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Politics and Local Tradition within the Cult of Saint Magnus of Orkney

This article will examine how veneration of a locally-popularised saint like Magnus Erlendsson, martyr and earl of Orkney (d. *c.*1117), was extended into the wider social-political arena, while at the same time never losing sight of his importance to the community that was initially drawn to him. Magnus' popularity was greatly due to his nephew Rognavald's political machinations; later Icelandic apprehension over the 'return' of the Norse crown during the Saga Age (*c.*11th-13th centuries) is a critical consideration also. These political aspects fed off the saint's attractiveness in the eyes of common-folk living in tight-knit communities within the Norse North Atlantic community: primarily Shetland and Orkney, but Iceland as well. Localised affinity for Saint Magnus, and his usefulness as a political tool, can be seen within the body of miracles attributed to him soon after his martyrdom at the hands of his cousin Hakon on the Orcadian island of Egilsay. These aspects of Magnus' cult are found within *Orkneyinga Saga, The Shorter Magnus Saga,* and, finally, *The Longer Magnus Saga.*

One significant miracle tells of Eldjarn Vardason, who farmed in the Kelduhverfi area of north Iceland. Weakened by famine, Eldjarn had himself carried to Matins at the local church by some other farmers. After Matins, he lay alone in the church and, now near death, made a pledge to the Holy Saints Olaf and Magnus. With that, Eldjarn fell into a deep sleep and dreamed that Saint Magnus appeared to him. Introducing himself, Magnus explained to the stricken farmer that though Saint Olaf had heard the vows made to him, he was unable to help because he had gone to western Iceland to help a women there. In Olaf's stead, Magnus cured Eldjarn by passing his hands over the farmer's body. When Eldjarn

awoke, the others in the church were astounded to see how fully he had recovered, thanks to the intervention of Magnus;[1] then 'Everyone praised God for the mercy he had shown, to honour the Holy Earl Magnus'.

The Kelduhverfi miracle underscores Icelandic interest in Magnus' cult, as does the 1298 transferral of some of the saint's relics to the extremely important cultural centre of Skálaholt in the old Southern Quarter. Before the transferral, however, Magnus Erlendsson attracted the attention of Icelandic historians and saga-men: *The Shorter Magnus Saga* (alone in relating the curing of Eldjarn) seems to have been composed around 1250. This would tend to indicate a fairly active oral tradition involving the healing powers of the saint's cult prior to the transferral. *The Longer Magnus Saga* was produced after 1298, possibly early in the fourteenth century, and thus the transferral probably helped stimulate its creation. Both *Magnus' Sagas* may have been composed in the north of Iceland – the same general area that was allegedly home to Eldjarn Vardason. The implication seems clear: the north had a strong local tradition conducive to the cultivation of Saint Magnus' cult, though we should not for a moment assume that the earl turned martyr was not popular in other parts of Iceland, such as Skálaholt.

The inclusion of Magnus' curing of Eldjarn seems inspired by local tradition from the north of Iceland. It is also the most detailed of the miracles related in *The Shorter Magnus Saga.* There is, in addition, a political message to the curing of Eldjarn, in that an Orcadian saint comes to the rescue, when a Norwegian one cannot. The cult of Saint Olaf was growing in strength and popularity throughout Scandinavia, Northern Europe and Britain:[2] Olaf was the first Scandinavian who was canonised largely for political reasons.[3] To overcome the influence of such a powerful figure as Saint Olaf would have been a tall order for any holy-man; the martyred Holy Magnus, nevertheless, seems to have made some inroads. The political message contained in *The Shorter Magnus Saga* might represent uncertainty on the part of the saga's composer: what else Norwegian in origin might eventually fail Iceland, the Norse Crown perhaps? Having said this, the

political message in *The Longer Magnus Saga* was, relatively speaking, even stronger.

Instead of the Kelduhverfi miracle, *The Longer Magnus Saga* relates in equal length and detail the story of two Norwegian brothers who run afoul of the male relatives of the woman they are seducing. Since this tale is non-typical – appearing only in *The Longer Magnus* Saga – it is probably very safe to assume that it is a genuine example of a very localised tradition seeping into the corpus of the sagas. Nevertheless, the saga relates how the slighted woman's brothers kill one of the hapless lads, whose body is later devoured by a pack of marauding wolves. The other is 'cruelly-treated' by the attackers: broken, muted and blinded. Repentant and woe-struck by his plight, the maimed lad prays to God for mercy, who responds by sending His servant Magnus to intercede. Saint Magnus does God's bidding: he heals the tortured man's broken limbs, restores his eyesight and places his tongue back in his mouth. Even more incredibly, Magnus causes the wolves to return; they vomit up the flesh and bones of the dead man; his body is made whole again, and he is restored to the land of the living.[4] And in the spirit of thanksgiving (not to mention the spirit of the God-fearing folk in *The Shorter Magnus Saga,* upon hearing of the miracle worked upon old Eldjarn), '...each of them greeted the other, giving thanks to God and to saint Magnus the earl for such ready mercy as was shown them'.

Replacing the story of Eldjarn as found in *The Shorter Magnus Saga,* the episode involving the maimed Norwegians in *The Longer Magnus Saga* hints at a relatively more overt political purpose for the creation of the latter. Suggestive of this is the author's introduction to his endeavour: 'Master Robert, who hath collected and composed the Saga of the holy earl Magnus in Latin, so begins his Prologue as may here be heard.'[5] What we have here is a clever bit of showmanship – by saying that his saga borrows from a Latin *vita,* he is proudly announcing that he himself has an intimate knowledge of both foreign literature and language. That the saga author could make this claim, would be one incontestable way to prove to his readership (not to mention

re-affirming in his own mind) that he was no common individual, and certainly not 'descended from slaves or scoundrels'.[6] Further, by affirming his knowledge of Latin, the author was making a statement about the advanced level of scholarship in his homeland. This could all serve as a protest against Norwegian overlordship which occurred after the fall of the Free State in 1264-66. Thus, *The Longer Magnus Saga* may have been designed to provide something of a political 'buffer-zone' against the Norwegian Crown. Saints' cults could contain a profound political agenda; successful saints (in terms of working miracles) were the special elect of God.[7] The person, or persons attached to that specially elect saint must have been able to wield a fair deal of power on earth; after all, they enjoyed a non-typical relationship with the Master of Heaven and Earth. Of course, as far as Icelandic society was concerned, neither Magnus nor Olaf were 'home-grown lads'. Yet it would seem that Magnus' Orcadian homeland would appear less offensive to an Icelander than Olaf's Norwegian origins. After all, both Icelander and Orcadian (arguably) had a tradition of dealing with 'the tyranny of Harald Finehair'. Taking together the rather bold aspirations of its author, and the fact that it incorporates a tale involving a non-Norwegian saint's intervention in saving two *Norwegians*, we can see how a tale of local significance can be adapted into the broader picture of Icelandic cultural pride.

A saint's cult, therefore, could serve as an 'envoy' for political aspirations; this aspect of Magnus' cult was fully exploited by Earl Rognavald Kali, the saint's nephew. A seemingly disproportionate number of Magnus' miracles, as recorded in the sagas, allegedly occurred in Shetland. This has to be related to Rognavald's relationship with the Shetlanders, as he tried to secure sole possession of the Orkneys away from Earl Paul. When first he left Norway to stake his claim for the earldom, Rognavald, after battling bad weather, made land in Shetland, where he was nevertheless well-received.[8] After suffering defeat at the hands of Earl Paul, Rognavald regrouped. Next year, he was able to take Shetland, and it seems that Rognavald used that

place as a sort of 'staging-post' for his invasion of Orkney. There is a hint of the role Magnus' cult played in all this within Kol's speech to his son, Rognavald: '"Now, here's my advice: look for support where men will say the true owner of the realm granted it you, and that's the holy Earl Magnus, your uncle."'[9] Upon receiving this advice, Rognavald and his followers immediately 'put out to sea and made land at Shetland, where they and the local people were delighted to see each other'.[10]

The 'warm welcome' afforded Rognavald by the Shetlanders must be surely related to the cult of Magnus. In the first place, the Shetlanders may have had a natural affinity for Magnus: he, rather than his cousin Hakon, had likely – in Crawford's words – 'been their earl'. This was owing to the way in which the earldom had been divided up during the joint rule of the Thorfinnssons, Erlend and Paul, with the east and north (probably including Shetland) going to the former.[11] The Shetlanders were probably very receptive to spreading stories of Magnus' miraculous healing powers; Rognavald, astutely, must have played-up his relationship with the saint, his uncle, all the while propagating and enhancing local knowledge of the saint's healing powers. This would have been especially true on his second visit to Shetland – much more so than his first – when he seems to have completely won them over to his side. We thus have an explanation for the numerous Shetland miracles that have found their way into all three of the sagas relating to Magnus Erlendsson's life.

It is certainly not the case that because *The Longer Magnus Saga* contains a miracle concerning Magnus helping two stricken Norwegians, Iceland had political designs upon Norway; quite the opposite. Rather, it might be that *The Longer Magnus Saga* is a more aggressive, more confident form of communal pride when compared to *The Shorter Magnus Saga*. This aggressive communalism is readily apparent in the Orcadian context through the number of hymns that portray Magnus as having led the purest Christian life, in addition to re-affirming that the Saint was the pride of his homeland; for example:

This glory we sing, and by miracles wrought,
The Lord Christ is blessed, and the Church doth rejoice,
And praise high ascendeth with thee as its theme;
How blessed Orcadia from henceforth appear![12]

Related to this, in *The Shorter Magnus Saga* it seems apparent that the cult of Saint Olaf has already made inroads into Icelandic society (and in one sense, why would it not?). The acquired cult of Saint Magnus was, therefore, fighting a 'defensive battle' against Olaf (and the Norwegian crown). Conversely, *The Longer Magnus Saga* represented the cult of Magnus 'taking the offensive'. In both *Magnus Sagas*, however, examples exist depicting Magnus as God's chosen over Olaf.

Politics aside, however, no saint's cult can achieve the slightest success unless it is able to strike a familiar chord with the local populace. This is where the cult of Saint Magnus succeeded brilliantly. Thomson, for instance, makes an excellent point when discussing the popularity of 'earl-saints' like Magnus, in that his cult embodied traditional (pre-Christian) 'concepts of sacral kinship' with the leader acting as a successor to the gods with a 'supreme priestly function'.[13] An example of how a saint like Magnus could fulfil the purely local desire for a traditional sacral king, capable of performing a 'supreme priestly function', is apparent in the following excerpt from a popular hymn:

O Magnus of my love,
Thou it is who would'st us guide.
...
Lift our flocks to the hills,
Quell the wolf and the fox,
Ward from us spectre, giant, fury,
And oppression.

Surround cows and herds,
Surround sheep and lambs;
Keep from them the water-vole,
And the field vole.

Sprinkle dew from the sky upon kine,
Give growth to grass, and corn, and sap to plants,
Watercress, deer's-grass, ceis, burdock,
And daisy.[14]

This hymn is actually a long way from the standard tune one would sing at Matins. It has more in common with a number of (originally) pagan charms. As such, though collected in the last century, this hymn could be classed as a reminder of the time when popular tradition (likely with the sanction of the new religious authorities) grafted the attributes of the old local land-spirits onto the personage of a Christian saint, himself enjoying his greatest success on the local level.[15]

Christianity held (and holds) that God is omnipotent. But for the newly-converted, long used to contending with distant, fickle deities, the Christian God (despite being depicted as a loving figure) might well have appeared as too lofty a figure to deal with directly. A favourite saint, however, could provide the necessary human face to religion so dearly needed, while serving as mediator between Christian man and God,[16] just as the benevolent land-spirit could serve as mediator between heathen man and the supernatural elements. The Christian saint, therefore, assumed the role of local land-spirit. The above hymn is not concerned with depicting Magnus as a universal saviour, helping the faithful on their way to Salvation; rather, he is acting as a quasi-fertility entity and a guardian-spirit on a purely regional level. It seems clear that this land-charm turned hymn in honour of Magnus was produced solely due to the requirements of the common populace. Probably the hymn is at least partially the product of a clerical mind, but the wording itself could come from the mouth of any common man or woman. Thus a hymn such as the above is very much the product of popular tradition.

The saga material dealing with Magnus also incorporates much popular tradition, though it displays an evangelising quality as well. What therefore seems to have occurred is a complex fusion of popular and Christian ideologies. Many of the miracles seem inspired by Biblical testimony that has

been filtered through local tradition: like Christ before him, Magnus spends time making the blind see, and the lame walk. However, helping a man win at dice is definitely something the Son of God would never do, while the tale of the cured Norwegians from *The Longer Magnus Saga* and the curing of Eldjarn as found in *The Shorter Magnus Saga* are all non-typical. Further, we should never expect a total Christian laundering of any Icelandic Saga material, regardless of the author. Few clerical writers in Iceland seemed interested in completely blotting out all traces of traditional (pre-Christian) ideology in their work. This is not to say they were intent on fostering a resurgence of heathenism; rather, they had a genuine interest in the traditions of their homeland.[17] In the fiercely independent and inward-looking society of Saga Age Iceland,[18] tradition would not be denied. A fine example of this is present in *Bárðar Saga*, when Gestr Bárðarsson converted to Christianity, through the insistence of the *foreign* evangelising King of Norway, Olaf Trygvasson (995-1000), and:

> The next night after Gestr was baptised he dreamt that his father Bárðar came to him and said: 'I'll have you done now that you have renounced your faith and that of your forefathers and allowed yourself to change your custom because of your cowardice. For that you shall lose both your eyes.' Then he laid his hands upon Gestr's eyes in no gentle manner and disappeared after that. Later, when Gestr awoke he had such a pain in his eyes that on the same day they both burst out. Then Gestr died in his white christening gown. [19]

Thus, according to the anonymous creator of *Bárðar Saga*, and probably many of his peers, woe to those who succumbed to pressure from a foreign potentate; worse yet to those who turned their backs on tradition to favour 'outside' ideology. The author of *Bárðar Saga* was not trying to promote paganism – he would have been a rare and unusual saga-man if he did; rather he was responding to the political pressures of the Saga Age with an analogy from the late Settlement

Age.

To sum up, it seems that Magnus' cult was successful largely because it could be adapted to suit virtually every need to which a saint's cult could aspire. It served a political purpose in providing a buffer zone between certain of the Norse North Atlantic colonies and the Norse Crown, despite the fact that all these efforts were, in the end, futile. But importantly, it served to provide, in the minds of many people, a convenient bridge between older (pagan-inspired) wisdom and newer (more universal) Christian thought. The study of a saint's cult – such as that of Magnus' – also provides a venue for attempting to understand some of the ways in which local legend and tradition interact with grander schemes.

Notes

1. *The Short Magnus Saga*, in G. Vigfusson (ed.) and G. W. Dasent (tr.), *Icelandic Sagas and other Documents Relating to the Settlements and Descents of the Northmen on the British Isles (Roll Series no. 88.* (4 vols.; H.M.S.O, 1887-94), iii, p. 300. See also, *Magnus' Saga*, H. Pálsson and P. Edwards (tr.), (Perpetua Press, 1987), p. 42.
2. A rather old article (but still relevant for the purposes for which it is being used here) describing the places in Britain where Olaf has been honoured is B. Dickins, 'The Cult of S. Olave in the British Isles', in *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 12 (1937-45), pp. 53-80.
3. T. Jexlev, 'The Cult of Saints in Early Medieval Scandinavia', in B. Crawford (ed.), *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (Aberdeen, 1988), p. 188.
4. *Magnus Saga the Longer*, in Vigfusson and Dasent, iii, pp. 279-80.
5. *Magnus Saga the Longer*, p. 239.
6. To quote the sentiments expressed in *Þórðarbók*, a seventeenth-century version of *Landnámabók*, which nevertheless relays timeless Icelandic sentiments; see *The Book of Settlements: Landnámabók*, H. Pálsson and P.

Edwards (tr. and ed.), (University of Manitoba Press, 1972), p. 6.

7. A variation of an observation of the part of A. Mirgeler, *Mutations of Western Christianity*, E. Quinn (tr.) (London, 1961; tr. 1964), p. 49, who held that saints were superior miracle workers that demonstrated God's might to the Northern peoples. It seems that God's strength is best exemplified by the saints most skilled at healing. Thus, the saints best skilled at the art of healing are the most favoured by God, and those persons most attached to that saint are also God's favourite.
8. *Orkneyinga Saga, The History of the Earls of Orkney*, H. Pálsson and P. Edwards (tr:), (Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 119.
9. *Orkneyinga Saga*, p. 130.
10. *Orkneyinga Saga*, pp. 130-31. It seems that already the influence of the saint in helping his nephew could be noticed: he provided fair sailing weather, as saints – since Columba's time – have had the ability to do. Of course, the saint was probably only obliged to help his nephew in this instance, given the fact Rognavald had pledged to build, in Magnus' honour, the truly magnificent St Magnus Cathedral (renamed, in post-Reformation times, Kirkwall Cathedral).
11. B. E. Crawford, 'The Cult of St Magnus in Shetland', in B. E. Crawford (ed.), *Essays in Shetland History* (Lerwick, 1984), p. 71.
12. 'Hymn to Saint Magnus' (stanza 6), contained in J. Beveridge, 'Two Scottish Thirteenth-Century Songs, with the Original Melodies, Recently Discovered in Sweden', in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 73 (1939), p. 284.
13. W. P. L. Thomson, *History of Orkney* (Edinburgh, 1987), p. 66.
14. 'Magnus of My Love' (no. 72), taken from Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* (6 vols.; Edinburgh, 1900, 1928, 1972, 1983), i, pp. 179-181.
15. Something similar was argued by R. C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims in Popular Beliefs in Medieval England*

(London, Melbourne and Toronto, 1977), p. 19: 'Scattered beliefs about spirits, healing, magic and prayer, which varied according to the new converts own region or tribe or social status or native scepticism, were re-interpreted along Christian lines.'

16. K. McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth Monographs, 1990), p. 188.
17. L. Lönnroth, *European Sources of Icelandic Saga Writing* (Stockholm, 1965), p. 12.
18. These sentiments can still be found to this day in the hearts of many Icelanders – an admirable and remarkable people!
19. *Bárðar Saga* (chapter 17, lines 32-43), J. Skaptason and P. Pulsiano (ed. and tr.), (New York and London, 1984), pp. 113.