THE LIFE OF ST. BASIL IN ICELAND

BASIL OF CAESAREA or St. Basil the Great (329 or 330–379 A.D.) is considered a saint in both Eastern and Western Christianity and recognized as an influential ecclesiastical figure in both churches. Hence it is not surprising that his vita should have reached Iceland, although the current state of its transmission in that country is highly problematic. This article will discuss some of these problems, contextualize the Icelandic vita with Continental versions, and present an edition of a previously unknown Icelandic manuscript text of the Life of St. Basil.

To begin with, the Icelandic text, Basilissi saga, is far from complete. Extant in two very fragmentaryvellum manuscripts, the text that remains is severely damaged. The longer of the two manuscripts, AM 238 II fol., contains three leaves, of which f. 3v is almost entirely illegible and has been left unedited, while AM 655 VI 410 contains two leaves, of which f. 1r and f. 2v are so badly damaged that they could not be edited. The former manuscript is dated to the first half of the fourteenth century and the latter to the first quarter of the thirteenth century.


4 Jakob Benediktsson, "Skýr um skinnhúði Landbókasalvi Islands," in álir Eggert Olsin and Láz Blöndal, Skýr um hundtítasmi Landbókasalvi Islands, Supplement 2, Viðskí (Reykjavik: Landbókasalvi Islands, 1959), 17. The manuscript is dated there to the fourteenth century.

below the line, the use of \(u\) for \(v\) (except as a capital), the extended crossbar of \(e\), and the near total absence of "caudata."\[6\]

Since the text of Lbs fragm 74 falls in one of the six lacunae in Basilii saga, it is impossible to determine whether it served as the source for the Icelandic text, and, if so, whether the Icelandic was a loose or close translation of it. Initial attempts to find a comparable Latin text in any of the printed versions of the life of Basil were unsuccessful. In the 1980s, the search for pre-thirteenth-century manuscripts known to contain both the Vita Basili and the Passio sanctorum martyrum Iuliani et Basilissae turned up a number of texts all related to Euphemius' ninth-century translation of the pseudo-Amphilochian Greek text. Subsequent manuscripts whose texts agree with Lbs fragm 74 proved so easy to find that it must be assumed that a large number of them exist. Although the Euphemian translation is listed in the Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina (BHL) as no. 1023,\[7\] the editions cited there do not contain a passage close to the Latin fragment in Iceland. In addition, these editions are missing a number of chapters found in those manuscripts that do have a text corresponding to that of Lbs fragm 74, prompting the use here of the term "17-chapter version" to refer to the texts of the ten manuscripts listed below.\[8\]

Angers, Bibliothèque municipale d'Angers, 804 [12th c.]=A
Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, cod. sign. 12.461 [13th c.] = B
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 13761 [10th c.] = P
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 16736 [12th c.] = P
St. Gall, Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen, 566 [late 9th, early 10th c.] = G


With the appearance of Gabriella Corona's edition of Ælfric's Life of Saint Basil the Great in 2006, another two complete manuscripts could be added to this list.\[9\]

London, British Library, Cotton Nero E. i, part 1 [3rd qtr., 11th c.] = N
Salisbury, Cathedral Library, 221 [end, 11th c.] = S

In the edited text below of Lbs fragm 74, the numerous abbreviations have been silently expanded.

\[\text{\[4\]} \text{\textsc{uir eius accurrir ad eam. contendens non haberä ita ueritatem. Illa autem \[i\] so in consolationem venienter suadibilibus eius sermonibus dixit ad eum. Si uis \[9\] milii satis facere et misere animie meae. cras ei ego et te uel}
\[\text{\textit{[m]iter canus ad ecclesiam. [et cora]m ne participa. incontaminatorum miste}
\[\text{\textit{rionem et sic satisfacta ero. tunc coactus dixit ei sentimentum capituli. Continuo \[j\] ergo deponens illa muliebrem infirmitatem et consilium bonum consiliis illi. \[k\] currit ad pastorem et discipulum: xristi basilium aduersum impietatem clamans \[k\] Misere mihi miserere sanque dei. misere mihi discipule domini. que cum demonibus causam egi. \[9\] Miserere mihi misere. proprium patrem non obsuidatem. Et docet eum rerum gestarum ordinem: Sanctus autem dei uocans puerum sciscitatus ab eo est. si ista in}

9 Vita Basilii, in Ælfric's Life of Saint Basil the Great: Background and Context, ed. Gabriella Corona (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 223–47, along with the very fragmentary Exeter, Cathedral Library, FMS/5 (12th qtr., 10th c.). In the discussion below, manuscript citations are taken from the oldest manuscripts, W. Because it is easier to gain access to the Corona text than to the original manuscripts, citations based on her edition are also supplied = N.

131 Miserer...[gl] Text omitted between lines 8 and 9, added at top of page by scribe. Miserere an error for miserere.

1423 has] added above the line.

1439 Enarravit[ with large, red E. The space at the end of the line contains a faded, red chapter title: De a[i]stasio spiritali[ or[ ] in[ or]].
1430 pater] following empty space has sufficient room for noster et magnus as per W, G, etc.

A comparison of the twelve Latin manuscripts listed above, as well as the unedited manuscript Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, cod. sign. 9636–7 [11th c.] = B2, reveals that there are no major textual deviations, especially considering their geographical and chronological distance. The Latin leaf from Iceland agrees with now one, now the other. Rarely does Lbs fragm 74 stand alone in omitting a word: te (1412), noster et mag- nus (1430) (although space has been left for it), or changing a word or its position: signaculum for signum (1421) (all ms. use signaculum some seven sentences later), bonus pastor (1437) (rev. all other ms.), ad for in (143) (with B2), habentes for habente (1420). Although no single manuscript stands out as being closest to Lbs fragm 74, several vie for that position. Among the few salient examples:

Lbs fragm 74]
1414 mili satis G, V, P, P, N, S
1416 kirieleison W, P, O, A

narrat B2; enarravit A, P, N, S
+ N, S
coadunare P, O
multi N, S, P, christe Kyrie eleison

1420 habente(s) manus in celum]

It should be noted that both N and S conflate chapters 1 and 2 to a single chapter, and that chapter headings in S do not appear consistently. Lbs fragm 74 seems closer to the oldest manuscripts and to those preserved in the South: St. Gall, and the Vatican (V), though B2 could perhaps be added to the latter group as well.

A comparison of the Basilius saga fragments and the 17-chapter Latin versions not only strengthens the view that the 17-chapter text was indeed used by the Icelandic translator, but also shows that the translator, while following the text, did not adhere slavishly to his source. Entire sentences are often omitted, presumably to move the narrative along. Direct speech is usually kept, which contributes to a lively narrative style, as does the avoidance of Latinisms. The translator often adds explanations that the reader might need, e.g.:

in partes caesarienses civitates = cesareae borg. I heiri borg var pa
biskups stoll heilags basilii (238, 2117)
stipatores = manna er hesta hans gætry (238, 2120)
ducebatur invictus = ok setzi i myrkvastof ok fiotra (238, 2110)
quae labebant unus quisque eorum in manibus = ok safnad af
gersinnm stenm ok ofvam fiarhvern (238, 2114)

Latin present participles are, of course, reformulated, usually as a simple past: "ostendens = syndi" (238, 2129), but occasionally as a past perfect: "haec dicens = haefi petra maelle" (238, 3128) or as a historical present: "Resurgens = speetr han up" (655, 1618). At other times the translation can be inexact: "ad consuetas orationes = a barvnen" (238, 3120); "nusquam comparuit subito = Siban reid hann i brot sva at var vissva ekki livat af honum varð" (238, 3111). Below are four illustrative examples of the translator's art taken from longer passages that do not contain appreciable omissions.10

10 Except for minor graphic variants, the text of Basilius saga cited below follows Morgen- seuer's edition.
655, 1714. Enn er basilius com alft fram a jordanar bacc. þa vapr han ser nilp á iorþ. oc bap þef taram oc callajti til guls, at i þessum aturþ scylldi neqvért tacn vitrasc af himni i hans tru. Sibjan spetr han up þef staltpra oc flest or cleþom sinomoc meþ sigfom sannligja þeim cleþom þar meþ fer han or en forma manni.

238, 216 [A] þeirri tid er ivia- nus gyðnadirng fror of veldi sins rikis með lið mikil ok ærladi til serklands herfor þa þom hann skipstori síavm vid cesearam borg. I þeirri borg var þa biskyps stól heilagr. basili. En er ivianus la þar vid laund þa þó Basilius til motz vid han ok villdi honvm brád farta. En er ivianus sa basili- sa þeirri manni hans Ec em þer spakari. Basilius svaraði. Vel varri þa ef þu verir mer spakari. Síðan faráði hans ivianus þra hygg hleif hleifadæra. En er keisinar sa keifand- na þeirri manni hans til þeirra manna er hesta hans gettr. Taki þer heyr ok gefit basiliþ þvat hvartveggja er eykia foðr hygg ok brád ok heyr en eckia konga krafir. Basilius tok þið heynivok meþtli sva

238, 4210 OK þa er hvn várð þess vis. at hann var a þávum þa þann hvn a lavn til kirkio ok kastáði

W1012 (N,223,7) Basilius autem iuxta ripam factus, proiectæ se in humum. et cum lacrimis ac clamori- re fortii, postulat signum reuelati eius fidei. Resurgensque cum tres- more, dispoliat se ueminentis suis, et cum ipsis uere uemunto homine.


W15V9 (N,243,17) Considerans autem tempus oportetum quando sanctus basilius ad consuetas ora-

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ritinav firir fætr honvm. Sídan fell hvn til fota Basilio ok kallaud hatt ok mælti. Miskynna þy mer heilagad þyvat ek em ollum synd- vum monvm syndvum. Er saell kristþ þa þost ok lei till hennar ok spvrdi hver savk til veri er hvn var sva hrygg. hvn svaraði. Se herna drottinn ek reit allar syndir mitala blæði þessu ok innsglada ek sialf. En ek bið þú, heilagr. gnás. maðr, at þy takir ekki bjöði af ritinu

W2014 (N,232,26) praecipit omnibus magnus basilius recipere peculium. Qui una uoce dixerunt ad eum: Si mortali imperator haec tribuere velimus ut non desolaret nostram clamatem. multo magis christo immortalis imperator oportet offerre ea, quia tanto interitus nos redemit. [Ecce ergo in manibus suis sunt omnia; sicut tibi deus iusserit, age.] Qui ammiratus fidelissimi populi magnanimitatem, terram partem etiam nullitibus tribuit eis. et de reliquo ornuit omne presbiterium cum circulo. Altar...
imperatoris suscipiens. sedificavit domos bene actionales...tiorum et mulierum...Haec audiens imperator. oblatio neg multas dedit ad nutrimentum eorum (N, 233, 34–234, 42)

417–7 pæ tok valentinianus keisara velldi epiri valentem. Þar er sagt at anastasius greifa sai er fyr var geti sagdi valentiniano fra morgym dýrðar verkum Basilli. En er keisarinn heyrði krapta verk hans ða pæ tok hann glæðliga gýd at lofa ok sendi anastasivm greifa með mikla farþliti at gefa enm hellaga Basilió með allri veggrend. Basillus tok við fenn...pæ let hann vyp reisa agetilga spítal...karla ok kvæma...En ða er valentinianus fretti þessa til tekiv Basilli þa gaf hann til þessi spítal mikil avðæfi

None of this Icelandic text, however, seems to match anything at the corresponding place on the admittedly damaged leaf 3v of 238. Since both chapters 11 and 15 concern Valens and Basil, and since both close with the death of the Emperor, it is possible that Icelandic antiquity interest prompted a repeated explanation of Valens’ successor. This conjecture is supported by the Icelandic reference on 412 to anastasius greifa sa er fyr var geti.

Despite these problematic passages, the Icelandic texts are close enough to the Latin source that one can see where all the fragments fit in to the entire Vita Basili. On the badly damaged, unedited first page of 655 it is possible to make out the words viþ yþr Herru (113), [hjelld blæja (blanda?)] (111), portuom (112), oc pretor (114), ef necever af yþr (115), oc uytter. biþi b[an] (116). These snippets of text match portions of the Latin text in W, bolded below, between ca. 9r8 and 9r3:

ad sublimes sudditionem, ad aequales et minores caritatem non fictam; parvis dicere, plurima autem intellegere, non temerarios heros, non superabundare sermonibus; non faciles esse ad risum; verucundia ornari, cum mulieribus inuereuntibus non disputare, deorsum uisum, sursum habere animam; fugere contradictiones; non magistralem uiuspare dignitatem; nihil existimare omnes saeculi bonores. Si autem quis ex uobis potest et alius proficiere, apud Deum mercedem expectet.
Assuming that no appreciable Latin text has been omitted in the Icelandic manuscript, line 121 probably began around W342, the latter portion of chapter 2. The middle of the last line of 1r: en forna Manni, hat er daufa i, matches well with W347: vetustu homine (middle of ch. 3).

In Morgenstern's edition of the Icelandic fragments, no attempt was made to edit f. 3v or the first five lines of f. 2r in W1517, just a few lines into the story of Basil's intercession on behalf of a debtor. The initial line of f. 2r begins as follows: fe[r] konin ar berd...við segja ma si hvesv miksilds verd voro ord ens heilaga basilii, and seems not only to introduce a story, but also indicates it to be about the importance of Basil's words. Since this short chapter does indeed illustrate the effect of Basil's pronouncements, which a local prince convincingly learns on two occasions, it is logical to assume that 238, 241 is introducing the tale that comprises chapter 7 (De Scriptura quam Mulliculae fecit). At 3v20, the name elladius is legible and at the end of the next line the name p[ro]fetareus can be made out, which convincingly indicates that chapter 12 (W342) began on 3v20.

Given the numerous lacunae and illegible portions of text, the six extant leaves in Iceland have been matched in the chart below with their corresponding positions in the Vienna manuscript of the Vita Basili (W).

A portion of the Vita Basili in chapters 8 and 9, dealing with the death of Julian the Apostate, appears as an independent miracle in two versions of Marius saga, as well as in Basilii saga. Although the first version (I) is only 25 lines long in C. R. Unger's edition and contains no information not found in the longer, 100-line version (II), the former ends with the following tantalizing information about the miracle: ok er þetta viga sagt i ritingum ok [þó einkulgam, Version II] i sögu Basilius byskups. One could well assume that the "saga" reference would apply to Basilius saga, while the ritingar might well refer either to the Vita Basili or to the "Death of Julian" in a collection of Latin miracles. Such collections are, of course, widespread, and an excellent example of the story of Emperor Julian's death can be found in London, British Museum, Cotton Elcmar C.x.12

However, there are passages in the independent Icelandic miracle (the longer Version II listed below with page and line from Unger's edition) that could not have come from the *saga* (with ms. page and line). These are given below, followed by *Basilius saga* (p. and l.), the *vita* (Vienna ms. 4635 = W, + p. and l. ref. in Corona's *Erfri=N*), and the independent miracle from Cotton Cleopatra C.x=C (Neuhaus' edition p. and l.).

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<th>Chapter Heading</th>
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<th>Page &amp; Line</th>
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<td>De Quibusdam Gentilibus et Interpretatione Exemeri [Concerning Certain Pagans, and his Sermon on the Six Days of Creation]</td>
<td>20v3</td>
<td>Cap. 10</td>
<td>II.700.26</td>
<td>aa fialiyv W17v16 (N,231,33) in monte C24v28 totum montem</td>
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<td>Quomodo Ducus est Antiochiam et de Filio Valentis [How he was Led to Antioch and Concerning the Son of Valent]</td>
<td>21r2</td>
<td>Cap. 11</td>
<td>II.701.2-3</td>
<td>Bulikla vitran vm dauda Juliani saga, 2v15 sa Libanius sophroquestor ati tign, sem hann var i Perside las hanna daða ivliani nöðings W17v17–18r3 (N,231,44) Similem uero uisionem mortis illiani uildit ipsa nocte et Libanius sophista cum esset cum eo in perside et quasiors dignitatem perageret.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Anastasio Spiritali Presbitero [Concerning the Holy Priest Anastasius]</td>
<td>23v3</td>
<td>Cap. 13</td>
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<tr>
<td>De Beato Patre Nostro Effrem [Concerning our Blessed Father Ephrem]</td>
<td>33v14</td>
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<td>De Valente Deo Odibil [Concerning Valeus, a Man Hateful to God]</td>
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<td>De Mullere culus Peccata per Orationem Delivit [Concerning a Woman whose Sins he Wiped Away through Prayer]</td>
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<td>De Joseph Hebreo [Concerning Joseph, a Jew]</td>
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<td>Explicit Vita Beatiissimi Basili Archiepiscopi</td>
<td>45v3</td>
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* The addition of *Valente* here is an obvious error, but one that is also found in ms. B, B, and V8.
than does the Latin miracle (C). Basil’s disrespectful reply to Emperor Julian’s boast about being a better philosopher than Basil (Utinam philosopharés W1515; N230,5) is reflected in the Icelandic miracle (Gud vildi, at þu kendist vid sama speki II,699,24), but the Latin miracle offers no corresponding passage. C is likewise silent where Julian accuses Basil of urging the people to break the statue of the goddess worshipped by the emperor (W1617v16v3; N230,5) and Version II has the emperor accuse Basil of breaking his command and of ridiculing the goddess Diana (II,700,3–5). When Julian’s quaestor, Libanius, arrives in person to report on Mercureius’ deadly attack (W19v4, N232,16; II,701,21), the miracle only notes: Re fretur autem in triperita historia C25,3). The miracle omits a paragraph found in chapter 9 of the vita, in which Basil attempts to restore to the people their donations, and the assassinated emperor is mocked by the populace of Antioch. The text in Version II at 702,6–17 corresponds closely to the text in chapter 9 of the vita (W2or,6; N232,8). Other examples showing the affinity of the vita and Version II vis-à-vis the independent miracle include the following:

II,700,8
W16v7 (N230,19)
C24,15

II,701,8
W18v5 (N,231,56)
C24,45

sagdi þeim ord keisars
narratit ei imperatoris uerba

at aa þeiri soma nott mundi hinn
grimmi konungur Julianus vera drepinn
quia ista nocte interfactus est tyrannus

W17v14 (N,234,33)
in iusue
II,700,26
in sueui
C24,27
in somnis

W19v15–16 (N,232,23)
cum blasphemia clamorem
II,701,31
Sigradir þu enn galuerski, sigradir þu
C25,11–12
Vicisti Nazarene. uicisti

None of the versions discussed here could have been the immediate source for the Icelandic miracle, although the version in the vita is very close. Given how relatively little the manuscripts of the Euphemian Vita Basilii differ from one another, it is unlikely that some manuscripts of the Euphemian translation served as the source for the Icelandic miracle. The statement in the Latin miracle: Re fretur autem in triperita historia (C25,3) would lead to the expectation that the Historia Ecclesiastica Triparita by Epiphanius-Cassiodorus16 could be the source, but this turns out not to be the case. It is quite plausible, however, that an older, independent story of the Death of Julian was so much closer to the vita that it served as the source for the tale in the Cleopatra manuscript as well as for chapters 8 and 9 of the Euphemian Vita Basilii (and quite probably of the obviously related version in the Legenda Aurea).

It is also unlikely that any of the versions of the Vita Basilii discussed above is indebted to the Vitae Patrum, a chronicle of church fathers that was very popular in the Middle Ages.17 That collection reached Iceland and

was translated into the vernacular, with the oldest Icelandic manuscript dating to around 1340. An inventory dated 1461 from the monastery at Mörðurvelli lists both a Latin and a vernacular version. The (admittedly fragmentary) Icelandic version of the Vitae Patrum does not contain a Vita Basili, and the Latin recension of the Vitae patrum that might once have served as its source matches poorly with Lbs fragm 74. The definitive textual transmission of the Vitae Patrum remains to be written, but the Rosweyddian text, which serves as the basis for modern scholarship, relies for its Vita Basili on a translation from the Greek by Ursus, BHL number 1022, whereas Lbs fragm 74 follows the translation by Euphemius, number 1023 in the BHL.  

It does not appear that St. Basil served as the patron saint for any of Iceland’s churches or monasteries, which removes any obvious candidates for the site of the original translation of Basil’s life into Icelandic. The only church inventories to list material related to St. Basil are those of the monastery at Mörðurvelli and of the churches at Kolbeinsstaðir and Búrfell. The copious holdings of Mörðurvelli list numerous books with Latin titles, but under the rubric Postar norrænu bekur is listed basilius saga. The very modest inventory at Kolbeinsstaðir lists eina Sogubok og er þar a Nichulas saga. Ambrosius saga oc Basilius saga, and the lives of the first two saints are known to exist in Icelandic. The church at Búrfell lists v. Mariuskrift. Basiliskrisspt, which, in this context, is probably a pictorial representation, since, though skrisspt could mean a writ or scripture, ritting would be the more usual term.

Had it not been for the use of vellum leaves taken from manuscripts to protect books and papers after the advent of the printing press, the only record of the life of St. Basil in Iceland would have been Basili’s name listed in conjunction with unknown books in several church inventories, and the story of his interaction with Julian the Apostate from addenda to Marius saga, though even that tale owes its presence in Iceland rather to the figure of Mary than to St. Basil. The five badly damaged leaves of Basilius saga, of which fewer than seven pages could be edited, presented a tantalizing, but incomplete picture of Basil the Great in Icelandic literary history. With the editing of Lbs fragm 74, this article demonstrates that a common, but long overlooked, version of the Vita Basili made its way to Iceland and served as the source for the vernacular version, probably around the beginning of the thirteenth century. A comparison of Basilius saga with the Latin source shows us how much of the Icelandic text has been lost and gives us a glimpse of the Icelandic translator’s modus operandi. Finally, as this article has shown, neither Basilius saga nor the Latin manuscript of the Vita Basili that made its way to Iceland could have served as the source for the Icelandic miracle about the death of Emperor Julian that is appended to Marius saga.

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Hellagur Basilius á Íslandi.

Lykilörð: Hellagur Basilius, Basília saga, Vita Basilii, Julian keisari, Eufemius.


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