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Edited by Eiríkr Magnússon
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A Life of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Icelandic

This Old Norse text and English translation, prepared by the librarian and scholar Eiríkr Magnússon (1833–1913) and published in two volumes between 1875 and 1883, remains the standard edition of the 'Saga of Archbishop Thomas'. Composed in Iceland in the early fourteenth century, it narrates the life, death and miracles of Thomas Becket, based on earlier Latin and Old French traditions. Embedded in the saga is a lost Latin life by Robert of Cricklade, written soon after Becket's murder in 1170, which contains some unique details: for example, that he had a stammer. The saga is valuable not only as evidence for Becket's life, but as an insight into the development of his saintly cult in Iceland. Volume 2 includes an extensive introduction to the text and its place in the tradition of Becket historiography, an account of St Thomas's miracles, several appendices of related texts, and an extensive glossary of words and phrases.

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VOLUME 2

EDITED BY EIRÍKR MAGNÚSSON



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RERUM BRITANNICARUM MEDII ÆVI
SCRIPTORES,

OR

CHRONICLES AND MEMORIALS OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND IRELAND

DURING

THE MIDDLE AGES.

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THE CHRONICLES AND MEMORIALS
OF
GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND
DURING THE MIDDLE AGES.

PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHORITY OF HER MAJESTY'S TREASURY, UNDER
THE DIRECTION OF THE MASTER OF THE ROLLS.

ON the 26th of January 1857, the Master of the Rolls submitted to the Treasury a proposal for the publication of materials for the History of this Country from the Invasion of the Romans to the reign of Henry VIII.

The Master of the Rolls suggested that these materials should be selected for publication under competent editors without reference to periodical or chronological arrangement, without mutilation or abridgment, preference being given, in the first instance, to such materials as were most scarce and valuable.

He proposed that each chronicle or historical document to be edited should be treated in the same way as if the editor were engaged on an *Editio Princeps*; and for this purpose the most correct text should be formed from an accurate collation of the best MSS.

To render the work more generally useful, the Master of the Rolls suggested that the editor should give an account of the MSS. employed by him, of their age and their peculiarities; that he should add to the work a brief account of the life and times of the author, and any remarks necessary to explain the chronology; but no other note or comment was to be allowed, except what might be necessary to establish the correctness of the text.

The works to be published in octavo, separately, as they were finished ; the whole responsibility of the task resting upon the editors, who were to be chosen by the Master of the Rolls with the sanction of the Treasury.

The Lords of Her Majesty's Treasury, after a careful consideration of the subject, expressed their opinion in a Treasury Minute, dated February 9, 1857, that the plan recommended by the Master of the Rolls "was well calculated for the accomplishment of this important national object, in an effectual and satisfactory manner, within a reasonable time, and provided proper attention be paid to economy, in making the detailed arrangements, without unnecessary expense."

They expressed their approbation of the proposal that each Chronicle and historical document should be edited in such a manner as to represent with all possible correctness the text of each writer, derived from a collation of the best MSS., and that no notes should be added, except such as were illustrative of the various readings. They suggested, however, that the preface to each work should contain, in addition to the particulars proposed by the Master of the Rolls, a biographical account of the author, so far as authentic materials existed for that purpose, and an estimate of his historical credibility and value.

*Rolls House,
December 1857.*

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THOMAS SAGA ERKIBYSKUPS.

A LIFE

OF

ARCHBISHOP THOMAS BECKET,
IN ICELANDIC,

WITH

ENGLISH TRANSLATION, NOTES AND GLOSSARY,

EDITED

BY

EIRIKR MAGNUSSON, M.A., K^T. D^BERG.

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## P R E F A C E.



AT different times various narratives of the life of Archbishop Thomas Becket have been current in Iceland, indiscriminately designated by the comprehensive name of THOMAS SAGA. This term being misleading, we deal with it in this introduction in the following manner. When we have in view the whole group of Icelandic writings relating to Thomas of Canterbury, or an undefined portion of it, we refer to either as "Thomas saga" or "a saga of Thomas." But the narrative which, under the title of "Thomas Saga Erkebyskups," now issues completed from the press, as well as the codex containing it, called Thomasskinna, we designate as T., when occasion demands that either should be distinguished from other writings of a similar character.

All histories of Becket called Thomas saga.

Distinction between other Thomas sagas and the present one.

The Icelandic Thomas saga stands in a relation of unique interest to English history and literature. It was in existence at a remarkably short period after the Archbishop's death. It soon exercised an influence nothing short of momentous on the relations between Church and State in Iceland. It secured for the name of St. Thomas a popularity which eclipsed that of every other saint, save the Virgin Mary. As we know it now, it is largely due to the pen of an Englishman who, in the literature of his own country, is unknown as a biographer of Becket; and thus it occupies a position of especial interest in relation to the existing lives of the Archbishop.

General relation of Thomas saga to English literature.

It is our duty in this preface to deal with Thomas saga under these different aspects as briefly as is con-

Scope of the preface.

K 541.

a.\*

sistent with completeness. For the sake of clearness and convenience we propose to treat the subject under the following heads :—

- I. The history of Thomas saga.
- II. The history of Thomasskinna.
- III. Various recensions of Thomas sagas.
- IV. Authors of Thomas sagas.
- V. Thomas saga and the sagas of Gudmund Arason
- VI. Collation of T. with extant lives of Becket.
- VII. Various notices.

## I. THE HISTORY OF THOMAS SAGA.

News of the murder sooner known in Iceland than might be supposed.

Communication frequent

from the first settlement onward.

Trade intercourse.

I. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS.—The news of the murder of Archbishop Thomas of Canterbury, one of the most heart-stirring occurrences of the eventful 12th century, seems to have reached Iceland sooner than would be generally supposed from the long distance it had to travel across that gulf of isolation which is commonly believed to have been at all times fixed between the island and the outer world. But communication with England, during this and the four succeeding centuries, was by no means uncommon; on the contrary, it was one of constantly increasing frequency until the prohibitive trade policy of the 16th and 17th centuries succeeded in excluding all foreign commerce from the country. The beginning of this intercourse was coeval with the history of the country. In the days of its settlement Iceland was colonized, to a large extent, by immigrants from Great Britain. That period was by no means such an exclusive period of sword and slaughter as is commonly supposed. It was, what all war periods are, a time of commercial intercourse as well, and when the viking ceased, in the 11th century, to be the scourge of the British coast, there followed, in the wake of his dragons, the northern ships of burthen with

peaceful traders on board, and laden with furs from Norway and fish from Iceland to be exchanged for England's fine textile fabrics, wine, honey, malt, and wheat. As to Iceland, this trade, it would seem, rather flourished than flagged as time wore on. Indeed, towards the end of the 12th century English trade had, apparently, asserted a paramount influence in Iceland. About A.D. 1200 it is truthfully related, that the national standard measure of length was changed, so as to correspond exactly with the English yard.<sup>1</sup> That this violent innovation was the result of a most pressing necessity may be inferred from the words of the record. It was carried at the instance of a most influential bishop backed by the mightiest men of the country, chiefly his own kinsmen.<sup>2</sup> Paul Jonsson, bishop of Skalholt (1195–1211), to whom the measure was chiefly due, had himself studied in England<sup>3</sup> and, having thus become acquainted with English institutions, was, no doubt, better able than most of his countrymen to realize the importance for his native land of facilitating commercial intercourse with England. We shall see, further on, when we come to discuss the “*Littera fraternitatis*” of Vigfus Ivarsson (vii) that, in the 15th century, the English trade was flourishing more than ever. Under circumstances of commercial intercourse the news would naturally reach the country very rapidly of an event which sent a thrill of horror through every heart of the Christian world. But, besides commerce, other interests had for a long time formed bonds of intercommunion between the two countries.

From the very dawn of Christianity in Iceland we find that, among the missionaries who busied themselves with the fortification of the new faith in the semi-pagan community, Englishmen took a prominent and, as it

<sup>1</sup> Páls saga. Biskupa sögur, I., 135; Diplomat. Island., I., 306–310.

<sup>2</sup> Páls saga. Bisk. sög., *ib.*

<sup>3</sup> Páls saga. Bisk. sög., I., 127.

English yard measure introduced.

Early missionaries from England.

would seem, the most civilized and humane, and therefore the most popular, part. Among these a Bernard Wilfried's? or Willard's? son (Bjarnvarðr Vilráðsson) won for himself the surname of "Bookwise,"<sup>1</sup> no doubt because he brought a library with him to the country and startled the unlettered islanders with his literary proficiency. Another, Rudolph<sup>2</sup> by name, is stated to have spent nineteen years in the country as a missionary bishop, sent there by St. Olaf of Norway; and that he really was sent by St. Olaf we may infer from the notice on him in the Hist. Coenob. Abendonensis, where it says, on his death as abbot of Abingdon, that he had been a Norwegian bishop.<sup>3</sup> He was the first man that ever founded a conventual establishment in Iceland<sup>4</sup>; and although his small monastery of Bær in Borgarfjord soon collapsed after his departure, he had none the less been the means of making the rough and ready islanders acquainted with catholic humility and self-abnegation in their most ideal aspect. No doubt it was connected with the missionary efforts of these Englishmen that Gudlaug, the oldest son of Snorri Goði, in his day the most influential chief in the country, took the vow, and left the country to spend the life of a recluse in England (cca. A.D. 1016).<sup>5</sup>

Bernard the "book-wise."

Rudolph, afterwards abbot of Abingdon,

founded the first monastery in Iceland.

Gudlaug Snorrason goes to England to take the vow.

Anglo-Saxon books brought to Iceland.

A.-S. looked upon by Icelanders as identical with their own tongue.

2. LITERARY CONNECTIONS.—The early missionaries, out of whose number we content ourselves with mentioning these two only, brought with them English, that is, Anglo-Saxon, books, and thus made the people, at a very early period, acquainted with a language which bore a strong similarity to the native idiom. Indeed, the early Icelanders looked upon the Anglo-Saxon language as one and the same with the Icelandic,<sup>6</sup> a view wherein we at

<sup>1</sup> Hungrvaka, Bisk. sög., I., 65.

<sup>2</sup> Ib.

<sup>3</sup> Wharton Angl. Sacra, I., 167.

<sup>4</sup> Hungrvaka, Bisk. sög., I. c.

<sup>5</sup> Islendinga sögur, II., 307.

<sup>6</sup> See treatise "Um stafroft," Snorra Edda, II., 12. That the author of this treatise, which is written before 1160, is more familiar with English than with any other language, except Latin, is clear



least discern as strong a proof of familiarity of intercourse between the two people, as of accuracy of scholarship in comparative philology. And so much is certain that, when the Icelanders were framing and adjusting their alphabet, during the 12th century, they adopted Anglo-Saxon letters, where the runic or the Latin alphabets did not express the sound with sufficient distinctness.<sup>1</sup> The earliest writer in the language, Ari the Learned, betrays familiarity with Beda as an authority whom he had studied.<sup>2</sup> The not inconsiderable number of sagas extant, derived from English sources, show that English literature was a subject that interested the Icelandic clerks of old. Sagas, such as that of Edward the Confessor,<sup>3</sup> of St. Oswald,<sup>4</sup> the *Bretasögur*<sup>5</sup> and monk Gunnlaug Leifsson's paraphrase of the prophesies of Merlin,<sup>6</sup> &c., evince, how eagerly the early Icelandic clerks availed themselves of opportunities for studying English history, opportunities which only could be the result of frequent intercommunion. Even to this day these sagas have an interest of their own, as being not unfrequently based on records now lost or unknown. Moreover, registers of Icelandic churches show that books of English penmanship continued for a long time to be in request in the country.<sup>7</sup>

The Icelandic alphabet framed, partly, on the pattern of the Anglo-Saxon.

Sagas relating to England.

from the manner in which he sets forth the principle of his orthography: "this is how Englishmen have framed their alphabet, let their example be our guide." His language impresses us as that of one who had studied in England.

<sup>1</sup> See the treatise already referred to, *Sn. Edda*, II., 32, 36, 38, and the succeeding treatise, *ib.*, 52-56.

<sup>2</sup> *Landnámabók*, *Isl. sög.*, I., 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Flateyjarbók*, III., 463-472; *ed.* also by Jón Sigurðsson, *An-*

*naler for nordisk Oldkyndighed*, 1852, pp. 1-43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ed.* by Jón Sigurðsson, *Ann. for nord. Oldk.*, 1854, pp. 3-91.

<sup>5</sup> *Ed.* by Jón Sigurðsson, *Ann. for nord. Oldk.*, 1848, pp. 102-215.

<sup>6</sup> *Ed.* by Jón Sigurðsson, *ib.*, 1849, pp. 14-75.

<sup>7</sup> Thus we may mention, *e.g.*, that at the church of Háls in *Enjóskudal*, "tvær aspiciens bækr" "enskar" are mentioned in 1394, and at the same time "tvær messu-bækr enskar" at the church of *Skinnastaðir*.

3. ICELANDIC VISITORS TO ENGLAND.—About the lifetime of the Archbishop, and in the course of the next twenty years after his death, we find that England was visited by men of great note in Iceland. Thorlak the son of Thorhall, afterwards bishop of Skalholt (1178–1193), and his country's patron-saint after death,<sup>1</sup> went abroad and studied theology at Paris and Lincoln, returning to Iceland about 1161. His sojourn in England fell thus within the palmiest days of the great chancellor. Thorlak could not have failed hearing much rumour about Thomas's unexampled lordliness, or about his wise and considerate Church policy—"Thomæ præsidio tutus et quietus manebat ecclesiæ status."<sup>2</sup> On returning to Iceland we may be certain that Thorlak continued to correspond with friends in England, in the ecclesiastical life of which country he must have found much to delight his pious mind, and where his own life had taken that saintly mould which characterised it throughout. Such correspondence could not have passed in silence over the one great event of the time. The records of Thorlak's own life point in this direction. The younger saga of this bishop bears a clear testimony to his having been not only remembered, but held in saintly veneration, in England, after his death, in the very locality of his whilom sojourn:—

Bishop Thorlak visits England and studies at Lincoln.

His effigy set up at the Priory of Kyme in Lincolnshire.

"In Kynn in England," the saga has it, "a man by the name of Audunn, had an effigy made in honour of the blessed bishop Thorlak, and when the effigy was made and had been placed in the church, a certain English clerk came forward and asked, of whom that image might be, and was told it was of bishop Thorlak in Iceland."<sup>3</sup> By the wording of the saga it would seem as if he who penned this passage looked upon

<sup>1</sup> He was declared saint in 1199. | IV., 12. Cfr. Fitzstephen, III., 23.

<sup>2</sup> Roger de Pontigny Materials, | <sup>3</sup> Þorláks saga hin yngri, Bisk. sög., I., 357.

Kynn rather as a place of one than of many churches. Scholars take Kynn to be a corruption of Lynn—at that time a populous town of many churches, and too well known to Icelanders in the 12th and 13th centuries as a chief centre of northern commerce, to be so mistaken. We maintain, on the contrary, that in Kynn we have, in a slight disguise, the name of Kyme, a priory of Lincolnshire, connected with the see of Lincoln,<sup>1</sup> and make bold to suppose, that Audunn may have been an Icelandic monk of the place, having been recommended by Thorlak to some of his former friends at Lincoln.

It was doubtless at abbot Thorlak's suggestion—he was abbot of Ver or Thykkvibær before he was bishop—that his nephew and successor in the see of Skalholt, Paul Jonsson, also went to England, where he studied for a time, and from where he returned, according to his biographer, so well furnished with learning and clerky lore, as to excel all men in his native country.<sup>2</sup> According to the saga he married young, which probably means that he was not yet 20, and when he had lived a few winters with his wife, he went abroad. This, we take it, refers to the age of, say 23 or so, and as Paul was born in 1155, his stay in England probably fell in the years 1178 and afterwards, that is, about five years after the canonisation of St. Thomas, when the whole country rang with his miracles, and most of his popular biographies were already in public circulation. We cannot possibly imagine that a young and eager-minded student of theology, such as Paul was, a scion of the noblest family in the country and an aspirant to high ecclesiastical dignities at home, should not have taken care to secure records concerning a saint who, at the very time, eclipsed all other saints in Christendom by the marvels which were daily occurring at his grave. When we

His nephew, bishop Paul, studies in England,

and probably brought back with him records relating to Thomas.

<sup>1</sup> See Dugdale, *Monasticon*, Vol. VI., 377-78.

<sup>2</sup> Páls saga, *Bisk. sög.*, I., 127.

come to discuss the evidence of early traces of a Thomas saga in Iceland (I., 4), we shall have occasion to return to this point more in detail.

In reviewing Icelandic visitors to England at this time we cannot omit to mention Björn, surnamed the English.<sup>1</sup> Although nothing is known of him beyond his name and surname, the latter is sufficiently suggestive of his having had unusually close or extensive connections with England, perhaps having spent there a portion of his life. He appears to have flourished about the latter part of the 12th century, and to have been thus a contemporary of bishop Thorlak. Any Iclander of note at that time having connections with England may be credited with disseminating news, if not importing to the country records, of Thomas of Canterbury.

Rafn Sveinbjarnarson goes on a pilgrimage to Canterbury.

But the person who we can with absolute certainty assert brought to Iceland literature relating to Thomas, was the pious, and in his daily conversation almost saintly, Rafn Sveinbjarnarson of Eyrr, in Arnarfjord, within the north-western peninsula of Iceland. He was contemporary with the bishops Thorlak and Paul. As early as about A.D. 1195 we find him making a vow to St. Thomas, a fact which in itself makes it more than probable that then already he was acquainted with a Latin or an Icelandic life of the saint. This vow, which bears importantly on the history of Thomas saga, occurred under the following circumstances :—

“ It so happened in Dyrafjord, at a spring-mote when  
 “ as Rafn was there, that a walrus came upon the land,  
 “ and people went to hunt it, but the ‘ whale ’ leapt into  
 “ the sea and sank, having been wounded in the hollow  
 “ (of the body) Then people went thereto in boats and  
 “ made grapnels for the purpose of hauling the ‘ whale ’  
 “ ashore, but without any avail at all. Then Rafn  
 “ made a vow to the holy Bishop Thomas, towards the

<sup>1</sup> Landnáma, Isl. sög., I., 142.

“securing of the ‘whale’: the ‘head-fast’ teeth of the  
 “‘whale,’ to wit, (*i.e.*, the skull of the walrus with the  
 “teeth in it), if they should avail in bringing the ‘whale’  
 “ashore. And then, when he had made the vow, they  
 “had no trouble in bringing the ‘whale’ a-land. After  
 “this Rafn went away, and they brought their ship  
 “to Norway. This winter Rafn spent in Norway. And  
 “in the spring he went west to England, and visited the  
 “holy Thomas Archbishop of Canterbury and brought  
 “St. Thomas the teeth. And there he spent his money  
 “towards a temple, and commended himself to their  
 “prayers. This is proved by Gudmund Svertingsson:—

“I put on record, that the man of firm intent  
 “Went from the ‘blue-wanded steed’ (*i.e.*, ship)  
 “To do his homage to the most holy  
 “Thomas, the repressor of all woe.”<sup>1</sup>

We cannot for a moment doubt that Rafn, on quitting Canterbury, brought away, by gift or otherwise, copies of Lives of the saint, all extant biographies of Thomas having at that time been put to writing. Some record of the saint's miracles must also have found a place in the pilgrim's library, the miracle collections being the most

Must have brought records of Thomas back with him.

<sup>1</sup> Rafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar, Bisk. sög., I., 641–2: Atburðr sá geyrðist í Dýrafirði á vorþingi, þá er Rafn var þar, at rosm-hvalr kom upp á land, ok fóru menn til at særa hann, en hvalrinn hljóp á sjó ok sökk, því at hann var særðr á hol. Síðan fóru menn til á skipum, ok geyrðu til sóknir, ok vildu draga hvalinn at landi, ok unnu engar lyktir á. Þá hét Rafn á enn helga Thómas biskup, til þess, at næst skyldi hvalrinn: hausfastar tennar or hvalnum, ef þeir gæti náð hvalinn at landi fluttan; ok síðan, er hann hafði heitið, þá varð þeim ekki fyrir at flytja at landi hvalinn. Þessu næst fór Rafn

K 541.

í brott, ok kvómu þeir skipi sínu við Noreg. Þetta sannar Guðmundr Svertingsason í drápu þeirri er hann orti um Rafn . . . þann vetr var Rafn í Noregi. Ok at vori fór hann vestr til Englands ok sótti heim enn helga Thómas erkibiskup í Kantarabergi, ok færði enum helga Thómasi tennar; ok varði hann þar fé sínu til musteris, ok fal sik undir þeirra bænir. Þetta sannar Guðmundr Svertingsson.

Get ek þess, er gékk at lúta,  
 geð fastr, enum helgasta  
 böl-hnekkjanda, af blakki  
 blás vandar, Thómási.

b

venerated portion of the literature relating to the martyr. By Rafn, therefore, Iceland certainly acquired materials for the compilation of a Thomas saga, besides what might have been brought to the country already before.

Thus, before A.D. 1200, we can aver, without at all drawing on imagination or stretching probability beyond legitimate limits that, at least some, records of Thomas of Canterbury had reached Iceland.

4. EARLY INDICATIONS OF THOMAS SAGA.—Though there is no direct evidence of the existence of a Thomas saga in Iceland earlier than the middle of the 13th century, yet we have indirect evidence of it of a much earlier date.

A history of Thomas probably known at Skalholt in bishop Thorlak's lifetime.

In the older saga of bishop Thorlak there occurs a passage, the import of which can be understood only by the aid of Thomas saga. The author who, by his own evidence, was in daily conversation with the bishop, and must therefore have been a clerk at Skalholt, for some time at least, during Thorlak's episcopate, refers, in the following manner, to the bishop's careful observance of fast-days:—

His observance of fast-days connected with Thomas saga.

“ He enjoined a strict observance of the Friday fast, so that two meals should be taken on no Friday not being a Feast-day, except on that one which falls in Easter-week. So rigorously did he himself observe Fridays, that on every such he partook of dry fare only, if he was well, but when he was sick, he so far relaxed and mitigated the fast as, on entreaty, to allow himself to eat white food on Ember-days and Fridays, thus setting an example to those who now desire to do things such as these in a manner the most beseeming in the face of God. During his episcopate bishop Thorlak happened to be ill *once when Christmas day fell on a Friday, and he was faint, and yet he tasted meat on that day, thus showing, by his example, that to do so was better* (more proper).”<sup>1</sup> Evidently

<sup>1</sup> Þorláks saga elzta, Bisk. sög., I., 106.