‘SVEINN EINN UNGR FELL Í SÝRUKER’:
MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC CHILDREN IN VERNACULAR
MIRACLE STORIES

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Sagas about the Icelandic holy bishops and miracle books provide examples which contribute to the image of Icelandic children and the portrayal of society’s attitude towards them from a perspective different from that known from contemporary sagas or Icelandic family sagas. Researchers who study hagiographical material usually focus on the depiction of the main characters as children. Those cases, however, interesting, have a slightly different function than the miracle stories included in the vitæ or extant as separate collections. As Barbara Hanawalt has observed, saints’ childhoods were not necessarily representative of ordinary experience, and their relationships with their mothers and fathers were not the most usual. All across Europe the important role played by children in the miracle material is in itself a significant fact which distinguishes this category from almost all other types of medieval sources and also reveals some information about the esteem in which children were held. Even though the focus on the saint’s glory is still the aim of those narratives, the reader can get at least a glimpse of everyday lives of poorer families.

Not many publications have been devoted to children as beneficiaries of the Icelandic miracle stories. This paper examines the cases listed in

1 See, for instance, the article by Bernardine McCreesh in the present volume.
4 They have been occasionally mentioned, e.g., by Else Mundal ‘Children, Parents and Society as Reflected in Old Norse Sources’, *Nordica Bergensia* 27 (2002), 175–91 (p. 176); and Helgi Þorláksson ‘Óvelkomin börn’, p. 116. A very thorough examination of children as the beneficiaries of miracles in Scandinavia has been made by Krötzl, ‘Parent–Child Relations’, also included in Diana Whaley, ‘Miracles in the Sagas of
the sagas and miracle books concerning the three Icelandic holy bishops: Jón Ógmundarson (1052–1121), Þorlákr Þórhallsson (1133–1193) and Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237). Þorlákr was the bishop of the southern diocese of Skálholt in the years 1178–93. He became the first native saint when the general assembly issued the permission in 1198 to call on him for intercession. On 20 July 1198 his body was translated to the cathedral of Skálholt, and the following year his feast was declared a Holy Day of Obligation. Jón was the bishop of Hólar 1106–21. The northern clergy decided for the elevatio of his bones in 1198 and a formal translatio in 1200 in order to promote a northern bishop as a saint. The veneration of that saint did not gain much popularity, and the cultus of another bishop of Hólar, Guðmundr Arason (1203–1237), was orchestrated more carefully. His relics were translated in 1315 and as many as six narratives were composed about that bishop, four of which postdate the translatio. Nevertheless, Guðmundr’s cultus does not seem to have been as widespread as that of Þorlákr either and the stories examined in this paper confirm it.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the portrayal of the saintly interference in everyday lives of medieval Icelandic children and their families as depicted in the miracle stories. The issues under examination are age and gender of the beneficiaries, nature of the cases (illnesses and accidents), means used by the intercessors (relics and other objects as well as prayers, vows and votive offerings) and the way the saints themselves intervened in particular cases. The issues of pregnancy, birth and infancy are excluded from this study as they are rather complex, and it would be outside the scope of this paper to examine all aspects of childhood. Hence, the paper focuses on children who could move around the household on their own and were not entirely dependent on adults. That, however, does not change the fact that their young age made them still very vulnerable. I would argue that each of the sources under consideration reveals authorial interest in the very concept of childhood and portrays children as human beings who were too fragile to be entirely independent and old enough to understand difficult situations or feel anxiety. They were old enough to help in the household but not entirely without supervision or assistance, and independent enough to keep busy, but not always able to judge the circumstances or find a