

Ambrósiuss saga biskups: Notes on the Norse *Vita* of a Neglected Church Father

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Ambrose of Milan (c. 340–97), Father and Doctor of the Church, is a fundamental figure in Western Christianity. In Iceland, traces of the cult of the saint date to the late twelfth century, and an account of the saint's life, *Ambrósiuss saga biskups*, is preserved in four manuscript witnesses, whose chronology stretches from the mid-thirteenth century to the first half of the sixteenth. In the past, scholars have devoted little attention to the saga: Besides the edition of the text's redactions (Unger 1877, I: 28–54; Loth 1969–70, II: 57–93), Peter Foote produced the only textual analysis of the saga, detecting the majority of its ultimate sources and providing few remarks on their adaptation (Foote 1962: 21–2). With my doctoral research, I intend to put the saga at the centre of the discussion from its usually peripheral position, giving the text and its protagonist a systematic evaluation and assessing their place within the Norse literary panorama.

Ambrósiuss saga is based on the most popular account of the saint's life in the Middle Ages, *Vita Ambrosii* (BHL 377), written by the bishop's own secretary, Paulinus of Milan, in the early fifth century. In the saga, the Latin text is integrated with additional material that describes the historical background of St Ambrose's times, which was taken for granted in Paulinus' text. A textual analysis led me to agree with Foote on the identification of most of the sources, and to update some of his conclusions. In light of *Vita Ambrosii*'s manuscript tradition (Cracco Ruggini 1963), I argue that the material drawn from Pseudo-Cassiodorus' *Historia ecclesiastica tripartita* and Gregory of Tours' *De miraculis sancti Martini episcopi* may have been already attached to the version of the hagiography that reached Iceland in the late twelfth century. Conversely, other passages seem to be unique to the Norse text. Some of them are drawn autonomously from both Late Antique (Ambrose, Orosius) and Medieval authors (Honorius of Autun, Geoffrey of Monmouth), whilst some others can be attributed to the creativity of the Norse scribes (chs. 7, 15, and 22), be it at the moment of translation or at a certain stage of the saga tradition, around the mid-thirteenth century.

The structure that results from this combination of sources follows the literary modes of saga-writing. In adapting the Latin text to the target culture, the narrator intervened on the text with eliminations and additions according to their own perspective, ultimately influencing the audience's perception of the narrative (Lönnroth 1970). In *Ambrósiuss saga*, homiletic excursuses are systematically eliminated for the sake of narrative flow and structural coherence, whereas greater space is given to historical events. Particularly prominent in the saga are the scenes of confrontation between the bishop and powerful rulers, such as Emperor Theodosius, the Arian Empress Justina, and the usurpers Magnus Maximus and Eugenius. These scenes are fundamental in the characterisation of St Ambrose as an authority in both ecclesiastical and secular affairs, and their importance is stressed by the use of direct speech and dramatization according to a common practice in saga-writing.

In my research, I argue that *Ambrósiuss saga* provided the Icelandic Church with a notable precedent and an example of episcopal authority whereby bishops could defend their prerogatives and extend their claims beyond ecclesiastical matters. An evaluation of the reception of St Ambrose's *exemplum* as reflected in certain *Biskupa sögur* will shed more light on the ways the saga could have been used in relation to the recurrent clashes between ecclesiastical and secular authority that characterise the momentous thirteenth century.

Bibliography

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