] might have been composed around the time of the third translation of Þorlák's remains in 1292,⁵⁰ whereas the third redaction, *Þorláks saga C* [*PBp^C*], was composed after 1325.⁵¹ The main difference between the first and the second and third redactions of *Þorláks saga* is the insertion of *Oddaverjaþátr* ('Tale of the Oddaverjar'), which deals with Bishop Þorlák's attempts at exercising direct control over ecclesiastical properties (*staðir*) against Icelandic chieftains, of whom the Oddaverjar are the most prominent.⁵² In

⁴⁸ *PBp^A*, ch. 65 (ÍF XVI: 94): "Nú játta þik fyrir presti ef þú vill heulsu fá" ("Now confess yourself before a priest if you wish to receive healing"; Ármann Jakobsson & David Clark 2013: 29); ch. 67 (ÍF XVI: 94): "Títt gersk þér at heita ok efna eigi" ("You are quick to make promises but not to fulfil them"; trans. Ármann Jakobsson, and David Clark 2013: 29). Expanded versions of these two miracles are found in the oldest collection of St Þorlák's miracles, *Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups in forma*, chs 1 and 28 (ÍF XVI: 107–108; 122–123).

⁴⁹ *Í einum stað kómu menn at ófærri vatni, ok kómusk þeir yfir með heilu er á Þorlák biskup hétu, en hinir eigi er óngu hétu.* (*PBp^A* ch. 44, ÍF XVI: 91); trans. Ármann Jakobsson & Clark 2013: 27).

⁵⁰ *PBp^B* is extant in AM 382 4to, ff. 1v–42v (c. 1340–60) and in the small fragment BL Add. 11242 (Wolf 2013: 378–384). *PBp^B* is closer to the Latin fragments than *PBp^A*, where the material of the fragments had been abridged. For a summary on the debated dating of the fragment, see Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 137–138; Wolf 2008: 247.

⁵¹ In *PBp^C*, the narrative is similar to the one in *PBp^B*, although it is sometimes abridged and contains independent episodes.

⁵² In *PBp^B*, *Oddaverjaþátr* follows the reference to Þorlák's marital reform (*PBp^A* ch. 15), whereas in *PBp^C* it follows the description of the bishop's habits (*PBp^A* ch. 16). The text's attention to the *staðamál* (the question surrounding ecclesiastical properties) may be attributed to the context of composition of the *þátr* around the time of the height of the controversy, during the episcopate of Bishop Árni Þorláksson: see Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Ármann Jakobsson 1999. Recently, Andersson (2021: xix–xxvii) has argued for the independent circulation of *Oddaverjaþátr* before its incorporation in the bishop's saga based on stylistic differences, the absence of Biblical quotations, the abundance of dialogue, and overt references to the past throughout the account.

order to achieve his goals, the bishop did not yield from threatening his opponents with interdiction and excommunication.

Central to the narrative is the case of the chieftain and deacon Jón Loptsson of the Oddaverjar (d. 1197).⁵³ Disagreement first arose between the bishop and the chieftain when Jón did not want the bishop to consecrate the new church he had built at Hofðabrekka, which would have implied a confirmation of ecclesiastical property on the part of the bishop. After the bishop placed him under interdiction, the *þátr* reports that the chieftain attempts to ambush him, his plan eventually failing due to a thick fog that hinders his way – itself a sign of divine intervention.⁵⁴ Then, Jón's son, Þorsteinn, takes the matter into his hands and threatens the bishop at Vellir. He waits for Þorlák outside the church, intending to strike him with his axe. When Þorsteinn is about to hit the bishop, his hand is miraculously struck stiff, “because we think that God's power prevented him”.⁵⁵ After another failed ambush, Jón and Þorlák settle their dispute, the bishop agreeing to delay excommunication and to wait for the chieftain to mend his ways. However, despite their settlement with the bishop, divine punishment intervenes one last time to chastise both Jón and Þorsteinn, scoring in favour of the bishop at the closing of the narrative. About Þorsteinn, the *þátr* says that he “turned out to be the most luckless fellow”, and that his father and brothers suffered repeated provocations on his account.⁵⁶ Finally, Þorlák himself interprets the events that lead to the death of Jón Loptsson as caused by divine intervention. Despite his opposition to the bishop, the *þátr* says that Jón wanted to build a monastery to St John the Baptist on his property at Keldur. Þorlák expresses his amazement as to whether the saint would accept the dedication from such an individual. By seeing his offer accepted, the bishop implies, Jón would feel legitimated in his actions against the Church, especially in connection to Keldur, which he had

⁵³ Cf. *PBp^B* ch. 22 (ÍF XVI: 167–168); chs 26–27 (ÍF XVI: 175–180).

⁵⁴ A similar divine chastisement happens to another chieftain in the narrative prior to this event. The bishop threatens Sveinn Sturluson with interdiction and excommunication because he took as a concubine a close kinswoman of his wife, and for this reason Sveinn attempts to ambush the bishop. However, according to the saga his scheme is frustrated by God himself, who protects the bishop with a fog that hinders Sveinn on his way (*PBp^B* ch. 25, ÍF XVI: 174).

⁵⁵ *ætlandi þat Guðs kraptr hafi hann tálmat* (*PBp^B* ch. 26, ÍF XVI: 175–177; quotation at p. 177).

⁵⁶ *vard inn mesti ógíptumaðr, svá at faðir hans ok braeðr hofðu þar af langa skapraun* (*PBp^B* ch. 27, ÍF XVI: 180; trans. Andersson 2021: 87).

seized against the bishop's will.⁵⁷ Before the monastery is completed, Jón is taken ill and dies soon after, and his sons abandon work on the monastery, leaving it in ruins.

Punishments via temporary paralysis like the one suffered by Þorsteinn Jónsson occur also in St Þorlákr's miracle collections.⁵⁸ In *Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups in forna*, which was composed shortly after the bishop's death, a woman is stricken with eye-pain after mocking a miracle attributed to the saint, and the saint heals her only after she has performed penance.⁵⁹ The first extant miracle of *Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups önnur*, which is extant in a seventeenth-century manuscript, deals with an English priest who mocks a statue of the bishop saint, derisively calling him a 'suet-eater bishop' (*mörbyskup*). He is immediately punished with paralysis, from which he is freed through public repentance and prayer to the saint.⁶⁰

2.1.2 *Jóns saga ins helga*

Jóns saga ins helga, the saga of Jón Ögmundarson, the first bishop of the northern diocese of Hólar (1106–1121), is extant in three recension known as S (Skálholt), from the first half of the thirteenth century; L ('Latinum'), written around c. 1320; and H ('Hólar'), which was written around 1500 but is extant in two seventeenth-century manuscripts.⁶¹ The author of the H recension included more miracles than those found in the previous versions, showing a greater interest in the bishop's supernatural powers. The one retaliatory miracle that Whaley identifies in *Jóns saga* befalls Þorfinna of Hof in Svarfaðardalur. In the episode, Þorfinna suddenly loses her ability

⁵⁷ "Pater mikit undr efti hann vill þiggja þat sem hefir þar saman borit, svá sem hann hefir til aflat". (PBp^B ch. 28, ÍF XVI: 180)

⁵⁸ *Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups in forna*, counts 46 miracles chiefly associated with the diocese of Skálholt, of whose cathedral church Þorlákr became co-patron together with St Peter and the Virgin Mary. Part of the miracles of the collection are also extant in AM 645 4to (1220–1250). *Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups önnur* is found in AM 379 4to (1654) and records events that happened in the diocese of Hólar and abroad at the time of Bishop Páll Jónsson (1195–1211). These additional miracles are more detailed in identifying people and places of invocation, suggesting that the collection might have been gathered to serve an official canonisation process. Both collections were added to *Þorláks saga biskups C* (see above). Cf. Kuhn 1996.

⁵⁹ *Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups in forna*, ch. 16 (ÍF XVI: 114–115). This miracle is also registered in PBp^B ch. 105 (ÍF XVI: 210).

⁶⁰ *Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups önnur* ch. 133; ÍF XVI: 227–228 (quotation at p. 227). This is the only chastisement mentioned by Whaley (1994: 163) in relation to St Þorlákr, which however does not appear to be accounted for in the breakdown of her results.

⁶¹ See Peter Foote's detailed analysis of the recension of the saga in Cormack 2021: 105–123. For the Latin literature connected with the popular cult of Jón, see Gottskálk Jensson 2017.

to speak and is then healed by the saint's intervention.⁶² However, it should be noted that it is St Þorlák who heals the woman, and not Jón. The holy bishop appears to her in a vision and, before healing her, explains that she lost the ability to speak for never praying for the dead before meals and for staying up late at night.⁶³ It is only later in the narrative, after Þorfinna is miraculously rescued from the edge of a precipice on her way to communicate the miracle to Bishop Guðmundr, that we are told of Bishop Jón's intervention. As St Þorlák states once he appears to the woman a second time, it is this second episode that serves as a token of Jón's charismatic powers. The bishop of Hólar, Þorlák says, is of no less merit with God than he himself, albeit less well-known with respect to miracles.⁶⁴

In fact, the saga says that Bishop Jón performed seven punitive miracles, two during his life and five after his death, and such retaliatory acts are explicitly interpreted as part of the weaponry of the bishop saint:

That summer Bishop Jón began his visitation of his diocese, and began to rule God's Church with a firm hand. He punished evildoers with the power that had been given him by God, and strengthened good and moral people in every way.⁶⁵

Jón's supernatural acts punish sinners, those who do not believe in his sanctity and those who openly oppose him. The first instance of divine punishment in the saga happens during Jón's lifetime. While visiting Trondheim on his way to Iceland, Jón,

⁶² *Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 63, ÍF XV²: 299–304 [S and H recensions].

⁶³ The holy bishop says that the first sin is a sign of lack of piety, the second an act that goes "against natural moderation and divine order" (*í móti guðligrí setningu ok manna hjalp ok helsu*; ÍF XV²: 302).

⁶⁴ *Því at hann leynisk meirr at öllum jarteinum, ok er hann þó hvergi légrí at verðleikum við Guð en ek* (*Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 63 [H recension], ÍF XV²: 304). This episode is part of a cluster of miraculous healings that are performed by Jón only after the supplicants have turned to St Þorlák without effect; cf. *Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 25 [all recensions], 29 [S and H redaction], 37 [all recensions]; ÍF XV²: 260–261; 264–265; 278. These miracle episodes are meant to show Jón's charismatic power, possibly at an early stage of his cult. For the purpose of the current analysis, these episodes count as potential but not actualised miracle that punishes the lack of attention for another saint. Thus, they can be ascribed to either bishop saint: St Þorlák, who effectively does not grant the healing, or Jón, who does grant it only after the due respects have been paid to him and his sanctity.

⁶⁵ *Á þessu sumri hóf Jón biskup yfirfor sína yfir ríki sitt ok tók at stýra at stýra Guðs kristnum með mikilli stjórn. Hirti hann vánda menn af því veldi er honum var gefit at Guðs hálfu, en styrkði góða menn ok siðláta í móragum góðum blutum.* (*Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 8 [all recensions], ÍF XV²: 202; trans. Cormack 2021: 39)

then not yet a bishop, persuades King Magnús *berfætr* to free an Icelander, Gísi Il-lugason, sentenced to death for a killing. A noble Norwegian, named Sigurðr *ullstrengr* (Woolstring), speaks against Jón but immediately received a swift punishment in the form of a mortal illness, from which he is released only after asking Jón for forgiveness.⁶⁶

After Jón's death, two miraculous happenings punish two deacons to warn them for their lack of faith in the late bishop's powers, even after having personally experienced them. In the first instance, deacon Brandr Dálksson is reluctant to attribute his horse's miraculous cure to Bishop Jón, whom he had called on.⁶⁷ Since God, the saga says, wanted to show the glory of the bishop, the horse becomes ill a second time. This time Brandr prays to the saint again and promises to have the miracle recorded. Similarly, Einarr the deacon dreams about a miracle performed by Bishop Jón but does not report it. In his case too, the prospect of divine chastisement is openly expected:

It occurred to him in the dream that he would have to pay dearly for many things, but would not pay more dearly for anything else than that he had failed to proclaim this miracle that Bishop Jón had performed for him.⁶⁸

The saga does not report what happened to the deacon, and the divine punishment thus remains potential but not actuated. Einarr's disbelief is particularly striking, as the deacon had been the recipient of another miracle granted by the bishop earlier in the saga.⁶⁹ Jón's patience in his regards is commendable, especially considering the fate of others who do not believe in his sanctity. As seen in *PBp*⁴, Jón is ready to rescue those merchants who vowed to him during a storm but is not so lenient in granting temporary punishments to those Norwegians who did not, leaving them to shipwreck and death.⁷⁰

As for punishing sinners, the saga says that Þórir, a member of the bishop's household, receives “a swift punishment” (*bráðliga hefnd*), for ignoring the bishop's com-

⁶⁶ *Jóns saga ins helga* [Gísls þátr Illugason] [L recension]; ÍF XV²: 331–332.

⁶⁷ *Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 45 [S and H recensions]; ÍF XV²: 288–289.

⁶⁸ *Kom honum þat í hug í svefnum at hann mundi margs mega at gjalda, ok eigi annars meirr mega gjalda en þess er hann hefði eigi lýst þessar jartein er Jón biskup hafði honum gört.* (*Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 34 [all recensions], ÍF XV²: 270)

⁶⁹ Cf. *Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 23 [all recensions], ÍF XV²: 258–259.

⁷⁰ *Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 64 [H recension]; ÍF XV²: 309–310.

mand of attending the canonical hours, of which he has been often heedless.⁷¹ He falls ill while wrestling and his tongue, which he would not curb –the saga says–, as he was rather careless of speech (*heldr gálauss*) is caught between his teeth, swelling so much that he is left unable to speak. The punishment is temporary, and Þórir is restored to health only after sincere repentance, prayer, and the holy touch of the bishop. A similar happening befalls Kálfr, whose chronic madness is cured for the intercession of the saintly bishop. Jón appears to Kálfr in a vision, announcing his cure, but admonishes him to mend his conduct. The fact that he has lost his mind, explains the bishop, is ultimately caused by God's wrath against him because of his evil way of life.⁷² Conversely, death is the only retribution that is deemed suitable for two women, Guðrun Daðadóttir and Valgerðr Böðvarsdóttir, and a priest, Hjalti of Hólastaðr, who stole from Jón's widow out of jealousy for her former status. Their deed is swiftly chastised with madness (*vitfiring*),⁷³ despite the fact that these women were –according to the saga– not immoral in any other respect (*eigi [ó]siðlátar værri í mörgu*): Guðrun was a noble housewife (*göfug húsfreyja*) and Valgerðr an outstanding young woman (*ein ágæt mær*).

2.1.3 *Guðmundar sögur*

According to Icelandic historiography, Bishop Guðmundr Arason of Hólar (1203–1237) firmly stood against secular interference in ecclesiastical affairs. Despite his efforts, however, Guðmundr was not successful in his undertakings and was only able to assert his authority through physical resistance to chieftains, as reflected in his dealings with chieftain Kolbeinn Tumason, and if anything, he managed to spread a marked awareness of a divide between spiritual and secular matters in Icelandic society.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the bishop's attention to the needs of the poor and his fame as

⁷¹ *Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 11 [S and L recensions], ÍF XV²: 224.

⁷² “Pat er eptir því sem vert er. Þú ert fullr lausungar ok hefir illa lifat, ok fyrir þá sök er þú orðinn fyrir Guðs reiði”. (*Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 42, ÍF XV²: 283 [S and H recensions]) (“That is appropriate, since you lived an evil life, full of deceit, and for that reason your condition is different from that appropriate for Christians, and you have been subject to God's wrath; trans. Cormack 2021: 77)

⁷³ *En þau tóku öll eina hefnd eptir guðligum dómi... ok því fengu skjóta hirting af Guði.* (*Jóns saga ins helga*, ch. 20a [H recension], ÍF XV²: 243–244) (They all received a single punishment according to divine judgment... For this they received a swift punishment from God; trans. Cormack 2021: 53)

⁷⁴ See Simpson 1973. On Guðmundr's role in the *staðamál*, especially in matters of *privilegium canonis* and *fori*, see Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1982.

wonder-worker, especially connected to his consecration of waters, kindled the people's devotion and encouraged the belief in the bishop's sanctity.⁷⁵

The first account of the bishop's life, *Prestssaga Guðmundar* (henceforth *Prestssaga*), was likely composed by Abbot Lambkárr Þorgilsson (d. 1249), one of the bishop's closest associates.⁷⁶ The text is now lost but survives in an abridged version in *Sturlunga saga* and covers Guðmundr's life up to the time of his election. The first *translatio* of Guðmundr's relics was promoted by Bishop Auðunn Þorbergsson of Hólar (1313–1322) in 1315, when it is likely that the bishop commissioned the composition of a saga to celebrate him. Three versions are extant from the 1320s: *Guðmundar saga A* [GBp^A] (c. 1320–1330), *Guðmundar saga B* [GBp^B] (c. 1320), and *Guðmundar saga C* [GBp^C] (c. 1320–1345).⁷⁷ A second *translatio* was ordered in 1345 by Bishop Ormr Áslásson of Hólar (1343–1356), whose collaborator, Arngrímr Brandsson of Þingeyrar (d. 1361), is the author of the youngest extant version of Guðmundr's life: *Guðmundar saga D* [GBp^D.]⁷⁸ Despite these efforts, however, Guðmundr was never formally canonised, his cult remaining confined at a popular level.⁷⁹

Given the challenging attitude that Bishop Guðmundr used in pursuing his goals, it seems surprising to note a lack of supernatural mechanisms employed to support and justify his acts. Since the publication of Whaley's study, Joanna A. Skórzewska provided an extensive discussion of miracles of punishment in the *Guðmundar sögur*.⁸⁰ She considered Guðmundr's vengeful attitude a surprising feature, especially in consideration of the bishop's otherwise gentle approach towards other issues, such as keeping certain days holy. This can be seen in the number of punitive miracles, five of which the bishop is said to have performed during his life and one after his death. This section will provide a brief overview of the bishop's actualisations of divine punishments based on Skórzewska's analysis.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Cormack 1994: 98–101; 2011: 20.

⁷⁶ The fourteenth-century tradition mentions Lambkárr as an 'unattached' abbot in Hitardalur (DI III: 31). According to Orri Vésteinsson (2000: 137 n. 43), this may only be an educated guess, and Lambkárr may have owed his title to Bishop Guðmundr's unusual actions.

⁷⁷ For a comprehensive overview of the *Guðmundar sögur* tradition, see Skórzewska 2011: 216–239. GBp^C is still unpublished. I was not able to analyse this version of the saga. Like several scholars before me, I relied on the findings of those who had the opportunity to study the text to compare with my findings whenever necessary.

⁷⁸ Gottskálk Jansson (2022) has recently demonstrated that this version was originally composed in Latin as a dossier for canonisation to be offered to the Curia, but the text survives today only in vernacular translation.

⁷⁹ See Anderson 2020.

⁸⁰ Skórzewska 2011: 184–190.

At times Guðmundr's miraculous punishments are the results of no more than a petty attitude towards those individuals who do not grant him what he wants. Death incurs those animals, a horse at Langadalur⁸² and a sheep in Borgarfjörður,⁸³ whose owners have refused to hand over to Guðmundr. Great misfortune is foretold to the priest Oddleif after he has refused hospitality to the bishop and his men,⁸⁴ whereas a long delay is the retribution that befalls the Norwegian sailors who did not grant the bishop elect to disembark on Hrísey to celebrate Mass.⁸⁵

More serious theological concerns are seemingly at play behind other punishments. When priest Steinn shows his scepticism in believing that the relics that the bishop had given him really belong to Bishop Jón, Guðmundr asks for a sign. Immediately, the relics of the saint give out a wonderful fragrance, and Steinn, who has suddenly become unable to smell, understands God' and Bishop Jón's anger against him.⁸⁶ Disbelief in the power of the waters that Guðmundr himself consecrated is severely punished in the case of priest Ljótr.⁸⁷ After openly declaring his scepticism during a public meeting, his son drowns and is found dead, being eventually revived thanks to the power of Guðmundr's waters.

Among the flaws that are corrected through punitive miracles in *GBpD*, a particular case involves people who neglect to cross themselves. While a woman is healed of a water snake (*vatnormr*) she temporarily contracted because she forgot to cross herself before drinking,⁸⁸ this same negligence is also punished with a miracle with irreversible effects. An unnamed shepherd becomes sick after drinking the water of a brook without making the sign of the cross. He runs to the church where he finds some grass that Guðmundr sprinkled with consecrated water. After eating it, he spits out the illness he swallowed and is briefly restored to health. However, after a short while, the shepherd falls sick again and passes away. Arngrímr, the author of *GBpD*, explains that the miracle story is meant to showcase how the charismatic powers of Bishop Guðmundr compare to those of the saint, and of St Ambrose in particular:⁸⁹

⁸¹ On Guðmundr's miracles, see also Gunnvör Sigríður Karlsdóttir 2017. I am thankful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing me to this source.

⁸² *Prestssaga* ch. 19; *GBp^A* ch. 86; *GBp^B* ch. 59; *GBp^D* ch. 16.

⁸³ *GBp^B* ch. 117; *GBp^D* chs 65 and 66.

⁸⁴ *GBp^A* ch. 166; *GBp^B* ch 105.

⁸⁵ *Prestssaga* ch. 29.

⁸⁶ *Prestssaga* ch. 22.

⁸⁷ Cf. *GBp^B* ch. 39 and *GBp^D* ch. 89.

⁸⁸ *GBp^D* ch. 83.

This shows that not even the power of saints can save the sinful man from the hidden and final judgement of God, albeit their charity is primarily shown before the eyes of holy Christendom.⁹⁰

Arngrímr's treatment of this miraculous scene is an interesting case of variation, as not only it involves the retribution for not crossing oneself but also deals with the extent of the power of saints towards those who cannot be saved. However, the fact that it is supported by a learned reference to hagiographical literature, a characteristic trait of Arngrímr's style, may be an indication of its fictional character rather than its historical reliability, of the literary abilities of the saga authors rather than the charisma of his protagonist.⁹¹

3.2 SAGAS OF NON-SAINT BISHOPS

The author/s of the early *Biskupa sögur* appear to be somewhat sceptical towards the charismatic powers of the bishops. *Hungrvaka*, which collects short portraits on the lives of the first bishops of Skálholt, and its continuation, *Páls saga*, the life of Bishop Páll Jónsson (1195–1211), do not portray the bishops as performing punitive miracles, despite including several references to resistance and opposition to the bishops that could have promoted their inclusion.⁹² The absence of punitive miracles in these early

⁸⁹ Cf. *Var hér sýndr verðleikr herra Guðmundar á þann hátt, sem virðuligs vinar hans Ambrosii.* (*GBp^D* ch. 44). The parallel is supported by a similar miracle performed by the bishop saint of Milan, which Arngrímr likely draw from the Old Norse version of the saint's life; cf. *Ambrósiuss saga biskups* ch. 11 (Unger 1877: I, 37–38).

⁹⁰ *Brtist fyrir þetta, at tign heilagra manna má eigi draga syndugan mann undan leyndum ok endaligum guðs dómi, þótt þeirra kærleikr birtist í fyrra stað fyrir augum heilagrar kristni.* (*GBp^D* ch. 44).

⁹¹ Ciklamini 1994; Stefán Karlsson 1985.

⁹² This is the case of the first bishop of Skálholt, Ísleifr Gizurarson, who performed some wondrous acts that—says the author—were considered miracles by the wisest people but only showed his benevolence “to those who could appreciate it” (*þá er miðk birti gæzku hans fyrir þeim mónum er þat kumur at skynja*) (*Hungrvaka* ch. 2; ÍF XVI: 10). Another record of disobedience is in *Hungrvaka* ch. 7 (ÍF XVI: 27–28), in relation to Bishop Þorlák Runólfsson. *Páls saga* ch. 7 (ÍF XVI: 309–310) says that the bishop proceeded cautiously (*variúðliga*) in the matter of proclaiming the sanctity of his relative, albeit believing in it from the get-go. The saga author also shows a certain awareness of the power of God to test his servants, a framework of reference that serves them to justify the drowning of Páll's wife and daughter: *En af því at Guð vill eigi ávallt eptirlæti einu reyna sína ástvini, heldr vill hann sína menn algóra verða láta í freistinnum ok mannaunum, ef vel standask, sem <opt> hafa raukir á orðit.* (*Páls saga*, ch. 13; ÍF XVI: 315) (“But God does not always wish to test his worshippers with favour alone but rather wishes to exalt them with temptation and exertion to see if they remain firm, as He has often demonstrated”; trans. Anderson 2021: 51)

texts may be a matter of editorial choice. After all, these episcopal biographies serve to celebrate the success of the institution of the Church in Iceland, rather than the sanctity of these figures. Furthermore, a text like *Hunrvaka* openly serves as a lead up to St Þorlák's life, whose sanctity and miracle working stand out even more in the very absence of the miraculous prior to his office.⁹³

3.2.1 *Árna saga biskups*

Punitive miracles are also documented in *Árna saga*, the biography of Bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt (1269–1298), composed shortly after his death (between 1304 and 1312).⁹⁴ The prominent feature of the narrative is the bishop's direct involvement in the *staðamál* and it is the central interest of the author to provide a reliable (albeit partial) account of the conflict over ecclesiastical property ownership between the Icelandic clergy and powerful former chieftains.⁹⁵ While the saga author chiefly relies on extracts from official documents and canon law to strengthen the bishop's claims during the conflict,⁹⁶ the narrative is not devoid of supernatural events that strike the bishop's enemies and are instrumental to bringing forth the bishop's victory.⁹⁷

This is the case of Ásgrímr Þorsteinsson and Ormr Klængsson, two former chieftains who supported Hrafn Oddsson in his fight against the Church. After lengthy descriptions of their grudges with the bishop, the saga reports that they were both struck by abrupt illnesses when they were about to undertake yet another action that was meant to damage Bishop Árni and his party. The saga suggests that the illness made them understand their crimes towards the bishop, and Árni agreed to absolve them *in articulo mortis* after they had sworn an oath of fidelity to the Church, which involved the transfer of ownership of their estates.⁹⁸

Despite the fact that the deaths of these wealthy laymen are neither immediately nor directly related to the bishop's intervention, the ex-chieftains' concern for dying

⁹³ Cf. *Hunrvaka* ch. 11: “everyone is sure to know that no other man has previously proved to be [a saint] except for Bishop Þorlák the Saint”; trans. Anderson 2021: 31. The final lines of *Hunrvaka* celebrate the bishop saint as the Apostle of Iceland and compare him to St Patrick, “for they accomplished the work of the apostles themselves in their teaching and patience with disobedient and wrongminded men”; trans. Anderson 2021: 33.

⁹⁴ *Árna saga* is extant in forty manuscripts and manuscript fragments.

⁹⁵ On the *staðamál*, see Magnús Stefánsson 1978; Orri Vésteinsson 2000: 210–223, 286–290; Gunnar Karlsson 2000: 38–43, 96–9.

⁹⁶ Þorleifur Hauksson 1975: lxii–cvii.

⁹⁷ Cf. Haki Antonsson 2017.

⁹⁸ Cf. *ÁBp*, chs 9 (on Ásgrímr Þorsteinsson) and 118 (Ormr Klængsson) (ÍF XVII: pp. 139–141; 165–167).

without the Church's blessing, together with the fact that the author dwells on these scenes for quite some time, hint at a preternatural component to these deaths. In fact, the saga itself provides the interpretative key to these scenes after narrating the events, highlighting their meaning in retrospect:

Many were reluctant regarding such doings because they knew well the bishop's anger and fury, whenever his will and orders were not abided by. A certain spark of God's love, or the contrary murmur of their own conscience –as it was proved true later– hindered some, so that each of them yielded when their life was in danger. Thus, they quickly swore as the bishop commanded them, so as to die in accord with the words and believes of the Church that Bishop Árni held and had, however many legal defences they had previously arrogantly presented, when they were allowed to chose a longer life, as it has been said before regarding the lord Ásgrímr and Ormr of Haukadalur.⁹⁹

The providential punishments are sent by God to Árni's opponents to make them repent of their stubbornness and disobedience to the Church and cause them to give in to the bishop's demands. It is worth noting that these episodes had a direct impact on the development of the controversy, as witnessed by the case of other two ex-chieftains. The saga says that Björn Dufgusson of Hjarðarholt waited until the last minute before his death for settling his enmity with the bishop,¹⁰⁰ whereas it was the shock caused by Hrafn Oddsson's death that led Óláfr Arnórsson to settle the matter with the bishop's representatives.¹⁰¹

A similar end is allotted to a priest, Þorvaldr Helgason, who deserted to Hrafn's side and disobeyed the bishop's injunctions. In his case, however, he is led to death by some sudden accidents without reaching a settlement with the bishop. From the moment the priest sided with Hrafn Oddsson, the saga says, it seemed that Þorvaldr had somewhat changed his way of talking about the bishop,¹⁰² and disobeyed him in various matters. Supernatural punishments for his behaviour befall Þorvaldr twice,

⁹⁹ *Urðu ok margir tregir til slíkra atgerða, því at þeir vissu visa reiði byskups ok stórmali þar sem hans vili ok skipan var at engu höfð. Suma tálmaði nokkorr gneisti Guðs ástar eðr móti möglan eiginnar samvizku, sem raunír bar á, at hvern þeira gekk til valds í lífsháska ok sór skjótt eptir því sem byskup bauð þeim til þess at deyja undir játning kirkjunnar mála ok trú sem Árni byskup helt ok hafði, hversu margar varnir sinna mála sem hann bar aðr digrbarkliga fram þá er hann lér lengra lífs til kosningar sem aðr er greint um herra Ásgrím ok Orm í Haukadal. (ÁBp ch. 120; ÍF XVII: 169)*

¹⁰⁰ ÁBp ch. 137; ÍF XVII: 193–194.

¹⁰¹ ÁBp ch. 146; ÍF XVII: 204–206.

¹⁰² þótt mönnum nokkot breytt orðlagi hans til byskups. (ÁBp ch. 124; ÍF XVII: 174).

both times when the priest leaves Iceland without Árni's permission.¹⁰³ In the first instance, Þorvaldr's voyage starts with a fair wind, which the priest interprets as a sign of favour in his regards and against Bishop Árni's.¹⁰⁴ However, immediately after insulting the bishop, the wind turns, and a shipwreck brings Þorvaldr back to Iceland. While the saga author does not say anything about the bishop's involvement in the shipwreck, similar miraculous punishments of sailors in *Jóns saga ins helga* and *Guðmundar saga* attest to the circulation of supernatural readings of such events and may have been interpreted as important omens of the punishment that attends the bishop's enemy. This cycle of disobedience and punishment culminates when Þorvaldr manages to leave the country, again without the bishop's leave.¹⁰⁵ Once he reaches the Faroes, he becomes possessed by an impure spirit (*óbreinn andi*), from which he is soon healed after entering the Church of St Magnús of Orkney.¹⁰⁶ Astounded by the seemingly miraculous healing of such a scoundrel, the saga says that the bystanders explained the event by saying that the real cause of Þorvaldr's apparent possession was the just result of his drunkenness.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, their scepticism towards the miraculous character of Þorvaldr's healing is proven correct once they get to Norway. Once arrived at the court of King Eirik II Magnusson, Þorvaldr is again struck by the same evil as soon as he takes to accusing Árni before the king and dies immediately after.¹⁰⁸

Árna saga breaks off here, in 1291, before the bishop reached the settlement of the *staðamál*. This was settled in 1297 with the Treaty of Ögvaldsness, signed by Bishop Árni and King Eirik.¹⁰⁹ According to the text of the treaty, whoever dared to

¹⁰³ *ÁBp* ch. 134 (ÍF XVII: 186–187) and 147 (ÍF XVII: 206–207).

¹⁰⁴ “Nú er því likast, at skip skriði undir mér á eina leið, hvárt sem Árni byskup gefr mér orlof eðr eigi.” (*ÁBp* ch. 134, ÍF XVII: 186) (“Now it seems that the ship glides under me in one direction, whether Bishop Árni gives me permission or not”)

¹⁰⁵ The episode of the journey and death of the priest Þorvaldr Helgasson is not preserved in all the manuscript tradition but is transmitted in AM 114 fol., the oldest copy of AM 122b fol. Although its matter has been considered divergent from the rest of the narrative (see below), no evidence suggests that it is a later addition: see Þorleifur Hauksson, *Árna saga bisкуп*, cxi. For a recent interpretation of the episode in relation to the *staðamál*, see Haki Antonsson 2024.

¹⁰⁶ *ÁBp* ch. 147, ÍF XVII: 206.

¹⁰⁷ *Sögðu tilefnit vera af sterkri drykkju, ok þat hefði hans vitleysi ollat.* (*ÁBp* ch. 147, ÍF XVII: 206) (They said that his state was due to a strong drink, and that this had caused him to lose his wits.)

¹⁰⁸ *þá er hann tók at ásaka sinn herra fyrir Eiríki konungi, kemr aptr hit sama tilfelli.* (*ÁBp*: 207; ÍF XVII: 207)

¹⁰⁹ DI II: 324–325. On the establishment of the beneficiary culture after the settlement of

break the settlement of the *staðamál* in favour of the Church would incur the papal ban, alongside the wrath of God and his saints.¹¹⁰ While it is impossible to assess whether the saga author dealt with the bishop's victory relying on further supernatural events, it is worth noting that a mechanism of supernatural warning similar to the one in the saga was put in place in the document itself. This may suggest a spread awareness towards this sort of supernatural propaganda and an acceptance of its terms beyond the limits of saga narrative.

3.2.2 *Söguþáttur af Jóni Halldórssyni biskupi*

Söguþáttur af Jóni Halldórssyni biskupi is the brief account of the life of Bishop Jón Halldórsson of Skálholt (1322–1339). The oldest manuscript of the *þátr*, Copenhagen, Safn Árna Magnússonar AM 657 a–b 4to (1340–1360), also includes narratives that are attributed to the bishop, who had been a Dominican preacher prior to his episcopal investiture. Rather than a linear biographical account like the rest of the *Biskupa sögur*, the *þátr* is a collection of tales based on Jón's readings and personal experience. Among these, there are two episodes that may be interpreted as punitive miracles. Given Jón's interest and fame in preaching through entertaining stories and exempla, these episodes arguably served the bishop to illustrate the very mechanism of divine retribution to his audience.

The first episode is an exemplum that Jón framed as a personal experience, but which is also found in Francesco Petrarca's *Rerum memorandarum libri*, likely composed after the late 1340s.¹¹¹ It is set in Bologna, where Jón studied, at a time –the saga says– when he was “of little understanding compared to later”.¹¹² In Bologna, a fellow student, Jón the English (*Johannes Anglicus*), asks Jón (*Johannes Nordmannus*) to interpret a strange dream (*undarlight*) he had the previous night. In the dream, he saw one of the two stone lions at the entrance of the cathedral church biting off his hand. Jón disregards the dream, replying that bad dreams often foretell insignificant things.¹¹³ Once the two students have reached the church, Jón the English stretches

the *staðamál*, see Sigurdson, *The Church in Fourteenth Century Iceland*, 32–43.

¹¹⁰ *Biodum uer ydr öllum. at hallda þetta fur lög. nema. huerr er odru viss gerir. uili sæta af os Reidi ok Refsingum. ok þo fella a sik. pauans bann. ok Guds Reidi. ok hans heilagra manna.* (DI II 325)

¹¹¹ *Rerum memorandarum liber iv*, 58 (Billanovich 1943: 233). For a comparison of the episode in the *þátr* and the Latin, see Krappe 1942: 31–33.

¹¹² *Var hann þann tima ungr ok lítit skiljandi hjá því sem síðar. (Söguþáttur af Jóni Halldórssyni biskupi ch. 1, ÍF XVII 445)*

¹¹³ *Ljótr draumr er oft fyrir litlu. (Söguþáttur af Jóni Halldórssyni biskupi ch. 1, ÍF XVII 447)*

his hand into the mouth of the stone lion that appeared in his dream and immediately falls onto the floor “as if killed” (*sem dreppinn væri*). While the cause of Jón’s death, the author explains, was due to an aspis hidden in the lion’s mouth, the episode is an edifying exemplum with religious undertones. The divine inspiration behind Jón’s dream is suggested by the church setting, especially by the fact that the student is punished to expiate his negligence before entering the sacred space. Moreover, the fact that the student is a namesake of the future bishop, who at the time had himself disregarded the dream, highlights the impact that this episode had on Jón personally and that, as bishop, he wanted to convey to his flock while preaching it. Thus, even without commentary in this sense, the episode implicitly stands as a warning, for both Jón and his audience, to follow those premonitions that God sends, without disregarding them as trifles.

A second exemplum that involves a miracle of punishment is taken from a sermon that Bishop Jón gave at Staðarhóll, in the Westfjords, on St Þorlákr’s Day. Again, the episode is not an original tale but is explicitly said to be an exemplum,¹¹⁴ which is ultimately drawn from *Dialogus miracolorum* of the Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach (1180–1240).¹¹⁵ It tells of a very righteous and wise knight who kills his nephew in God’s name to make him atone for having raped a woman.¹¹⁶ When the bishop is summoned to the deathbed of the knight, who had suffered from a long illness, the man confesses his sines but does not atone for the killing of his nephew. At first, the bishop is enraged by the man’s attitude but is eventually moved by his conditions and grants him absolution. While the bishop is looking for the Host to administer communion and cannot find it, the consecrated Host miraculously appears on the tongue of the knight:¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ In the *þátr*, the episode is variously mentioned as an adventure (*afintýr*), a chosen example (*tiltekit dæmi*), and an exemplary tale (*dæmisaga*), cf. *Söguþáttur af Jóni Halldórssyni biskupi* ch. 3, ÍF XVII: 449–450 and 454.

¹¹⁵ *Dialogus miracolorum* ix, ch. 37 (Strange 1851: II 193–195). On the reception of Caesarius’ *Dialogus* in the Dominican tradition, see the essays by Brili and Polo de Beaulieu in Smirnova, Polo de Beaulieu & Berlioz 2015: 161–210.

¹¹⁶ “...fel ek upp á allra yðar ábyrgð viðr Guð, ef þat er óhegt fyrir yðarn vondskap er stórrar pínu er fyrir vert í lögnum.” (*Söguþáttur af Jóni Halldórssyni biskupi* ch. 3, ÍF XVII: 451) (“I charge you all with responsibility to God, if what is worth great suffering in the laws goes unpunished”; trans. Marteinn H. Sigurðsson, Gunnar Harðarson & Mikael M. Karlsson 2021: 296)

¹¹⁷ “Ef hon er eigi þar þá má vera með vilja dróttins at hon sé hér.” (*Söguþáttur af Jóni Halldórssyni biskupi* ch. 3, ÍF XVII: 454) (“If [the host] is not here, then perhaps with God’s will it is here”; trans. Marteinn H. Sigurðsson, Gunnar Harðarson & Mikael M. Karlsson 2021: 298)

The bishop fell forward and begged for God's mercy and the mighty noble's forgiveness for his misunderstanding contrary to God's judgement.¹¹⁸

Rather than exemplifying the charismatic powers of the bishop himself, the exemplum illustrates the inscrutability of God's will even when violence is involved. As with the first exemplum, this story serves Bishop Jón to instruct his audience not only based on his own experience, but through his own knowledge of the religious literature on the subject.¹¹⁹

3.2.3 *Lárentíuss saga biskups*

Divine retributions towards unruly clergymen are also recurrent in *Lárentíuss saga biskups*, the life of Bishop Lárentius Kálffson of Hólar (1324–1331) composed by the bishop's disciple and secretary, priest Einarr Haflidason (1307–1393).¹²⁰ The first episode of this kind is set in Skálholt, on the eve of St Þorlákr's Day. Lárentius, not yet a bishop, is admonishing Björn, a Norwegian Dominican friar in charge of preaching the following day, to ponder in particular on the glory of the Icelandic bishop saint in his sermon. Since Þorlákr's sanctity had not yet been recognised outside of Iceland, Björn is reluctant to acknowledge the bishop's sanctity and even threatens to prohibit his veneration, despite Lárentius' warning.¹²¹ In retribution for his words,

¹¹⁸ *Verðr nú skjótt umskipti, byskup fellr fram ok biðr Guð sér líknar ok svá ríka mann sér fyrirláts um rángan skilning móti Guðs dómi; veitir hann síðan allt embætti með tárligri góðfýsi þeim góða manni.* (*Söguþáttur af Jóni Halldórssynni biskupi* ch. 3, ÍF XVII: 454; trans. Marteinn H. Sigurðsson, Gunnar Harðarson & Mikael M. Karlsson 2021: 298)

¹¹⁹ While the *þátr* says that the sermon is explicitly meant to relate St Þorlákr's fairness and zeal in keeping to God's law, no attempt is made to relate the episode to St Þorlákr himself. According to Viðar Pálsson (2021: 47), the exemplum is meant to highlight the inevitability of divine judgment and the equal standing of all before God's law as principles that should be guarded by church officials.

¹²⁰ Einarr Haflidason was part of the so-called 'North Benedictine School', a group of learned clerics who wrote hagiographical texts in a highly rhetorical and elaborate style; Cf. Sverrir Tómasson 1985. Højgaard Jørgensen (1978: 92–94) hypothesizes that Einarr Haflidason composed *Lárentíuss saga biskups* in order to promote the canonization of Lárentius. On *Lárentíuss saga biskups*, see also Ferrari 2021.

¹²¹ “...ok lát eigi ofar koma þessa fólsku, því at þat vita allir hér á þessu landi ok svá víða annars staðar at hinn heilagi Þorlák byskup er sannheilagr maðr, ok hann gjörði margar ágætar jartegnit ok gjörir, ok hann mun hefna þér ef þú bætir eigi við Guð ok þann blezaða byskup” (ÍF XVII: 270) (“... let this foolishness go no further, for all men, both in the land and far and wide beyond it, know that the Bishop St Thorlák is a saint in truth, and did many mighty miracles, and yet doeth; and he will surely punish thee if thou dost not make thy peace with God and his blessed bishop”; trans. Elton 1890: 33)

overnight the preacher is afflicted with a near-fatal illness. When Björn seeks his help, Lárentíus remarks that this illness is the result of his foolishness, since he doubted the sanctity of St Þorlákr, who, as is merciful to those who call upon him, “is very vengeful to them that trespass against him”.¹²² To support his interpretation of the event, he then tells Björn the miracle story of St Þorlákr and the English cleric that opens *Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups önnur* and that was mentioned above.¹²³ The illness and the miracle episode persuade the Dominican friar, who makes amends and is soon cured of his illness.

As in the case of the punitive miracles in *Jóns þattr*, this episode is particularly significant as it reveals how punitive and retributive miracles were understood by contemporaries and employed by saga authors. Einarr admonishes his audience through Lárentíus, but does so without attributing the miracle to the protagonist of his saga, who would later become a bishop himself. True to the goals of his narrative, which was not intended to highlight the sanctity of its central figure, the author instead invokes the then recognized sanctity of Bishop Þorlákr, whose holiness ensures the credibility of such an event.¹²⁴ As a keen reader of the religious literature of his time, Einar refers to Þorlákr's miracle and elaborates it further into another episode of punishment, which should therefore be counted among the saint's acts of retribution.¹²⁵

There are two further miracles of punishment in *Lárentíuss saga*. The first involves the priest Snjólfur Sumarliðason, a staunch opponent of Bishop Lárentíus throughout the saga.¹²⁶ During a visitation at Munkaþverá, the priest gets drunk at a banquet with Lárentíus and speaks ill of the bishop, who does not reply to the priest's cursing (*brigslí ok meinyrði*). The following night, Snjólfur is taken gravely ill and begs for the

¹²² *Svá er hann ok mjök hefnsamr þeim sem í móti honum brjóta.* (ÍF XVII: 271; trans. Elton 1890: 34)

¹²³ *Lárentíuss saga* ch. 18 (ÍF XVII: 268–273).

¹²⁴ On the hagiographical traits of *Lárentíuss saga*, see Jørgensen 1978: 92–94.

¹²⁵ The transfer of a miracle from a saint to another is often recorded in hagiographical literature: “Miracles were not copyright; they were part of a general world view and belonged to an essentially subjective kind of truth”, Ward 1982: 221. Whaley (1994b: 163 n. 30) acknowledged that St Þorlákr's miracle episode was repeated in *Lárentíuss saga*, but did not count it among the miracles of the bishop saint. This may be because *Lárentíuss saga* was outside the scope and the corpus of her study.

¹²⁶ Cf. *Kom jafnan hart i meðal þeira, þó svá at hann leitaði á biskupinn meðr ómetnaðarsamligum orðum.* (*Lárentíuss saga*, ch. 45, ÍF XVIII: 388–389) (There was ever a sharpness between them; but it was Snjólf who attacked the bishop with vainglorious words; trans. Elton 1890: 104).

bishop to come and asks forgiveness for his words. Bishop Lárentíus pardons the priest, who recovers and “never again spoke ill of the bishop as long as he lived”.¹²⁷ In ch. 57, Brother Árni, Lárentíus’s own son, is taken ill, as the saga author suggests, as a punishment for his misconduct.¹²⁸ He is restored to health by the prayers of the bishop and upon his conditional return to the monastery of Þingeyri.¹²⁹

Another episode in *Lárentíuss saga* could be read as a miraculous punishment of sort and scored to the merits of Bishop Lárentíus.¹³⁰ It delas with the case of a sub-deacon, *Ferða-Árni* (Wandering-Árni), who, “puffed up with great wickedness and monstrous foolhardiness”,¹³¹ disguises himself as mass-deacon and twice reads the gospel during Mass. Before Árni is ultimately charged by Bishop Lárentíus’s ecclesiastical authority, his disguise and crime are made apparent by two miraculous happenings. In both instances, when the false mass-deacon is reading the gospel, the church lights go out and cannot be rekindled. Once discovered, Bishop Lárentíus orders him to be whipped by six real deacons, whose office Árni had surreptitiously taken upon himself. *Ferða-Árni* is then absolved, but his legal ordination is hindered and deferred to the higher authority of the pope. According to the saga, the episode is meant to illustrate Bishop Lárentíus’ concern to keep the laws of the Church and the rightful distribution of penances. While the episode cannot be counted as a proper miracle of punishment, as it is not the divine intervention itself that bestows the punishment through Lárentíus, it is nonetheless the case of a miraculous warning that brings forth the episcopal punishment, which appropriately corrects the heterodox character of the crime through the canonical practices of the Church.¹³²

¹²⁷ *Meinyrti aldri síðan síra Snjólfur Laurentium byskup meðan hann lifði.* (*Lárentíuss saga*, ch. 45, ÍF XVIII: 388–389)

¹²⁸ The saga author says that after Árni was taken ill Lárentíus pondered on his son’s shocking lifestyle, which was totally unbefitting a clergyman: *Hafði herra Laurentius byskup oftsinnis mikla skapraun af hans afskapligum framferðum sem mjök vóru í móti klaustrligum lifnaði.* (*Lárentíuss saga*, ch. 57, ÍF XVIII: 433)

¹²⁹ *Lárentíuss saga*, ch. 57, ÍF XVIII: 433–434.

¹³⁰ *Lárentíuss saga*, ch. 55, ÍF XVIII: 427–429.

¹³¹ *Fylltiz hann upp svá mikillar illsku með ógeyriligrí ofdirfð.* (*Lárentíuss saga*, ch. 55, ÍF XVIII: 427)

¹³² As in many cases throughout the saga, here too the author stressed the accuracy with which practices are followed. Thus, Árni’s crime is first communicated to the bishop of Hólar, in whose diocese it was committed, then to the provost; only then the authority to rule the case is passed on to Bishop Lárentíus by letter patent. On Einarr’s copious use of official documents in the saga, see Aae 2021: 228–237.

Conclusions

The ambiguity of the power of saints is a fixed component of hagiographic literature since late Antiquity and throughout the medieval period. Acts of divine punishment performed by God through his bishops are meant to vouchsafe for their sanctity and their ecclesiastical prerogatives, as well as to warn those who challenge them. In this sense, they are no different from healing miracles, to which they act as antithetical in form but not in purpose. This dichotomy is functional to the celebration of the power of bishop, whatever their canonization status, be it official or unofficial.

This study has demonstrated that the medieval bishops of Iceland, both bishop saints and their non-saint colleagues, are represented in the *Biskupa sögur* as dispensators of divine punishments more often than what so far considered. (Table 1 and 2)

Table 1: Punitive miracles in the sagas of bishop saints

Bishop saint	Miracles	Source/s	in vita	post mortem
St Þorlák	9	<i>PBp</i> ^A <i>PBp</i> ^{B-C} <i>Jarteinabókar</i> <i>Jóns saga</i> <i>Lárentiuss saga</i>	2	7
Jón Ögmundarson	7	<i>Jóns saga</i> [S, L, H]	2	5
Guðmundr Arason	8	<i>Prestssaga</i> ; <i>GBp</i> ^{A-B-C-D}	5	3

Table 2: Punitive miracles in the sagas of non-saint bishops

Non-saint Bishop	Miracles	Source/s	In vita	post mortem
Árni Þorláksson	5	<i>Árna saga</i>	5	
Jón Halldorsson	2	<i>Söguþátr Jóns</i>	2	
Lárentiuss Kálfsson	3	<i>Lárentiuss saga</i>	3	

The corpus of *Biskupa sögur* counts 34 instances, which is 18,6% of the corpus of “non-healing miracles” essayed by Whaley,¹³³ in contrast to the 9,8% of the French corpus analysed by Sigal.¹³⁴ A further difference with the French corpus is the time when these punishments are dispensed: while *post mortem* miracles amount to 11,7%,

¹³³ Almost as many as those miracles categorised by the scholar as miracles of “protection or rescue” (20,3%) (Whaley 1994b: 171).

¹³⁴ Whaley 1994b: 171; Sigal 1985: 289. It must be noted, however, that Sigal’s corpus counts a total of 470 punitive miracles out of 4756 miraculous instances.

with 4,2% *in vita* miracles, the Icelandic corpus shows a slight majority of *in vita* (55.8%) over *post mortem* miracles (41.2%).¹³⁵ While acknowledging the limitations of comparing two quantitatively different corpora (12 sagas against c. 254 hagiographical texts in the French corpus), these numbers suggest that Icelandic bishops were dispensers of divine punishments as much as their colleagues on the Continent, or at least as their French colleagues.

Overall, the figures in the Tables above may differ numerically from those already offered in Whaley's study, but they do not differ in substance. The far larger number of healing miracles suggests that the authors of *Biskupa sögur* preferred to illustrate the benefit that derives from the saints' miracles through more beneficial retrIBUTions. However, the presence of a larger number of punitive miracles than so far detected contributes to better define the portrayals of the bishops of Iceland and to complete the understanding of their charismatic powers through a discussion of their vengeful side. Furthermore, the study has made it possible to assess the presence of punitive miracles in sagas of non-saint bishops, in which otherwise the miraculous is generally absent.

This survey has also shown that retaliatory miracles in the genre serve different purposes in each text. As records of reported events, they showcase the power of saints in human history and support the bishops' claim to a popular cult. This is clear in the case of St Þorlákr' and Jón's miracles, which also enact a certain competition for the primacy in their respective cults through the registrations of miracles. Another reason that justifies the insertion of these miracles is to be found in the interests of the hagiographers. While some saga authors, like Arngímr Brandsson and Einarr Hafliðarson, are clearly interested in showcasing their skills, possibly at the serving of a process of canonisation, others may have been motivated by more political reasons. The authors of *Árna saga* and the later versions of *Þorláks saga*, on the other hand, are keenly interested in constructing an argument of supernatural propaganda. By relying on previous saints and echoing parallelisms between them and the bishops, these authors suggest to the audience the transfer of the same saintly powers from one to another. Finally, these miracles appear in edifying exempla that are also meant to entertain, a trait that extends to all texts at different degrees but is particularly evident in Jón Halldorsson's case.

This study represents a step forward towards a more comprehensive knowledge of the recording and the interpretation of miracles in the medieval North. In the fu-

¹³⁵ As in the French corpus, the victims of punitive miracles are more men (30) than women (6), laymen (26) more than clergymen (10). The discrepancy between the number of miracles (34) and the number of victims (36) is due to the fact that some miracles affect more people at once.

ture, it would be beneficial to pursue the charting of these miracles in a larger corpus, including *heilagra manna sögur*, Conversion narratives (*Kristni saga*, and the large tradition of *kristni þættir* and *ævintýri*), as well as secular sagas like *Sturlunga saga* and *Konunga sögur*.

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