

Mírmanns saga:

The First Old Norse-Icelandic Hagiographical Romance?

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Medieval Icelandic writers seem at times to have been fully aware that the boundaries of their texts were not firmly fixed within a rigid historical or generic frame, but could and indeed should be varied according to subject matter. The lives of their chosen saints were not recorded strictly according to the saints' worldly experiences; rather, particularly praiseworthy events were selected and recorded to provide audiences with examples of holy living. A saint's *vita* is, of course, classified as a biography, but its inclusion of miracles that occurred during or after the saint's lifetime also tests the limits of textual boundaries.

I reiterate this common knowledge because there seems to be some confusion among Old Norse-Icelandic scholars and critics regarding the classification of Old Norse-Icelandic hagiographical literature. Some scholars consider, for example, the corpus of sagas of Icelandic bishops to belong to a genre commonly called *biskupa sögur*, a term inherited from Jón Sigurðsson and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, who first edited in two volumes the biographies of Icelandic bishops and *vitae* of Icelandic episcopal saints who lived prior to the Reformation.¹ Jón Sigurðsson and Guðbrandur Vigfússon did not classify these narratives according to literary principles; to them these sagas were of the

1. Jón Sigurðsson and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, ed., *Biskupa sögur*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1858–1878).

same breed, and in their view it was not necessary to determine the pedigree of these stories more specifically.²

More than half a century ago, the British scholar Gabriel Turville-Petre maintained that the oldest translations of Latin legends into Old Norse-Icelandic had greatly influenced the vernacular literature, and that these translations taught the Icelandic/Norwegian authors to express themselves in their own language.³ In many ways, Turville-Petre's opinions shaped the ideas of other scholars about the earliest attempts to write indigenous biographies, and many scholars took for granted that the native legends were mainly imitations of Latin works. While it is indisputable that the earliest translations could have easily provided Old Norse-Icelandic writers with examples of narrative composition and style, it must be borne in mind that Old Norse-Icelandic authors and translators were educated in ways similar to their colleagues elsewhere in Europe, and that their training at native educational centers, mainly in the private and cathedral schools at Hólar, Skálholt, Haukadalur, and Oddi, helped them compose both in Latin and in the vernacular. Skill in the oral retelling of native tales must also have been a significant asset. Without such a background culture, the Old Norse-Icelandic translations of Latin *vitae* would have been impossible.

The Four Grammatical Treatises, especially the First, display a remarkable tendency to use indigenous terms when discussing grammar and rhetoric.⁴ Other literary terms are defined to a lesser degree. Some Old Norse-Icelandic terms demonstrate, however, that the writers were conscious of different types of saints' lives and would have classified the narratives accordingly.

The manuscript AM 624 4to is a priest's manual compiled around 1500. Some parts of it are written by Jón Þorvaldsson, sometime chancellor at the nunnery at Reynistaður in Skagafjörður. The manuscript contains three Icelandic homilies written by him. One of them discusses Saints Mary Magdalen and Martha and is an interpretation

2. Cf. Guðbrandur Vigfússon's introduction in *Biskupa sögur*, vol. 1, pp. v–xc.

3. Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 141–2.

4. On this topic, see my article “Skáldskapur og fræði fyrir stökk innan” in *Frejas psalter. En psalter i 40 afdelinger til brug for Jonna Louis -Jensen*, ed. Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir et al. (Copenhagen: Det arnamagnæanske Institut, 1997), pp. 190–2.

of Luke 10:38–42, the account of Jesus visiting the sisters at their home. The homilist takes pains to explain the difference between Mary’s and Martha’s work:

Þá gekk Jesús inn í kastala, andlega at skilja, er hann vitraðiz mönnum sýniligr ok lét beraz í heim frá meyju; ok tók kona nokkur hann í hús sitt sú er Martha hét, en hun átti systur er María hét. Tvær systur trúfastar, þær er við drottni tóku, merkja tvenn líf kristins lýðs; þat er *sýslulíf*, ok *upplitningarlíf*. *Sýslulíf* er at fæða hungraðan, ok klæða nöktan, þjóna sjúkum, ok grafa dauðan . . . *Upplitningarlíf* er at skiljaz við öll fjölskyldu<verk> heims, ok hafna öllum veraldaráhyggjum fyrir ást guðs.⁵

(Then Jesus entered the castle, understood in a spiritual sense, when he appeared to human beings and condescended to be born in this world by the Virgin; he was invited to the home of a certain woman named Martha, who had a sister named Mary. These two faithful sisters, who received Christ, signify the two types of Christian living; that is, *sýslulíf*, the active life, and *upplitningarlíf*, the contemplative life. The active life, *sýslulíf*, is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, serving the infirm, and burying the dead . . . The contemplative life, *upplitningarlíf*, is divorcing oneself from all everyday concerns and rejecting all worldly woes for the love of God.)

Anyone reading these lines knows that behind the words *sýslulíf* and *upplitningarlíf* stand the terms *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, which in the later Middle Ages became closely connected with the discussion of the symbolic role of these two sisters. My reason for quoting the passage is that nowhere else in Old Icelandic hagiographic literature—at least to my knowledge—does such an explicit expression of the symbolic significance of the saintly life occur.

The source from which the preacher drew his subject matter remains unknown. The sermon can hardly be a native composition; the Icelandic clergy depended a great deal on foreign, mainly Latin interpretations, as evident from most of the medieval Icelandic

5. AM 624 4to, 122v. Cf. Þorvaldur Bjarnarson, ed., *Leifar fornra kristinna fræða íslenzkra: Codex Arna-Magnæanus 677 4to* (Copenhagen: H. Hagerup, 1878), p. 154.

ecclesiastical writings. Þorvaldur Bjarnarson, the editor of this sermon, believed that it was influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux and Gregory the Great,⁶ but the discussion of the sisters' role was widespread in the mendicant orders, who saw it as reflecting their own activity, a sort of *vita mixta*, a representation of their double lives as preachers and ascetics.⁷

At the end of the thirteenth century and especially at the beginning of the fourteenth century, Icelandic hagiographers began to change their methods; they incorporated into their *passiones* and *vitae* all sorts of historical details, and their hagiographical narratives took on the character of universal history, with exact chronology and geography alongside traditional interpretations of theological questions. At times, the saint almost vanishes from the scene because of the compiler's historical interests and pedantic vocabulary. No doubt, the compilers believed that this type of writing would further strengthen their readers' faith. The best example of such compositional practice is the twin legend of the apostles John and James (*Tveggja postola saga Jóns ok Jakobs*). As the missions and martyrdoms of the apostles are narrated, historical facts about the reigns of certain pagan tyrants are provided, along with exegetical commentary on fundamental religious elements. When describing how Saint John survives all sorts of torment, the compiler comments:

Nú er álitanda hvárt þessar greinir samanlesnar í þvingan ok meinlætum Johannis mega eigi *martirium* heita viðrkvæmiliga, meðr því at hinn sæli Gregorius segir at í bindandisdýgð ok einni saman þínu holdsins geriz maðr píslarváttr í guðs augliti án allri ofsókn.⁸

(Now it must be considered whether these collected accounts concerning John's sufferings and pain might not appropriately be called *martirium*, since the blessed Gregorius maintains that in the

6. Þorvaldur Bjarnarson, ed., *Leifar*, p. x.

7. On this topic, see Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 50–1.

8. C. R. Unger, ed. *Postola sögur. Legendariske fortællinger om apostlernes liv deres kamp for kristendommens udbredelse same deres martyrdød* (Christiania [Oslo]: Bentzen, 1874), pp. 610–1.

virtue of abstinence and the torments of the flesh a man becomes a martyr in the sight of God, even without undergoing persecution.)

Tveggja postola saga Jóns ok Jakobs is one of the lives in *Codex Scardensis*, a manuscript produced in the scriptorium at the Helgafell monastery in the latter half of the fourteenth century and most likely commissioned by Ormr Snorrason, a wealthy knight, at Skarð on Skarðsströnd.⁹ Another manuscript that was probably commissioned by him, the so-called *Ormsbók*, is a compilation of prose romances. This manuscript now survives only in later paper copies and has been for many years a jigsaw puzzle for Old Norse-Icelandic philologists as they have tried to reconstruct its size and structure from diverse quotations in Swedish lexicographical works dating from the seventeenth century. Desmond Slay has probably come closest to establishing its structure, the order of its sagas, and its original foliation.¹⁰ He proposes that the manuscript was originally about 90 leaves, containing 15 sagas and shorter narratives: *Trójumanna saga*, *Breta sögur*, *Mágus saga*, *Laes þáttr*, *Vilhjálmss þáttr Laessonar*, *Geirarðs þáttr*, *Flóvents saga*, *Bærings saga*, *Rémundar saga*, *Erex saga*, *Bervers saga*, *Ívens saga*, *Mírmanns saga*, *Partalópa saga*, and finally *Enoks saga*, provided the manuscript did not conclude with *Parceval saga*, an adaptation of *Le conte du graal* by Chrétien of Troyes.¹¹

It is no coincidence that *Ormsbók* begins with *Trójumanna saga*. The saga was placed there on ideological grounds; Ormr Snorrason and other Icelandic noblemen most likely believed that they were descended from the Trojans. According to the medieval understanding of history, the refugees from Troy migrated to Western Europe, and one of their descendants, Brutus, was thought to have settled in Britain. His story usually followed the history of the Trojans, as is the case in *Ormsbók*. One would have expected the next items in *Ormsbók* to

9. On the scriptorium at Helgafell, see Ólafur Halldórsson, *Helgafellsbækur fornar*, *Studia Islandica* 24 (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1966).

10. See Desmond Slay, “Ívens saga, Mírmanns saga and Ormr Snorrason’s Book,” in *The Sixth International Saga Conference: Workshop Papers*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Det arnamagnæanske Institut, 1985), vol. 2, pp. 953–66.

11. Slay, “Ívens saga, Mírmanns saga and Ormr Snorrason’s Book,” says in this connection: “Although the seventeenth-century list of contents of OS [i.e. *Ormsbók*] has ‘Partiuals’ as its concluding item, no quotation from *Parcevals saga* has been found in the lexicographical works, and there is no known copy” (p. 954).

be the pseudohistorical narratives of King Arthur and his knights, but the pseudohistorical sequence in the Icelandic manuscript is broken: after *Breta sögur* comes *Mágus saga*, the contents of which are related to *Renaud de Montauban*, a French *chanson de geste*, but the two adaptations of Arthurian romances, *Erex saga* and *Ívens saga*, are far behind in the sequence of stories. The order of the narratives in the manuscript is an indication that they were not merely included for the purpose of tracing the history of the noble origins of Ormr Snorrason and his family, the *Skarðverjar*. *Trójumanna saga*'s pseudohistory is, for example, combined with chivalrous ideals. Some of the sagas in the manuscript must also be labelled as romances with Christian themes, such as *Bevens saga*, *Bærings saga*, *Flóvents saga*, *Rémundar saga* and even *Partalópa saga*, which is probably a translation of the French *Partenopeus de Blois*. The last preserved item, *Enoks saga*, is clearly an exemplum. But how should *Mírmanns saga* be classified?

Mírmanns saga is extant in six versions. They have all been edited diplomatically by Desmond Slay, and in his introduction to the edition he discusses all of the known manuscripts of the saga.¹² Slay calls the version referred to here the D-version. It is preserved in Stock. Papp fol. no. 47, written in the latter half of the seventeenth century by Jón Vigfússon (d. 1692), who copied it from from Stock. Perg 4to no. 6 (dating from the fifteenth century), Stock. Papp fol. no. 17 (dating from the seventeenth century), and *Ormsbók*, which was then the oldest known manuscript of *Mírmanns saga*. Slay considers it very likely that Jón Vigfússon had only two leaves of the saga from *Ormsbók* when he started copying it, and that these leaves contained only the last part of the narrative, about one-fifth or one-sixth. Slay is of the opinion that Jón Vigfússon had inserted some modern words into his copy;¹³ this can easily be seen in many places, but on the other hand this version has passages that are lacking in the others, and on the whole Jón Vigfússon does not seem to be as careless a copyist as scholars have maintained.

In his introduction, Slay discusses neither the dating of *Mírmanns saga* nor its literary qualities. Only few scholars have paid any atten-

12. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Desmond Slay, Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, Ser. A, vol. 17 (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1997), pp. xii–clxi. All subsequent references to *Mírmanns saga* are to this edition.

13. See *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, pp. cxlii–cxliiii.

tion to *Mírmanns saga*'s merits. Finnur Jónsson, who acknowledged that the saga was well composed ("godt fortalt"), but expressed reservations about its religious overtones,¹⁴ believed that the saga was an Icelandic work, not older than 1325, and based on outmoded Old French motifs ("afblegede oldfranske minder"), along with some Old Norse-Icelandic ones. In his introduction to the first edition of *Mírmanns saga*, Eugen Kölbing commented on the saga's religious tendency, which he regarded as an attempt to describe the two chivalric worlds, the religious and the secular.¹⁵ Jan de Vries agreed with Kölbing and described it as demonstrating "geistliche Ritterschaft."¹⁶ Jürg Glauser, the last to comment on the saga, argues that it is influenced by the literature of the crusades.¹⁷

Mírmanns saga is structured like a romance. The story begins by introducing Mírmann's parents, Duchess Brigida and Duke Hermann, who live in Saxland (Saxony), which was then pagan. Mírmann receives his early education in his native country, but is soon sent to France, where he is fostered by King Hlöðver and further educated. In France, Mírmann is baptized, and King Hlöðver commissions him to christianize his countrymen in Saxland, especially his parents. Mírmann's father is unwilling to accept his son's message. He fights with him in a rage, and the fight ends with Mírmann killing his own father. Mírmann then returns to France and stays with King Hlöðver for some time. Hlöðver's second wife, Queen Katrín, falls in love with Mírmann. Brigida, Mírmann's mother, sends him a letter promising reconciliation, but this turns out to be treacherous, because she gives him a magic drink that causes leprosy. This is the turning point of the saga. Mírmann's role at the court in France is completed, and he undertakes a journey to Italy after hearing of good doctors there.

On this journey, he changes his name to Justinus. The first doctor he seeks is Martin, who cannot cure him, but advises him to go to Sicily to meet a woman named Cecelia, who is famous for her medical skills

14. Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie*, 3 vols. (Copenhagen: Gad, 1920–24), vol. 3, p. 103.

15. Eugen Kölbing, ed., *Riddarasögur* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1872), p. xlv.

16. Jan de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, 2 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1964–67), vol. 2, p. 535.

17. Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas: Studien zur Prosaliteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1983), p. 223.

and able to help him. She diagnoses his illness, telling him that it has been caused by magic, and that a snake has grown in his stomach. She then gives him a magic drink which causes the snake to move into his throat. She calls upon it in the name of Jesus to come out further, and when she and Mírmann place their mouths together, the snake enters her mouth. Mírmann seizes the snake's tail with his teeth and she cuts it in two with a knife and throws the parts into a fire.

Eventually, Mírmann is cured of leprosy and marries Cecelia, though before their marriage she discovers his true identity. After the wedding, Mírmann wants to go back to France, and although Cecelia is hesitant, she eventually grants him permission to visit his friend King Hlöðver. While Mírmann is in France, King Hlöðver dies, and Queen Katrín gives Mírmann a magic drink, causing him to forget Cecelia and marry Katrín. Later Mírmann is defeated by the knight Híringr, alias Cecelia. She brings him back to Sicily, where he lives with her for the rest of his life.¹⁸

As evident from this synopsis, *Mírmanns saga* does not seem very different from ordinary romances. One may divide the story into four main sections: 1) Mírmann at his parents' house, his studies there, and his education at the court of King Hlöðver in France; 2) his disease, his cure, and marriage to Cecelia in Sicily; 3) his later stay in France, his marriage to Katrín, King Hlöðver's widow, and his subsequent defeat by his former wife, Cecelia, who battles dressed like a man and calls herself Híringr; 4) Mírmann's reunion with Cecelia in Sicily, where he ruled with her for twelve years, after which the married couple entered a monastery and served God. The bipartite structure is, however, obvious: 1) Mírmann's sinful youth and his suffering from the disease, and 2) his life after he has been cured. It may be argued that Mírmann's life is determined by three women: Brigida, Katrín and Cecelia.

I have not found anyone in the Middle Ages bearing the name Mírmann (or Mírmantt as it is written in some manuscripts).¹⁹ It is possible that the name refers to the first part of the Latin word *miracula*, so as to stress that the person is saved by God's mercy, such as those men who are blessed by the intercession of saints. On

18. I am indebted to Slay for this summary. He gives an excellent synopsis of the A-text at the end of his edition of *Mírmanns saga*, pp. 196–202.

19. "The name Mírmann," in *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, pp. 191–5.

the other hand, the women's names are all well known saints' names, although Brigida is not well attested in Iceland.²⁰ Her description in the saga coincides remarkably well with that of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, except that the saint does not kill her clients when they do not behave as she wants. Brigida's virtues are described as follows:

Kunnosta hennar var með því móti at þat þótti allt sem barnavípr er aðrar konur gjörðu hjá því sem <hun> gjörði. En spektarmál ok veraldarvizka sú er hun hafði numit af heiðnum bókum stóðuz henni eigi hinir beztu klerkar, ok sigraði hun með snilldarorðum kónga ok klerka ef orðaskipti áttu við hana.²¹

(Her knowledge was such that everything that other women did seemed to be children's trifles compared with what she did. The best clerics could not match her in learning and worldly wisdom, which she had studied in pagan books, and she defeated kings and clerics with her rhetorical skill if they disputed with her.)

Saint Catherine, on the other hand, had learned:

allar þær íþróttir á bókum er *liberalis* heita. Hún kunni og margar tungur að mæla og spakliga að leysa allar spurningar þær er fyrir hana voru bornar . . . “Til bókar var eg sett. Nam eg yfrið mikið af bókligum íþróttum og veraldligri speki . . . ”²²

(all of the arts that are named *liberalis*. She had learned to speak many languages and could answer wisely all of the questions she was asked . . . “I was sent for education. I studied the literary arts and worldly wisdom to a great extent.”)

It cannot be mere coincidence that the word *barnavípr* is used when describing Brigida's merits: it clearly refers to Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir in *Laxdœla saga*.

20. Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland: Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400*, Subsidia hagiographica 78 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes: 1994), pp. 86–9.

21. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, A-text, pp. 1–2.

22. Kirsten Wolf, ed., *Heilagra meyjja sögur* (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2003), pp. 124, 126.

At first Queen Katrín is given a favorable description, but later on the image of her changes:

Svá er sagt frá kóngsdóttur at hun var hverri konu fríðari, mjúk í orðum en mild af fé svá at hun gaf á tvær hendr gull ok silfr, ok varð hun af því þokkasæl við landslýðinn. En í annan stað vánu bráðara tók hun at hyggja at vænleik Mírmanns jarlssons ok atgjörvi er hann hafði, sem fyrr var sagt, um fram aðra menn.²³

(It is said that the princess was more beautiful than other women, softspoken and openhanded, giving away gold and silver with both hands, and because of that she became very popular among the common people. On the other hand she soon noticed Mírmann's fairness and the virtues that he had beyond other men, as told previously.)

After Mírmann falls ill, Katrín is portrayed less favorably: she speaks of Mírmann being too sick to be at court, and it is remarkable how King Hlöðver rebukes her:

Katrín drottning kemr at máli viðr kónginn Hlöðver ok sagði honum at hann hefði undarligan sið at hafa þann mann í hirð ok samneyti meðr sér sem at svá væri aumliga yfirkominn í þeim háskasamligasta ok versta sjúkdómi, ok kynni hann sjálf þar af hina verstu ok óbætanligustu vanheilsu sér sjálfum at brugga. “Þú veizt at ek mæli af rétttri elsku ok kærleik viðr þik. Skil þik frá þessum manni at þú hljótir ekki neitt illt af honum.” Hlöðver kóngr svarar henni ok segir: “Nú þykki mér öðruvísi háttat í orðum ok atvikum þínum hjá því sem at þá var er hann var heilbrigðr. Þá sýndiz mér svá at þér þótti hann aldregi of nærri þér vera, . . .”²⁴

(Queen Katrín starts speaking to King Hlöðver and tells him that he had a peculiar custom keeping at court and in his presence a man who so badly overrun by a most dangerous and foul disease, and he himself could be infected by this worst, incurable illness. “You

23. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, A-text, p. 13.

24. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, D-text, p. 53.

know,” she said, “that I speak out of true love and charity toward you. Stay away from this man so that you do not catch anything bad from him.” King Hlöðver answers her and says: “Now I find you different in your words and actions from the time when he was healthy. It seemed to me then that you felt as if he were never too close to you . . .”)

Later on we are told that Katrín is a *trollkona* and a giantess as well as a very skilful sorceress. Her actions are quite similar to those of Brigida previously. She gives Mírmann and his men a magic potion, causing him to forget the oaths that he had sworn his queen, Cecelia, in Sicily.

The description of Cecelia is in quite a different tone. Although she is not as accomplished as her namesake, Saint Cecelia, she possesses the same healing power as the saint. In one way she is equal to the best of knights. She has trained herself

við burtreið sem karlar. En þó vissu þat fáir menn því at hun lék í skógi í karlmannsklæðum at fárra manna vitorði, en því gjörði hun svá at Guð er alla hluti veit fyrir, vissi at hun mundi þess þurfa áðr lyki . . .²⁵

(in tilting, like the men. This, however, was known only to few people, because she practiced it secretly in a forest, dressed in a man’s clothes. She did this because God, who foresees everything, knew that she would need this training before everything was over.)

The D-text first describes her countenance as being more beautiful than other ladies in Sicily, and then adds:

[þ]ar eptir hafi ok farit aðrar hennar listir, því at hun hafi lært allar riddaraligar íþróttir, ok kunnat út at ríða sem hinn besti riddari.²⁶

(her other skills were also like this, because she had learned all of the chivalric arts and could ride into combat like the best of knights.)

25. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, A-text, p. 61.

26. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, D-text, pp. 62–3.

It appears at first glance that Brigida punished her son for killing his father and her husband. One might, however, suspect that this is not the main reason for her actions. In the second chapter of the saga, when Brigida tells her husband that she is expecting a child, he tells her of his dream in which he thought that she had “a snake in [her] chemise; it was surprisingly big and savage, and when [he] wanted to pull it away it bit [him] and [he] had no strength against it.”²⁷ It is also the duke who wants his son to leave and “never come back.”²⁸ The words indicate that something else happened between mother and son, and her remark when she leaves him in her brewery after she has poisoned him supports this notion:

“. . . ok þat hlægir <mik> ef hun Katrín kóngsdóttir hefr <ekki slíka> list af ykkar laukagarðsleikum²⁹ hér eptir sem hingat til.”³⁰

(it makes me laugh to think that Princess Katrín will no longer enjoy your games in the herbarium as before.)

A person infected by leprosy was in the Middle Ages by some authors considered to have committed a mortal sin;³¹ the disease was thought to be God’s punishment for lust and arrogance.³² Also, one cannot help but regard the snake as a phallic symbol, and the creature is painted on Cecelia’s standard when she conquers Mírmann’s army:

27. “‘Mik dreymdi,’ sagði hann, ‘at þú hafðir orm einn í serk þér ok þótti mér vera undarliga mikill ok ólmr, en þá er ek vilda hann taka ok kippa honum frá þér, beit hann mik svá at ek hafða ekki afl við honum’” (*Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, A-text, p. 2).

28. “ok kvæmi aldri apr” (*Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, A-text, p. 4).

29. The other manuscripts have the variant *augnagaman* (eyes’ delight) instead of *laukagarðsleikr* which surely refers to the words Earl Bæringr uses of the relationship between Queen Katrín and Mírmann: “Þér verði hér annat fyrir grönum en kyssa Katrín drottingu í eplagarði sínum” (*Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, A and B-text, p. 35; “something else will be closer to your beard than kissing Queen Katrín in her apple garden”).

30. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, D-text, p. 51.

31. Cf. Darrel W. Amundsen, *Medicine, Society and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 210.

32. The same motif is also to be found in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* (Carl Christian Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, 3 vols. [Copenhagen: Popp, 1829–30], vol. 2, p. 394); cf. Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (London: Georg Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1934), p. 134; Astrid van Nahl, *Originale Riddarasögur als Teil altnordischer Sagaliteratur* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1981), p. 222.

Merki hans [that is, Hírings] var skínandi sem önnur sólarbirti, ok á dregit meðr rauðu gulli, einn jungkæri ok jungfrú, hafandi einn orm hvárt þeirra sér í munni í millum sín sundr deildan með knífi þeim sem at jungfrúin helt á.³³

(His standard was shining like the other brightness of the sun; it was drawn with reddish gold, a prince and princess, holding in their mouths parts of a snake that had been cut in two with the knife that the princess held in her hand.)

In the battle with Mírmann, the gemstones on Híringr's armor signify his virtues; his saddle is inlaid with an emerald (*smaragdus*), which, according to a translated lapidary, probably Marod's, is "saintly in its nature but more saintly as a token of God's chosen people."³⁴ On Mírmann's lorica there is a beryl (*berillus*) which is "good for the love of a married couple."³⁵ The symbolic meaning of those stones must have been known to most of the audience.

As scholars have pointed out, the author of *Mírmanns saga* devotes a great deal of his narrative to God's mercy and kindness; the saga's religious overtones are very prominent. Its historical scenes vary from pagan Saxland to France and south to Apulia in Italy and Sicily. The French are Christianized when Mírmann studies with King Hlöðver, and then the saga's time frame is given:

Í þenna tíma kom hinn helgi Dionisius í Frakkland með umráðum Klementis papa. Ok með því at Hlöðver kóngr var sjálfr góðviljaðr ok sá ok heyrði sannar jarteinir almáttigs guðs ok hans heilagra manna ok þessa hins blessaða byskups er þar var kominn, þá tók hann skírn ok rétta trú, ok allir aðrir þeir sem í váru hans landi, baði ríkir ok fátækir, en Mírmann jarlsson tók trú ok skírn af fortölum Hlöðvers kóngrs fóstara síns. En þeir er eigi vildu undir ganga trúna

33. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, D-text, p. 127.

34. "... smaragdus, sá er dýrligr í sínu eðli en dýrligri í jartegn valdra manna guðs" (Kr. Kálund and N. Beckman, ed. *Alfræði íslenzk: Islandsk encyclopædisk litteratur*, 3 vols., Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 37, 41, 45 [Copenhagen: Møller, 1908-18], vol. 1, p. 41).

35. "... er góðr hjónum til ástar" (Kálund and Beckman, ed. *Alfræði íslenzk*, vol. 1, p. 79, cf. pp. xxvi, xxix).

stukku ór landi, sumir vestr til Spaníalands. Þar réð fyrir jarl sá er Bæringr hét . . . en sumir á hendr Hermanni í Saxland.³⁶

(At that time Saint Dionisius came to France at the counsel of Pope Clement. And because King Hlöðver was himself benevolent and saw and heard the truthful miracles of almighty God and his saints and of the blessed bishop who had come there, he was baptized and took the true faith, as did everyone else who stayed in his country, both rich and poor. But Mírmann, the earl's son, took the faith and was baptized at the urging of his foster father, King Hlöðver. Those who did not want to accept the true faith fled the country, some west to Spain, where an earl named Bæringr held power . . . and some went to Hermann in Saxony.)

It is not quite clear if by Saint Dionisius the narrator means Dionysius Aereopagate, who in the first century A.D. was sent by Pope Clement to France and martyred there. It is also possible that the person in question was Saint Denis, whom Pope Fabianus sent to France in the third century A.D., where he suffered martyrdom. The sources often confuse the two martyrs. The external time frame of the story could therefore either be in the first or third century. The internal time frame spans only two generations, the lifetime of Mírmann himself and his parents.

No tournament or battle is fought in the saga without prayers for God's assistance; this is a very common topos in the romances³⁷ and cannot be counted among the peculiarities of *Mírmanns saga*. Neither can the account of Mírmann's Christian mission. Mírmann does not Christianize pagans, but his speeches are representative of the type that were people's daily bread at that time. The sermon that he preaches to his father is a good example. In this sermon, he traces almost the entire history of the Jews, from their earliest existence in Paradise until the start of the apostles' missionary work:

Síðan gaf hann postulum sínum vald ok styrk til jartegna slíkra, sem urðu í Rómaborg, þá er Símon hinn illi gekk í móti Petri postula ok gjörði þá sjónhverfing at hann fló í lopti með fjandans krapti. Þá bað

36. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, A-text, p. 15; the C-version gives a more exact chronology and relates that these persons lived during the same age in which Christ himself was born: "... í þeim heimsaldri Krístr var hingat borinn" (p. 15).

37. van Nahl, *Originale Riddarasögur*, p. 156.

Petrus at guð skyldi lægja villu hans ok þá fell Símon ofan ok brast í fjóra hluti ok lauk svá hans ævi.³⁸

(Then he gave his apostles the strength and power to perform such miracles, such as those that occurred in Rome when Simon the Evil met Peter the Apostle and made it appear, through the power of the devil, as if he flew in the air. Peter then prayed to God that he should defeat his heresy. Simon then tumbled down and was torn into four pieces and thus ended his life.)

Mírmann's speech is very similar to the historical summaries found in the younger sagas of the apostles, for instance in *Tveggja postola saga Jóns ok Jakobs*. It is also obvious that the author of *Mírmanns saga* knew the older saga of the apostle Peter, since the subject-matter in the above passage is related to that version.³⁹

The Christian mission among the pagans is not the main theme of *Mírmanns saga*, and it is difficult to detect in it any relationship to the literature of the crusades. Mírmann is, however, always fighting against pagan knights and Cecelia's suitors. The core of the work is an account of how an earl's son gained worldly power and the nature of his reign. He could only gain worldly power, *gloria mundi*, when living with the widow, Queen Katrín, but this life could in no way be termed *sýslulíf*, for he acquired his power because of Katrín's magic and treachery. When he lost the battle against Híringr, he was not capable of fighting (he was lame), and the story illustrates how he could only get peace of mind by having God's mercy fall upon him. He would then govern in such a way that everyone could see that *gloria Dei* shone over him. This view is stressed at the end of the saga, when the reader is told that:

[þ]au Mírmann kóngr ok Cecelia drotting áttu einn son, ok þann kölluðu þau Hlöðver eftir Hlöðver kóngi í Frakklandi. Hann tók ríki ok kóngdóm eptir þau ok er þeim þótti sitt líf standa meðr hinum bezta blóma, fyrirlétu þau allt veraldarskart ok hégómligt þessa heims líf, ok fóru í einsetu, ok prýddu þar með mannkostum sínar sálir ok líkami til eilífs fagnaðar hjá heilagri þrenningu.⁴⁰

38. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, A-text, pp. 26–7.

39. van Nahl, *Originale Riddarasögur*, p. 156

40. *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, D-text, p. 146.

(King Mírmann and Queen Cecelia had one son and they named him Hlöðver after King Hlöðver in France. He took over the kingdom after them, and when they felt that their life was in its highest blossom, they left all the vain finery of this world and became hermits and thus adorned their souls and bodies with virtues for eternal celebration with the Holy Trinity.)

This ending provides clear evidence that this particular saga was meant to be a romance, a hagiographical romance. The *Skarðverjar* family was accustomed to such literature, and part of their education at Skarð would have been to listen to stories of this kind; later they would also compose them, as evident in the works of Björn Porleifsson junior, in hagiographical romances such as the *Saga of Saint Christopher* and the *Saga of Gregorius on the Rock*, an Icelandic version of the same material that Hartmann from Aue used in his *Gregorius auf dem Stein*. In the latter, the authors deal with double incest: first a brother and a sister beget a child, and later this child, Gregorius, marries and copulates with his own mother. His marriage with his own mother leads to his worldly power, *gloria mundi*, but through penance he gains peace of mind—the latter part of his story shows that he is living a *vita spiritualis*, and that he is enjoying *gloria Dei*. The concluding sentiment of both *Mírmanns saga* and the *Saga of Gregorius on the Rock* is the same: the *vita carnalis* should be avoided, and the members of the audience should submit to the spiritual power represented by the Church. Only in doing so will their lives be safe. It is quite another matter if the message of hagiographical romances, such as *Mírmanns saga*, was meant to convince women that they could only gain the upper hand or power over men if their married lives ended in hermitage, thus fulfilling the ideal of *vita contemplativa* (*upplitningarlíf*).⁴¹

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