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Conversion and Cultural Memory in Medieval Iceland

Sverrir Jakobsson

Christianization was an important and traumatic event that became embedded in the cultural memory of Icelanders. Through the reconstruction of this event in historical narratives, there was an ongoing debate on the identity of Icelanders as a group as the cultural heritage of this group was institutionalized and cultivated by particular organizations and individuals. This is reflected in very different emphasis on individual agents in this process, which can be found in various historical works composed between 1070 and 1330. The general trend is that the narrative became more inclusive for a larger group with each major version, as the leading role passed from the Archbishop to a select group of few leading families to a larger group including leaders from all parts of Iceland and, finally, to the general population, the humble as well as the mighty.

I. Introduction

There is no consensus to be found in medieval sources about how Iceland became a Christian country during the tenth and eleventh centuries. What is clear is that Christianization was an important and traumatic event that became embedded in the cultural memory of Icelanders. Through the reconstruction of this event in historical narratives, there is an ongoing debate on the identity of Icelanders as a group as the cultural heritage of this group was institutionalized and cultivated by particular organizations and individuals. As has been noted by Andrea Sterk: "More than mere transmitters, Christian historians crafted or reshaped accounts of mission with their own particular details and emphases to pass on their own particular perspectives on mission and conversion."[1] The purpose of the present article is to analyze the sources about Iceland's conversion to Christianity and attempt to explain why they tell such different stories about it, which agents are emphasized, how the transformative events are depicted,

[1]Andrea Sterk, "Representing Mission from Below: Historians as Interpreters and Agents of Christianization," *Church History* 79, vol. 2 (May 2010): 271–304, 304.

Sverrir Jakobsson is Professor in medieval history in the Department of History and Philosophy at the University of Iceland

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and if the provenance of the sources has any influence on how they depict the sequence of events that led to the conversion. The focus will be on the conversion as a single event and the manner in which this event was narrated in medieval sources rather than Christianization as the adoption of a Christian way of life and an ongoing process of transforming society, which is another important subject that has been studied in detail, not least in the last twenty years and with ample scope by other historians.[2]

The written testimony, composed decades, or even centuries, after the events in question, belongs to the realm of cultural memory rather than communicative memory, according to the distinction made between the two by Jan Assmann.[3] According to Assmann, communicative memory is shared and conveyed within a social group defined by common memories of personal interaction through the means of verbal communication over a time span of eighty to one hundred years. Communicative memory is an unstructured type of memory and can be thought of as a private interpretation of a person's own past and, therefore, as a sort of unwarranted everyday memory. Cultural memory has a more differentiated and exclusive character, as not every member of the community is endowed with the legitimacy to influence the content of cultural memory. It is intrinsically related to power and tradition and covers a much longer period of time in comparison with communicative memory. In short, cultural memory begins where communicative memory ends.

This article is thus not a study of the Christianization of Iceland as either an event or as a process, but it is rather a study of the "debate" over the Christianization of Iceland as a traumatic event and the construction of the cultural memory. The shaping of this cultural memory was connected with the creation and evolution of particular ecclesiastical institutions but also with the development of Christian identity in Iceland and the question of whether this new religion should be an elitist endeavor connected with a limited group of people or it implied a genuine conversion of the masses.

[2]See: Orri Vesteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland, Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000–1300* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Hjalti Hugason: *Frumkristni og upphaf kirkju.* "Kristni á Íslandi (Reykjavík: Alþingi, 2000); Margaret Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland. Their Veneration from the Conversion to 1400*, Subsidia Hagiographica 78 (Brussels: Soc. des Bollandistes, 1994); Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, *Property and Virginity: The Christianization of Marriage in Medieval Iceland 1200–1600* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010); Lára Magnúsardóttir, *Bannfæring* og *kirkjuvald á Íslandi 1275–1550. Lög og rannsóknarforsendur* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2007); Haki Antonsson, "Traditions of Conversion in Medieval Scandinavia. A Synthesis," *Saga-Book* 24 (2010): 25–74; Haki Antonsson, "The Early Cult of Saints in Scandinavia and the Conversion: A Comparative Perspective," in *Saints and their Lives on the Periphery: Veneration of Saints in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (c.1000–1200),* ed. Haki Antonsson and Ildar Garipzanov, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 17–39.

[3]See Jan Assmann, "Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität" in *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, eds. Jan Assmann & Tonio Hölscher (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 9–19.

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This study concerns the main strands of medieval narratives about the Christianization of Iceland, each represented by a variety of sources. They stem from the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium* by Adam of Bremen, composed sometime in the 1070s, *Íslendingabók* by Ari Þorgilsson, composed sometime between 1122 and 1133, and *Kristnisaga* by an anonymous author, composed sometime during the thirteenth century. In addition to these three narratives, a synthesis was made of these different and often divergent sources in the fourteenth century, which can be found in works such as *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*. These are the sources of interest in this inquiry.

These conflicting narratives offer a topic for analysis in that they are the vehicles for different perspectives of the past, and they also reflect different ideas concerning the order of society and the institutions that shape it. The narratives that refer to the conversion of Iceland as an event were shaped by the values and the social and political ideologies of its narrators. Therefore, they offer important insight into the society which produced them, making them a topic of interest for medievalists, and more scholarship should be undertaken that explores these texts beyond their traditional role as repositories of such nuggets of information that have been extracted from them and then presented as historical facts.

In the following, the story of the conversion will be examined in chronological order, depending on the age of the narratives. This does not imply that the earlier narratives are always closer to the events that happened or that younger sources represent a direct evolution from a perspective found in earlier sources. The relationship between the narratives is much more complicated. Nevertheless, it is always best to start at the beginning, and then follow the road wherever it may lead.

II. The Bishop as King: Adam's Story

Adam of Bremen was a cleric in the service of the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen about whom nothing is known except that he wrote a voluminous history of the archbishopric sometime during the 1070s.[4] It is closely modelled on Sallust, even to the extent that whole phrases and sentences from that author are incorporated into Adam's work.[5] It was written in Latin

[4]For arguments for a more precise dating see Henrik Janson, *Templum Nobilissimum. Adam av Bremen, Uppsalatemplet och konfliktlinjerna i Europa kring år 1075*, Avhandlingar från Historiska institutionen i Göteborg, 21 (Gothenburg: Göteborg Universitet, 1998), 34–39.

[5]See Fabio Stok, "Modelli e suggestioni sallustiane nella biografia dell'Arcivescovo Adalberto," in *Devotionis munus. La cultura e l'opera di Adamo di Brema*, eds. Riccardo Scarcia & Fabio Stok (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2010), 79–100.

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but with a number of Germanisms. It is the chief source of our knowledge concerning the history and ethnography of the northern regions before the twelfth century.

Little is known of the author's life, and he signed his name with his first initial letter, A, in the preface to his history. That this letter stands for Adam is known because of the *Chronica Slavorum* of Helmold, which refers to Adam as the author of a history of the Hamburg-Bremen diocese.[6] Shortly after his arrival at Bremen, Adam visited the Danish king Svend Estridssøn (1047–1076) and obtained from him much information for the historical work that he intended to write, beginning it after the death of Archbishop Adalbert in 1072.

Since Scandinavia belonged to the missionary field of the archbishop, Adam was much concerned with Scandinavian events. Although partly based on older sources, such as the ninth-century *Vita Anskarii*, for most tenth- and eleventh-century events in Scandinavia, the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium* is one of the earliest sources at our disposal. It is, however, a tendentious text, because it is concerned with the achievements of various archbishops and the agenda of the archdiocese as an institution. It has been noted that "the archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen defined itself in terms of the northern peoples: the Danes, Swedes, Slavs, and others whom it sought to convert." Even if the actual achievements of the mission were slight, "the myth of the church's special mandate to convert the North was central to the way in which the clergy of the church legitimized their institution to themselves and others."[7] It could be argued that the northern mission was the main rationale for the status of Hamburg-Bremen as an archdiocese, which necessitated making the most of the result of the mission.[8]

Adam had mixed feelings about Archbishop Adalbert (r. 1043–1072), resulting in a description that is often paradoxical.[9] However, this ambiguity is not allowed to detract in any way from the achievement of the archbishop concerning the mission to the north. Adam writes that "he remained in respect of the heathen mission alone vigorous in service and without reproof,

[6]Helmold von Bosau, *Slawenchronik*, Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters 19, ed. Heinz Stoob, 2nd Edition (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), 78.

[7]Timothy Barnwell, "Fragmented identites: otherness and authority in Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*," in *The Resources of the Past in Early Medieval Europe* ed. Clemens Gantner, Rosamond McKitterick & Sven Meeder (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 206–222.

[8]See: Thomas Foerster, *Vergleich und Identität. Selbst- und Fremddeutung im Norden des hochmittelalterlichen Europa*, Europa im Mittealter 14 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2009), 32–34, 206.

[9]Cf. Barnwell, "Fragmented identities," 207–208; Ildar Garipzanov, "Christianity and Paganism in Adam of Bremen's Narrative" in *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery: Early History Writing in Northern, East-Central, and Eastern Europe (c. 1070–1200)*, ed. Ildar Garipzanov, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011): 13–29, 18–20.

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and such as both the circumstances of the times and the ways of men would have him."[10] He goes on to say that Bremen "was devoutly sought from all parts of the world, especially by all the peoples of the north. Among those who came the longest distances were the Icelanders, the Greenlanders, and legates of the Orkney Islanders. They begged that he send preachers thither, which he also did.[11]"

This is one of the earliest references to missionaries in Iceland. Iceland is not mentioned in papal correspondence until 1053, during the time of Archbishop Adalbert.[12] The first mention Adam makes of Icelanders at all in his narrative is in his claim that the Norwegian king, Saint Olaf, received support from "the peoples of Iceland" (*populis Islanorum*) in his failed attempt to regain the kingdom of Norway from Canute the Great in 1030.[13] Adam also notes that King Harald (r. 1046–1066), the brother of Saint Olaf, "extended his bloody empire all the way to Iceland" (*ille cruentum imperium usque ad Island extendit*).[14] Adam therefore seems to have some idea about Norwegian rule over Iceland, which, however, is not mentioned in connection with the mission there.[15]

The most elaborate discussion of this mission is in a separate section where Adam describes all the Scandinavian countries and their peculiarities. He identifies Iceland as the island of Thule that is described in Greco-Roman geographies and describes how the inhabitants raise cattle, clothe themselves with pelts, and live in underground caves with their cattle. Instead of towns, they have mountains and springs, "[p]assing their lives thus in holy simplicity" (*Itaque in simplicitate sancta vitam peragentes*). Adam considers the Icelanders:

> most blessed because all have now adopted Christianity. They have many meritorious customs, especially charity, in consequence of which they have all things in common with strangers as well as with natives. They hold their bishop as king. All the people respect his wishes. They hold as

[10]*Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*, Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters 11, eds. Werner Trillmich and Rudolf Buchner (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961), 358. "*in sola gentium legatione permansit integer officii et sine querela et talis, qualem et tempora et mores hominum mallent habere*."

[11]*Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, p. 358. "*ab omnibus terrarum partis devote peneretur, maxime ab omnibus aquilonis populis. Inter quos extremi venerant Islani, Gronlani et Orchadum legati, petentes, ut predicatores illuc dirigeret; quod et fecit*."

[12]See Harald Gustafsson, "Islands kristnande—en kritisk undersökning," *Scandia* 77 vol. 2 (2011): 18–37, 27–28.

[13]*Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, 300.

[14]Ibid., 346, 348.

[15]The question of Norwegian hegemony in Iceland has been ignored by most Icelandic historians, because it did not fit the view of the image of Medieval Iceland as an independent "commonwealth," see Gustafsson, "Islands kristnande," 28.

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> law whatever he ordains as coming from God, or from the Scriptures, or even from the worthy practices of other peoples.[16]

Adam then goes on to confirm that the Icelanders had indeed been converted to Christianity during the reign of Archbishop Adalbert:

> For them, our metropolitan returned vast thanks to God that they had been converted in his time, even though before receiving the faith they were in what may be called their natural law, which was not much out of accord with our religion. On their petition, therefore, the archbishop consecrated a certain most holy man named Islef. And when he was sent from that region to the prelate, the latter held him in his company for a while and furthermore bestowed great honor upon him. In the meantime Islef learned in what respects peoples newly converted to Christ can advantageously be instructed. By him the archbishop transmitted letters to the people of Iceland and Greenland, reverently greeting their churches and promising them he would come to them very soon that their joy may be full together.[17]

Although references are made to the pious lifestyle of the Icelanders before their conversion, it is evident that they were not Christianized until Adalbert had sent Isleph (or Islef) to them. The comment that the Icelanders were already Christian according to natural law can hardly be used as proof that Adam knew of a conversion event in 999, although such an interpretation has been suggested.[18] Rather, it would fit in with the idealized picture Adam painted of Icelanders as noble savages.[19] It should be noted, that Adam also places the conversion of Greenland in a similar period.[20]

[16]*Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, 486, 488. "*et in hoc beatissima, quod nunc omnes induerunt christianitatem. Multa insignia in moribus eorum, precipua karitas, ex qua procedit, ut inter illos omnia communis sint, tam advenis quam indigenis. Episcopuum suum habent pro rege; ad illius nutum respicit omnis populous; quicquid ex Deo, ex scripturis, ex consuetudine aliarum gentium ille constituit, hoc pro lege habent*."

[17]*Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, 486, 488. "*De quibus noster metropolitanus immensas Deo gratias retulit, quod suo tempore convertebantur, licet ante susceptam fidem naturali quadam lege non adeo discordabant a nostra religione. Itaque petentibus illis ordinavit quendam sanctissimum virum nomine Isleph. Qui ab eadem regione missus ad pontificem aliquandiu retentus est apud eum cum ingenti prorsus honore, discens interea, quibus noviter conversos ad Christum populos salubriter posset informare. Per quem transmisit archiepiscipus suos apices populo Islanorum et Gronlandorum, venerabiliter salutans eorum ecclesias et pollicens eis propediem se venturum usque ad illos, ud gaudio simul pleno fruantur*."

[18]Haki Antonsson, "Traditions of Conversion in Medieval Scandinavia," 32.

[19]See Heinrich Schmidt, "Skandinavien im Selbstverständnis der Bremer Kirche vom 9. bis zum 11. Jahrhundert," in *Bremen.1200 Jahre Mission*, ed. Dieter Hägermann, Schriften der Wittheit zu Bremen. N.F. 12 (Bremen: Johann Heinrich Döll Verlag, 1989): 33–59, 52; David Fraesdorff, *Der barbarische Norden. Vorstellungen und Fremdheitskategorien bei Rimbert, Thietmar von Merseburg, Adam von Bremen und Helmold von Bosau*, Orbis mediaevalis. Vorstellungswelten des Mittelalters 5 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005), 298–299.

[20]See Рыбаков В. В. Адам Бременский о времени крещения Гренландии // Восточная Европа в древности и средневековье. Время источника и время в источнике. XVI чтения

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The Christianization of Norway is depicted as following a very different route from that of Iceland. According to Adam of Bremen, Olaph, the son of Thrucco (Óláfr Tryggvason), was baptized and "the first among his people to accept Christianity" (*ex ea gente primus fuisse christianus*).[21] We learn, however, that some believed he abandoned Christianity and was a magician who practiced prophecy; as such, he was known as Craccaben (*krákubein*, crow-bone). Following Olaf's death in a naval battle between Scania and Zeeland (*inter Sconiam et Seland*), King Suein of Denmark also became the ruler of Norway.[22] Later, when King Suein of Denmark invaded England, he took with him the son of Craccaben, also called Olaf, who was later elected the ruler of Norway.[23] Thereafter followed constant war between Saint Olaf and King Canute (Lat. *Chnud*, ON. *Knútr*), who was Suein's successor, which lasted throughout their lives (*continuum fuit bellum, nec cessavit omnibus diebus vitae eorum*).

Olaf is described as a "most Christian king" (*Rex itaque christianissimus*), a just ruler, and an ardent enemy of sorcerers. According to Adam, Olaf had brought with him many bishops and priests from England to conduct a mission in Norway: "Of their number, Siegfried, Grimkil, Rudolf, and Bernhard were noted for their learning and virtues. At the king's command they also went to Sweden, Gothia, and all the islands beyond Norway, preaching the Word of God and the Kingdom of Jesus Christ."[24] Is this an oblique reference to a Norwegian mission in Iceland? If so, there is an inherent contradiction in the work of Adam of Bremen. These Anglo-Saxon missionaries would have preceded Islef and thus instigated a mission in Iceland well before Islef's ordination as bishop.

In the following chapters, Adam narrates how Olaf was driven from his kingdom by Canute, but eventually returning with an army, composed of Icelanders among others. After a brief second reign, he was killed by sorcerers—or murdered on the orders of Canute—and became a martyr.[25] From then on, Canute ruled both Denmark and Norway. However, after his death, the Norwegians elected Magnus, an illegitimate son of the martyred Olaf, as their king; he also became king of Denmark following an

памяти чл.-корр. АН СССР Владимира Терентьевича Пашуто. Москва, 14–16 апреля 2004 г. Материалы конференции. Moskva, 2004. 175–180.

[21] *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts*, 268, 270, 272.

[22] Ibid., 276.

[23] Ibid., 290.

[24] Ibid., 296. "*Quorum clari doctrina et virtutibus erant Sigafrid, Grimkil, Rudolf et Bernard. Hii etiam iussu regis [ad] Suediam, Gothiam et omnes insules, quas trans Nortmanniam sunt, accesserunt, euangelizantes barbaris verbum Dei et regnum Iesu Christi*."

[25] Ibid., 296, 298, 300, 302.

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invasion.[26] Harald, the brother of Olaf, is described as having travelled to Constantinople and fought against Saracens in the service of the emperor. He then returned to Norway and became king following the death of his nephew Magnus.[27]

In contrast to the explicit acknowledgement of Olaf as a martyr and a saint, King Harald is depicted as a tyrant exceeding all others (*rex Haraldus crudelitate sua omnes tyrannorum excessit furores*). The archbishop sent legates to Harald and castigated him for having brought bishops from England and France, contrary to the established Church hierarchy (*contra fas ordinare fecerat se contempto, per quem auctoritate sedis apostolicae deberent iuste ordinari*). Harald reacted angrily and told the legates that Harald himself was the only archbishop or ruler of Norway (*Ad haec mandata commotus ad iram tyrannus legatos pontificis spretos abire precepit, clamitans se nescire, quis sit archiepiscopus aut potens in Norvegia, nisi solus Haroldus*). There seems to be a marked contrast in attitudes toward Harald and his brother Olaf. Both of them brought priests from England to Norway, but no mention is made of the opposition of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen to Olaf. In fact, Harald is explicitly contrasted with his saintly brother about whom Adam claims that "[t]he miracles that take place every day at that king's tomb in the city of Trondhjem testify to his extraordinary merits" (*Cuius egregia merita testantur haec miracula, quae cotidie fiunt ad sepulcrum regis in civitate Trondemnis*).[28] And yet, the complaints that the archbishop made to Harald about bypassing church hierarchy could equally have applied to Olaf and his English priests.[29]

As Adam makes quite clear, King Harald's empire extended all the way to Iceland. Because his brother had sent Anglo-Saxon missionaries to the island, it would be reasonable to expect Harald to continue with such activities, as he continued his brother's efforts to bring bishops and priests from England to Norway. Yet Adam makes no mention of this in his narrative, implying, if not stating it emphatically, that Islef, the archbishop's representative, was the only bishop on the scene in Iceland.

To summarize: the narrative in *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium* depicts Icelanders as a noble and simple people, already Christian in spirit before they petitioned Archbishop Adalbert to send them an ordained bishop, and thus Iceland converted during his time in office (1043–1072). This bishop enjoyed their complete obedience, ruling as a king over the country.

[26]Ibid., 318.
[27]Ibid., 338, 340, 342.
[28]Ibid., 346, 348.
[29]See Lesley Abrams, "The Anglo-Saxons and the Christianization of Scandinavia," *Anglo-Saxon England* 24 (1995), 213–249.

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However, if we also take into account what Adam of Bremen recounts about the situation in Norway, it seems that the preachers sent by Saint Olaf had gone to Iceland during his reign in Norway (1015–1030), probably some thirty years before Islef became bishop. Because Adam regarded King Harald, the brother of Olaf, as having extended his rule to Iceland during his reign (1046–1066), it would be reasonable to assume that this mission had continued. However, that fits poorly with notion of Islef as the supreme ruler of Iceland, acting as the representative of the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen.

As Volker Scior has argued, Adam narrates the universal confrontation between Christians and pagans more specifically as that between the Christians of the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen and the pagan peoples targeted by missionary activity. Hence, there is an implicit connection between Christianity and the archbishopric throughout the narrative. This institutional self-identification affects the presentation of the history of the archbishopric.[30] In other words, being converted to Christianity was tantamount to becoming part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy subject to the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. Thus, even if one acknowledges the efforts of the missionary bishops sent by Saint Olaf, the moment of the proper conversion could only have been when the Icelanders received a legitimately ordained bishop who was subject to the proper authority, the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen.

The narrative of Adam of Bremen is an example of cultural memory in its formative stage. It is institutionalized and shaped by the strategic position of the archbishopric in the ecclesiastical politics of the time. However, it was also composed around the same time as the events in question, half a century after the sending of Saint Olaf's missionaries from Norway and a mere twenty years after the consecration of Islef as bishop. Thus, Adam does not present a single institutionalized narrative of the conversion wherein one version of events is maintained at the expense of all others. Instead, he narrates two different tales, one where the Norwegian king is the important agent of conversion and another where the agents of the archbishop are the ones who convert the Icelanders. Even if Adam grants primacy to the efforts of the archbishop, the role of other agents could hardly be suppressed so close in time to the events in question. Thus, we are left with a paradox of an island where the inhabitants seem to have simultaneously obedient to the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen and one of his greatest antagonists, the king of Norway.

[30]See Volker Scior, *Das Eigene und das Fremde: Identität und Fremdheit in den Chroniken Adams von Bremen, Helmolds von Bosau und Arnolds von Lübeck*, Orbis mediaevalis: Vorstellungswelten des Mittelalters 4 (Berlin: Akademie, 2002), 87.

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II. The Apostle of the North: Ari's Story

In the early twelfth century, Ari Þorgilsson composed a work he called *The Book of the Icelanders* (*Íslendingabók*). In his prologue, Ari makes the following statement concerning the origin of the work: "I made *The Book of the Icelanders* for our bishops, Þorlákr and Ketill, and I showed it both to them and Sæmundr the priest."[31] From this evidence, it is apparent that Ari's work was supported not only by the two bishops in Iceland at the time—Þorlákr Runólfsson at the diocese of Skálholt and Ketill Þorsteinsson at the diocese of Hólar—but also by a third man, who can be identified as the priest Sæmundr Sigfússon. The date of composition must be sometime between 1122, when Ketill was ordained as bishop at Hólar, and 1133, when both Þorlákr and Sæmundr died. However, the length of the term of the last lawspeaker mentioned in this work is listed as twelve years, from 1123 to 1134, which suggests that Ari did not finish his final revision of the text until about 1134.[32] There is, therefore, a relatively brief period of time in which this work might have been composed.

Íslendingabók is the earliest, continuous narrative history of Iceland. For most of the facts presented there, it is the only original source. Its importance for the history of Iceland is therefore considerable in spite of its brevity. The history narrated in *Íslendingabók* starts with the discovery and settlement of the island in 870. It can be categorized as institutional history, since its main themes are the creation and evolution of the Icelandic parliament, the Christianization of Iceland, and the establishment of the Icelandic Church and the relationship between Iceland and Norway. These reflect the interests of Ari Þorgilsson, who was simultaneously a cleric and a chieftain.

On the origin of Christianity in Iceland, Ari is very explicit. He credits one man with the conversion of the Icelanders: "King Olaf, son of Tryggvi, son of Olaf, son of Harald Fairhair, brought Christianity to Norway and Iceland"

[31]Íslenzk fornit I. Íslendingabók, Landámabók, ed. Jakob Benediksson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968) ,I, 3. "*Íslendingabók gørða ek fyrst byskupum órum Þorláki ok Katli, ok sýndak bæði þeim ok Sæmundi presti*." On the topos of commission in Íslendingabók and its implications, see Sverrir Tómasson, "Tækileg vitni," *Afmælisrit Björns Sigfúsonar* (Reykjavík: Leiftur, 1975), 251–287.

[32]*Íslenzk fornrit* I, 23. The editor of the standard edition of the *Book of Icelanders*, Jakob Benediktsson, considers the reference to Guðmundr to be a later insertion (*Íslenzk fornrit* I, xvii–xviii) but the argument for this is mainly that it "disrupts the natural flow of the narrative" (Ic. *rýfur eðlilegt samhengi frásagnarinnar*), and the present author confesses to having no idea what this means. Indeed, if the information about Guðmundr is deemed to be an insertion, it then has to be explained why a scribe (or Ari himself) would insert information about Guðmundr but leave out the lawspeakers that succeeded him. See also Einar Arnórsson, *Ari fróði* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1942), 30. On the foreign models for the prologue of Ari, see Sverrir Tómasson, "Tækileg vitni."

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(*Óláfr konungr Tryggvasonr, Ólafssonar, Haraldssonar ins hárfagra, kom kristni í Norveg ok á Ísland*).[33] This is the same Norwegian king depicted as an apostate in Adam of Bremen's narrative. According to Ari Þorgilsson, Ólafr sent a missionary called Þangbrandr (Theobrand) to Iceland "and taught people here Christianity and baptized everyone who accepted the faith" (*hér kenndi mönnum kristni og skírði þá alla, er við trú tóku*). Three noteworthy men are mentioned in particular, Hallr Þorsteinsson, Gizurr the White, and Hjalti Skeggjason. Hallr was an ancestor of Ari Þorgilsson through his mother's line, whereas Gizurr was the grandfather of Teitr Ísleifson, whom Ari describes as his foster-father and names as his main source for these events. Ari is thus upholding the claims of his own family and that of his foster-father, to have been the chief apostles of Christianity in Iceland. According to Hjalti Hugason, the descendants were thus made into the institutional keepers of this particular historical memory.[34]

According to Ari, this happened after Þangbrandr had returned to Norway and had been pessimistic about the results of his mission in Iceland, which angered the king, who then threatened to maim or kill Icelanders who were in Norway at the time. Two of the aforementioned leaders of the Christian fraction, Gizurr and Hjalti, then travelled to Norway and undertook service as missionaries on their return to Iceland, bringing with them a priest named Þormóðr. In this narrative, it is evident that the secular leaders were in charge of the mission rather than the priest.

As Orri Vésteinsson pointed out, to Ari, "the conversion was not so much a matter of salvation as political unity; the drama of the tale revolves not around the eternal well-being of Icelandic souls but about whether they were capable of taking momentous decisions like these without the fragile political system disintegrating."[35] In line with this emphasis, it is described how a great controversy between Christians and pagans arose at the parliament, resulting in a legal schism. The Christians elected Hallr Þorsteinsson as their lawspeaker and charged him with reciting a separate law for them. Against their wishes, he negotiated with the pagan lawspeaker, Þorgeirr Þorkelsson, chieftain of the Ljósvetningar, to adjudicate a solution. Þorgeirr lay still for a day and night and then surprisingly declared that Christianity should become the common religion in the interest of peace. According to *Íslendingabók*, he then gave a speech which conformed tightly to classical rhetorical conventions, as has been demonstrated by Hjalti Hugason.[36] In his speech, Þorgeirr is said to have mentioned the example of prolonged wars between

[33]*Íslenzk fornrit* I, 14.

[34]Hjalti Hugason, "Mat og túlkun á kristnitökufrásögn Ara prests Þorgilssonar," *Frændafundur* 3 (2000), 11–20.

[35]Orri Vesteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland*, 18.

[36]Hjalti Hugason: *Frumkristni og upphaf kirkju*, 97.

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kings of Denmark and Norway which were settled by their countrymen against the wishes of the kings, in the interest of peace. Then he uttered the maxim that "[i]t will prove true that if we tear apart the law, we will also tear apart the peace."[37] The resolution decreed by Þorgeir was as follows:

> It was then proclaimed in the laws that all people should be Christian, and that those in this country who had not yet been baptized should receive baptism; but the old laws should stand as regards the exposure of children and the eating of horse-flesh. People had the right to sacrifice in secret, if they wished, but it would be punishable by the lesser outlawry if witnesses were produced. And a few years later, these heathen provisions were abolished, like the others.[38]

These provisions about the temporary allowance of infant exposure, eating horse-meat and secret sacrifices reflect a knowledge of Christian penitentials, in which such practices were forbidden. In such penitentials, an explicit difference is often made between public and secret practices.[39]

This event is dated to the summer before the death of King Óláfr Tryggvason in the year 1000 (or 999 by modern reckoning). In Ari's account, the whole narrative is depicted as a diplomatic quarrel, first between the Norwegian king and the Icelanders, then between two factions of the Icelanders, one of which was Christian and well-disposed towards the king. Ari places great emphasis on the peaceful resolution of the conflict, which was clearly a part of a general agenda, as he emphasizes peaceful and legal resolutions to all major conflicts which he mentions in *Íslendingabók*. This bias of Ari has influenced modern scholarship, which has a tendency to overemphasize the peaceful nature of the conversion of Iceland.[40]

Ari freely admits to transgressions on behalf of the Christians, as the priest Þangbrandr killed two or three men for writing insulting verses about him, and one of the leaders of the Christians, Hjalti Skeggjason, committed blasphemy against the pagan gods. The only pagan leader mentioned by name, Þorgeirr Þorkelsson, was the founder of the essentially political settlement that prevailed and became, in a sense, one of the founders of Christianity in

[37] *Íslenzk fornrit* I, 17. "*þat mun verða satt, ef vér slítum í sundr lǫgin, at vér munum slíta ok friðinn*."

[38] *Íslenzk fornrit* I, 17. "*Þá vas þat mælt í lǫgum, at allir menn skyldi kristnir vesa ok skírn taka, þeir es áðr váru óskírðir á landi hér; en of barnaútburð skyldu standa in fornu lǫg ok of hrossakjötsát. Skyldu menn blóta á laun, ef vildu, en varða fjǫrbaugsgarðr, ef váttum of kvæmi við. En síðarr fám vetrum vas sú heiðni af numin sem ǫnnur*."

[39] See Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, "Um kristnitökufrásögn Ara prests Þorgilssonar," *Skírnir* 153 (1979), 167–174.

[40] Kathleen M. Self, "Remembering our Violent Conversion: Conflict in the Icelandic Conversion Narrative," *Religion* 40 (2010): 182–92, 183–184.

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Iceland.[41] Gerd Wolfgang Weber regards the sudden change of heart of Þorgeir as an "ingenious application of a missionary topos which Ari the historian could find in virtually all reports in the conversion of nations prior to the Icelandic one."[42] However, his purely political rationale is not a typical application of that topos, as pointed out by Haki Antonsson, who emphasizes the non-sacral political authority of the Icelandic parliament.[43]

The role of the Norwegian king is ambiguous. Although he was the instigator of the mission in Iceland, it was his Icelandic agents who were ultimately successful.[44] Gizurr and Hjalti are said to have undertaken "management" (*umbsýsla*) of the mission, almost as if they were the king's officials.[45] It is worth noting that from then onward, major events were connected to the reigns of Norwegian kings in *Íslendingabók*.

Ari, again using Teitr Ísleifsson as his main source, mentions a number of "foreign" (*útlendir*) bishops who served in Iceland during the first decades of Christianity's introduction. One of them, Frederick (Friðrekr), was bishop during the pagan period, but the rest served following the conversion. It is noteworthy that the longest serving of these bishops were named Bernard (Bjarnharðr) and Rudolf (Hróðolfr).[46] These are the missionaries, also mentioned by Adam of Bremen, who came from England and served Saint Olaf in his Norwegian mission. According to Ari, both these bishops served in Iceland for nineteen years. Rudolf might be the same prelate who later became the abbot of Abingdon, according to the Anglo-Saxon chronicles.[47]

Ari then goes on to discuss Ísleifr Gizurarson, who was the son of the missionary Gizurr the White and the father of his most important source Teitr Ísleifsson. Ari says that Ísleifr was ordained during the time of King Harald in Norway and Pope Leo IX (Leo VII, according to Ari) in Rome. No mention is made of the Archbishop in Hamburg-Bremen. Ari then dates

[41]On the political nature of the settlement see, Jenny Jochens, "Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion through Arbitration in 1000": *Speculum* 74 (1999), 621–655; Hjalti Hugason, "Mat og túlkun á kristnitökufrásögn Ara fróða," 16–17.

[42]Gerd Wolfgang Weber, "*Intellegere historiam*: Typological Perspectives of Nordic Prehistory (in Snorri, Saxo, Widukind and others)," *Tradition og historieskrivning: Kilderne til Nordens ældste historie*, Acta Jutlandica 63.2, ed. Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1987): 95–141, 116.

[43]Haki Antonsson, "Traditions of Conversion in Medieval Scandinavia," 33–37.

[44]Roland Scheel interprets the narrative in *The Book of the Icelanders* as a rebuttal against the view that the Norwegian king was responsible for the conversion, see Roland Scheel, *Lateineuropa und der Norden. Die Geschichtsschreibung des 12. Jahrhunderts in Dänemark, Island und Norwegen*, Frankfurter Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge, 6 (Berlin: trafo Wissenschaftsverlag, 2012), 139.

[45]*Íslenzk fornrit* I, 15.

[46]*Íslenzk fornrit* I, 18.

[47]See Konrad Maurer, *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christenthume, in ihrem geschichtlichen Verlaufe quellenmäßig geschildert*, 2 vols, Munich: C. Kaiser: 1855–1856, I, 597–598.

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the ordination of Ísleifr to 1056, which was, in fact, two years after the death of Leo IX.[48]

As can be seen, there are important similarities between the accounts of Adam and Ari. Both mention the Anglo-Saxon missionaries who served Saint Olaf and travelled to the islands beyond Norway. Both emphasize the role of Ísleifr Gizurarson, and both date his ordination to roughly the same period, during the reign of King Harald (r. 1046–1066) or Archbishop Adalbert (1043–1072).

There are also important discrepancies. The most important one is that Ari credited Olaf Tryggvason, at least partly, with the Christianization of Iceland, whereas Adam described him as a magician and an apostate. Ironically, the only king of Norway about whom Adam wrote favorably and acknowledged as both a saint and a justly king, Saint Olaf, receives no such prominence in the account of Ari, who makes no mention of his sainthood and rather calls him Olaf the stout (*Ólafr hinn digri*). King Harald, whom Adam described as a tyrant, is described by Ari in relatively neutral terms, with neither a positive nor derogatory nicknames.[49] However, no mention is made of the Norwegian hegemony over Iceland during the time of King Harald, which had been highlighted by Adam of Bremen.

A second important factor is the complete omission by Ari of any mention of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen. Although not explicitly stated, the mention of both King Harald and Pope Leo IX gives the impression that Ísleifr was ordained either in Norway or Rome. By this sleight of hand, the archbishop is removed from the equation. One reason for this might be that Iceland was longer subject to the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen. Since 1104, the archbishops at Lund in Denmark had been the heads of Scandinavian missionary work and had ordained both of the bishops that Ari had credited as patrons in his account. However, Ari also made no mention of these archbishops and, given his general proclivity to mention Norwegian kings and highlight their importance, one would be tempted to regard him as royalist in his general outlook rather than beholden to the archbishop.

Third, there is an obvious family bias in the narrative of Ari Þorgilsson, as he emphasized the role of a few individuals connected with his own family and that of his foster-father and source. The Bishops Ísleifr and Gizurr, father and brother of Teitr Ísleifsson, are depicted in such laudatory terms that it has even been suggested that the whole work should be regarded as the chronicle of the diocese of Skálholt.[50] The narrative detailing their

[48] *Íslenzk fornrit* I, 20–21.
[49] Ibid., 19–20.
[50] Else Mundal, "Íslendingabók vurdert som bispestolskronike," *Alvísmál* 3 (1994), 63–72. See also Else Mundal, "Íslendingabók: The Creation of an Icelandic Christian Identity," *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery: Early History Writing in Northern,*

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prominence in the Christianization of Iceland cannot be accepted at face value; it is too obviously related to the familial interests of Ari himself, and the kinsmen of Bishop Ísleifr. *Íslendingabók* is an official history whose writing was sponsored by a small elite connected to the two dioceses, representing the viewpoint of interests that were most prominent in Icelandic society in the early twelfth century.

The account of Ari Þorgilsson envisions a much earlier Christianization of Iceland than that of Adam of Bremen, which occurred mainly through the efforts of Norwegian kings and their Icelandic allies. This event happened one hundred twenty years before the composition of *Íslendingabók*, and Ari had no access to written sources to corroborate his version of this story, which in itself places it in the realm of legends.[51] The archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen are not mentioned at all in this version of the story. However, the prominence of Isleph/Ísleifr Gizurarson is emphasized in both accounts. Although Ari is generally favorable toward Norwegian kings, he makes no mention of the empire of King Harald, or any other Norwegian king, having extended to Iceland.

It has been pointed out that "[t]he development of a public discourse that linked religion to the membership of a political entity was also a strong factor in creating attitudes of conformity" within various cultures.[52] This political element is predominant in the narrative of conversion in *Íslendingabók*. The idea that religious uniformity is a political necessity to preserve peace and the law characterizes the account of the conversion. This political problem required a political solution, a negotiated deal between select members of the elite, brokered at the secular parliament. Christianity is thus depicted as a necessary ingredient for the function of society and the law.

III. Enraged Gods: The Story of Kristnisaga

Sometime in thirteenth century, a narrative called *Kristnisaga* was composed in Iceland, combining elements from Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* with new material.[53] In its earliest extant version, it follows directly from the narrative

East-Central, and Eastern Europe (c. 1070–1200), ed. Ildar Garipzanov (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 111–121.

[51]This has mostly been ignored by modern historians, although there are important exceptions, see Gustafsson, "Islands kristnande," 21–27.

[52]Arietta Papaconstantinou, "Introduction," in *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond: Papers from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, University of Oxford, 2009–2010*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantiou (London: Routledge 2016), xv–xxxvii, at p. xxvii.

[53]"Where Ari is lacking, however, other sources are used, both to embellish Ari's narrative and to provide information where he gives none . . . . The impression we are left with is that of a careful

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of the *Book of Settlements* (*Landnámabók*). As such, it is found in *Hauksbók*, a huge compilation from the first decade of the fourteenth century which includes material concerning world history, Scandinavian history and the earliest history of Iceland.[54] As has been noted, there is a notable interest in Christian settlers in *Hauksbók*, in comparision to earlier versions of the *Book of Settlements*, which the redactor had access to.[55]

In the epilogue to the *Book of Settlements* in *Hauksbók*, before the beginning of *Kristnisaga*, it is stated that:

> Wise men say that a few of those who settled in Iceland were baptized, indeed most of those who came from west beyond the sea; Among those are mentioned Helgi the Lean, Örlygr the Old, Helgi Beolan, Jörundr the Christian, Auðr the Subtle, Ketill the Foolish, and yet some more of those who came from the west beyond the sea. Some of these kept Christian practices well unto their dying day, but this was infrequently maintained among their descendants, for the sons of some of these men built Temples and made sacrifices, and the land had become completely pagan after hundred winters.[56]

This forms the background for the description of the mission in *Kristnisaga*. As this note makes very clear, the purpose of this mission was not to introduce Christianity to Iceland but to save the Icelanders from the apostasy in the descendants of the settlers, many of whom had been Christian.

The earliest version of the *Book of Settlements* is believed to have been composed in the first half of the twelfth century. Among its redactors, according to *Hauksbók*, was Ari Þorgilsson himself. There is nothing that indicates that this early version of the *Book of Settlements* included any information about Christian settlers. Nothing of that nature is found in *Íslendingabók*, although Ari Þorgilsson was descended from Auðr the Subtle. They are not depicted as Christians in the family sagas from the first half of

historian handling a large number of sources, struggling like his successors to interpret the material at his disposition and fit it into a historical mould." Siân Grønlie, "Kristni Saga and Medieval Conversion History," *Gripla* 16 (2005): 137–160, 148.

[54]See Sverrir Jakobsson, "Hauksbók and the Construction of an Icelandic World View," *Saga-Book* 21 (2007): 22–38.

[55]See Siân Grønlie, "Conversion Narrative and Christian Identity: How Christianity Came to Iceland," *Medium Aevum* 86 (2017): 123–146, 131.

[56]*Íslenzk fornrit* I, 396. "*Svá segja vitrir menn, at nǫkkurir landnámsmenn hafi skírðir verit, þeir er byggt hafa Ísland, flestir þeir, er kómu vestan um haf. Er til þess nefndr Helgi magri ok Ørlygr enn gamli, Helgi bjóla, Jǫrundr kristni, Auðr djúpauðga, Ketill enn fíflski ok enn fleiri menn, er kómu vestan um haf, ok heldu þeir sumir vel kristni til dauðadags. En þat gekk óvíða í ættir, því at synir þeira sumra reistu hof ok blótuðu, en land var alheiðit nær hundraði vetra*." This episode was most likely derived from *Sturlubók*, a version of the *Book of Settlements* written by the lawman Sturla Þórðarson in the 1270s and quoted by Haukr Erlendsson as one of his sources.

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the thirteenth century that deal with some of these Christian settlers, such as the description of Auðr the Subtle in *Laxdæla saga*. It was only in late versions of the *Book of Settlements*, from the second half of thirteenth century and later, that any mention was made of Christian settlers. It is possible that the earliest versions of *Kristnisaga* had an influence on this tradition, although very little is known about its date of composition. What is known is that some elements of this tale are already present in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Heimskringla*, which was probably composed sometime between 1220 and 1240.[57]

The man credited with the first mission to reclaim Iceland for Christianity was a man named Þorvaldr Koðránsson who had been abroad as a soldier and had

> traveled far and wide in the southern lands. In Saxland, in the south, he met a bishop called Friðrekr and accepted from him baptism and the true faith, and stayed with him for a while. Þorvaldr asked the bishop to go to Iceland with him to baptize his father and mother and others of his relatives who were willing to follow his advice. The bishop granted him this. Bishop Friðrekr and Þorvaldr came to Iceland the summer that the land had been inhabited for one hundred and seven years.[58]

According to the chronology of the *Book of Settlements* and *Kristnisaga*, this event transpired in 981. The *Kristnisaga* states that Þorvaldr and his family came from Giljá, which is located in the northwest of Iceland, not far from where the monastery at Þingeyrar, which was built later in the twelfth century. Þorvaldr and Friðrekr then stayed in Iceland for four years and had some success in the Northern Quarter of Iceland but none at all in the Western Quarter. With Þorvaldr and Friðrekr, we enter a narrative on the conversion which has individual men at its heart. As Peter Brown has remarked: "In studying both the most admired and the most detested figures in any society, we can see, as seldom through other evidence, the nature of the average man's expectations and hopes for himself."[59] The individual missionary became a model of emulation, an inspiration to others.

[57]See Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Sögugerð Landnámabókar. Um íslenska sagnaritun á 12. og 13. öld*. Ritsafn Sagnfræðistofnunar 35 (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001), 21–37, 73–78; Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Ólafs sögur Tryggvasonar. Um gerðir þeirra heimildir og höfunda* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2005), 57–62

[58]"*fór víða um Suðrlǫnd. Hann fann í Saxlandi suðr byskup þann er Friðrekr hét ok tók af honum skírn ok trú rétta ok var með honum um hríð. Þorvaldr bað byskup fara til Íslands með sér at skíra fǫður sinn ok móður ok aðra frændr sína, þá er hans ráði vildu fylgja. Byskup veitti honum þat. Þeir Friðrekr byskup ok Þorvaldr kómu til Íslands sumar þat er landit hafði byggt verit tíu tiga vetra ok sjau vetr.*" *Íslenzk fornrit XV. Biskupa sögur I*, eds. Ólafur Halldórsson, Sigurgeir Steingrímsson and Peter Foote (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2003), 4.

[59]Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80–101, 81.

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As noted by Kathleen M. Self, later Icelandic versions of the conversion narrative become more violent rather than less, in contrast to the heavy emphasis on the peaceful nature of the conversion, which can be found in *Íslendingabók*. According to Self, "[t]hese later versions make no attempt to make the story more peaceful as distance is gained from the events. Instead the violence is used to highlight the peace which concludes the narrative."[60] *Kristnisaga* is an early example of this trend, illustrating how the conversion event was becoming solidified within the cultural memories of the Icelanders during the central Middle Ages. Whereas *Íslendingabók* had been chiefly devoted to the peaceful solution of a potentially dangerous conflict, the later conversion narratives are emblematic of a more developed view of missionary history more in line with the general practice of Latin Christianity. The sufferings and hardships of the missionaries were a necessary ingredient of an exemplary missionary narrative.

Approximately ten years after the mission of Þorvaldr and Friðrekr, when Óláfr Tryggvason had become king of Norway, he sent another Icelander, Stefnir Þorgilsson, to Iceland. This Stefnir was the descendant of the Christian settler Helgi Beolan, and his family lived in Kjalarnes, in the westernmost part of the Southern Quarter. It is said that Stefnir was vigorous in his promotion of Christianity but had gained no results, and in the end he was prosecuted by his kinsmen from the Western Quarter.[61] The narrative thus establishes two early missionaries who were from different parts of the country than the southern and eastern chieftains who had been credited with leading the Christian party in *Íslendingabók*. According to Haki Antonsson, "the author's emphasis on the participation of Icelanders from all four quarters in achieving the ultimate goal, the Christianization of Iceland, must have resonated in a society rife with civil strife." However, he also points out that "with the decreasing importance of the Alþing and the constitutional set-up of the commonwealth in the course of the thirteenth century, it is not surprising that local initiatives and concerns came increasingly to the fore in the conversion narrative."[62]

Later on in *Kristnisaga*, it is said that Þorvaldr Koðránsson and Stefnir Þorgilsson met each other following the death of King Óláfr Tryggvason and travelled together to Jerusalem, Constantinople and Kiev. It is said that Stefnir was killed in Denmark but Þorvaldr remained in Russia and died there, close to Polotsk: "He is buried on a mountain there at the church of John the Baptist, and they call him a saint."[63] Sian Grønlie regards this

[60]Kathleen M. Self, "Remembering our Violent Conversion," 183.
[61]*Íslenzk fornrit* XV, 15–17.
[62]Haki Antonsson, "Traditions of Conversion in Medieval Scandinavia," 38.
[63]*Íslenzk fornrit* XV, 37. "*Þar er hann grafinn í fjalli einu at kirkju Johannis baptiste, ok kalla þeir hann helgan.*"

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statement as "lukewarm" in contrast to the saga's enthusiastic summation on Bishop Friðrekr and points out that "who exactly 'they' are is not specified, nor is the veracity of the claim confirmed."[64]

Then the story of the priest Þangbrandr is discussed in more detail. It is said that he was the son of a count in Bremen and met King Óláfr Tryggvason in the lands of the Western Slavs and tried to convert Óláfr to Christianity. Later Þangbrandr became Óláfr's priest, but the king sent him to Iceland as a missionary to atone for his rowdy behavior. From then on the narrative follows the account of Ari, although with much embellishment. As Siân Grønlie has pointed out: "Kristni saga is the only source to extend Þangbrandr's mission to three full years (it is one or two elsewhere), and this seems likely to be the compiler's innovation."[65] Hallr Þorsteinsson, Gizurr the White and Hjalti Skeggjason again appear in leading roles, but this time they are not alone.

The main difference between the narrative of *Kristnisaga* and that of *Íslendingabók* is that a much wider group of people is described as participating in the events leading to the parliament of 999.[66] A prominent position is given to people who had been the subject of the early thirteenth-century narratives, such as *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. Kjartan Ólafsson, arguably one of the main protagonists of the first, played a decisive role among the Icelanders at the king's court in Norway. He accepted baptism "and was entertained at the king's table while he was in white robes" (*ok var í boði konungs meðan hann var í hvítaváðum*).[67] Later on, he would become one of four young noble Icelanders who were detained as hostages, one from each quarter of the country. As pointed out by Kathleen M. Self, the texts which depict Kjartan's conversion place an emphasis on how he negotiates the terms of his conversion, instead of merely yielding to the brute force of the Norwegian king.[68] This is in stark contrast to the narratives in the sagas of King Olaf Tryggvason, which depict him as frequently using force to compel and coerce the people of Norway to submit to him and to convert to Christianity. Even if the taking of hostages fits the forceful nature of the conversion of Norway as it is depicted in the

[64]Siân Grønlie, "Kristni Saga and Medieval Conversion History," 152.
[65]Ibid., 150.
[66]For a further discussion on these differences, see Peter Foote, "Historical Studies: Conversion Moment and Conversion Period," in *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium 14–15 May 1992*, ed. Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1993), 137–144; Siân Grønlie, "Kristni saga and Medieval Conversion History."
[67]*Íslenzk fornrit* XV, 28.
[68]Kathleen M. Self, "Conversion as Speech Act: Medieval Icelandic and Modern Neopagan Conversion Narratives" *History of Religions* 56:2 (2016), 167–97, 180.

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Old Norse sagas, the Icelanders get a relatively mild treatment compared to the Norwegian subjects of King Olaf.[69]

During the debate at parliament, a prominent chieftain from the Western Quarter, Snorri Þorgrímsson, known from narratives such as *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, made a dramatic appearance when an otherwise unknown volcanic eruption had been announced in the heartland of the Southern Quarter, close to the parliament site at Þingvellir:

> Then the heathens spoke up: "It is no wonder that the gods are enraged by such talk." Then Snorri goði said: "What were the gods enraged by when the lava we are standing on here and now was burning?"[70]

Here, Snorri, who is not otherwise mentioned in *Kristnisaga*, is clearly introduced as a well-known sage from the family saga corpus. Along with that of Kjartan Ólafsson, his support offers a demonstration that not all prominent people from the Western Quarter were opposed to the Christian cause.[71]

The dramatic nature of the narrative in *Kristnisaga* partially obscures the fact that in this version of the tale, the conversion at the parliament is far from sudden. In fact, Christianity had been present in Iceland from its settlement and for the first hundred years of its history. From then, only a few years passed until Christianity was reintroduced to the country by Þorvaldr Koðránsson and Bishop Friðrekr. Bishop Friðrekr, mentioned briefly in *Íslendingabók*, appears here as a saintly character, and the mission of Þangbrandr is described in much more detail.

The narrative about the Christianization of Iceland in *Kristnisaga* counters the familial bias of *Íslendingabók*. In this version, a much larger group of people is present on the scene. As in *Íslendingabók*, the king of Norway is at the center of events, and nothing is said about the archbishop, although Þangbrandr the missionary is said to have come from Bremen. This version of events, however, goes even further than *Íslendingabók*, stretching the Christianization of Iceland further back in time. As it turns out, the country had always been partly Christian, due to the presence of settlers from the western islands, that is, the British Isles. From this viewpoint, *Kristnisaga* offers a radical departure from the narrative in *Íslendingabók*. It is also more dramatic and highlights the adversities encountered by the missionaries,

[69]Kathleen M. Self, „Remembering our Violent Conversion", p. 190.

[70]*Íslenzk fornrit* XV, 33. "*Þá tóku heiðnir menn til orðs: 'Eigi er undr í at guðin reiðisk tǫlum slíkum.' Þá mælti Snorri goði: 'Um hvat reiddusk guðin þá er hér brann hraunit er nú stǫndu vér á?*'"

[71]The daughter of Snorri, Þuríðr, was one of the main informants of Ari Þorgilsson's Íslendingabók. See *Íslenzk fornrit* I, 4. In spite of that, in that source there is no mention of Snorri taking part in the debate about Christianization.

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more in line with the typical conversion narratives prevalent within Latin Christianity.

IV. A View from Below: The Fourteenth-century Synthesis

The *Great Saga of Ólafr Tryggvasonar* (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta*) was composed sometime in the fourteenth century, incorporating many episodes from the conversion of Iceland. The oldest extant manuscript of the saga is from the third quarter of the century, but the saga itself might be slightly older, usually dated to the 1320s or after.[72] However, scholars have generally assumed that some of the episodes concerning the conversion are derived from a lost version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, composed by the monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson around 1200 but not used in *Heimskringla* or *Kristnisaga*. This is indeed possible, although this supposition does not necessarily apply to all of the material found in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* but not in earlier sources. Gunnlaugur Leifsson is quoted as an authority on certain facts about three events described in two episodes of this story, *Þorvalds þáttr víðförla* and *Svaða þáttr*. In all cases, they occur in relation to the activities of Friðrekr and Þorvaldr víðförli in Iceland from 981 to 985.[73] It can thus be assumed that this lost saga contained information concerning that particular mission.[74] Indeed, in the early thirteenth-century history of the bishops at Skálholt, *Hungrvaka* there are references to "stories" (*sǫgur*) about Bishop Friðrekr.[75]

There are, however, other parts of the events in the *Great saga of Óláfr Tryggvason* that are very different in emphasis from the thirteenth-century narratives of the Christianization, such as *Heimskringla* and *Kristnisaga*, one of which is the focus on lowly and humble characters as the agents of the Christianization. One example of this type comes from the episode of the missionary Þangbrandr. Here the arrival of the missionary is described in similar terms to the description found in *Kristnisaga*, although in more florid terms, but in the advent of Síðu-Hallr's conversion, there is a new twist added to the storyline. Hallr becomes suspicious and wants to test effects of baptism. Two old and decrepit women from the household are selected to be baptized to see if its effects would be harmful. The following day, the old

[72] *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. Editiones Arnamagnæanæ, Ser. A. Volumes 1–3, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1958).

[73] *Íslenzk fornrit* XV, 72, 84, 151.

[74] On the hypothetical episode of Þorvaldr by Gunnlaugr Leifsson, see Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Sögugerð Landnámabókar*, 79–100.

[75] *Íslenzk fornrit XVI. Biskupa sögur II*, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2002), 11.

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ladies turn out to be in good cheer and joyful without any harmful effects. They are quoted as saying:

> We are doing rather well, because of our old age our limbs have little strength. But any sickness and discomfort that we have long since been burdened with and strained by has suddenly disappeared and instead there is total rest and health of the body, because all our limbs and joints are soft and easy to use, as if we were young for a second time. Also any anguish and fear and tiredness of life has disappeared, but we have gained jubilance and mirth and true hope of eternal joy and bliss yet to come.[76]

Following this enthusiastic testimony, Hallr assents to be baptized along with his whole household. This is typical of the conversion episodes as they are depicted in the Old Norse conversion narratives. As Kathleen M. Self has pointed out: "The religious reaffiliation of the head of a household had implications for the religious affiliation of many others of less power."[77] However, even if the great man has the final word, in this particular episode, the moment of tension in the narrative revolves around the fate of two humble and decrepit old women.[78]

Another episode revolving around an unusual lead character is the episode of Þiðrandi (*Þiðrandaþáttr*), which relates the death of the eighteen-year-old Þiðrandi, a son of Síðu-Hallr not mentioned in any other sources. Þiðrandi, a well-behaved and noble youth, having ignored the warnings of a pagan prophet, is killed by nine dark women, so-called *dísir*, at the autumn feast before the arrival of Þangbrandr.[79] These dark women were then interpreted to be the pagan guardian spirits (*fylgjur*) of Síðu-Hallr's family, taking part in the final struggle between Christianity and paganism before the conversion of Iceland.[80] It is evident that the conversion involves not only

[76] *Íslenzk fornrit* XV, 132–133. "*Harðla vel megum vit, því at sakir ellináttúru eru afllitlir limir okkrir. En þó allt at einu er í brotu allr sjúkleikr ok óhægendi er okkr hefir lengi þyngt ok þrǫngt, en þar í móti er komin algǫr hvíld ok heilsa líkamans, því at allir okkrir limir ok liðir eru mjúkir ok hægir hverr til sinnar þjónustu, því líkt sem vit sém orðnar ungar í annat sinn. Horfinn er ok allr uggr ok ótti ok lífs leiðendi, en vit hǫfum fengit fagnað ok gleði ok sanna ván eilífrar gleði ok ókominnar sælu*."

[77] Kathleen M. Self, "Conversion as Speech Act," 175.

[78] See Ármann Jakobsson, "Two Old Ladies at Þváttá and 'History from below' in the Fourteenth Century," *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages. Papers of The 12th International Saga Conference, Bonn/Germany, 28th July–2nd August 2003*, eds. Rudolf Simek and Judith Meurer (Bonn: Hausdruckerei der universität Bonn, 2003), 8–13.

[79] On these dísir, see Folke Ström, *Diser, nornor, valkyrjor. Fruktbarhetskult och sakralt kungadöme i Norden* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1954); Terry Gunnell, "The Season of the *Dísir*: The Winter Nights, and the *Dísablót* in Early Medieval Scandinavian Belief," *Cosmos* 16 (2000), 117–149; Ármann Jakobsson, "Conversion and Sacrifice in the Þiðrandi Episode in Flateyjarbók," *Conversions: Looking for Ideological Change in the Early Middle Ages*, Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia 23, eds. Rudolf Simek and Lezek Słupecki (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2013), 9–21.

[80] *Íslenzk fornrit* XV, 123–124.

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joy, but also sacrifice and loss. Later, on the eve of Christianization, the same prophet mentioned in the episode of Þiðrandi has a vision in which he sees the pagan land spirits leave their hills and mounds in preparation for the arrival of the new faith.[81] The idea of a cosmic battle between the Christian god and pagan deities taking hold of nature, ridiculed by Snorri goði in *Kristnisaga*, is here portrayed as self-evident. Such narratives have been seen as a manifestation of an Augustinian vision of conversion as an epic battle between Christian and Pagan deities.[82] They also constitute a "de-sanctification of the natural world, the transference of power from trees, fountains and rocks to the proper human and ecclesiastical channels," that is to say, the "hominization" of the cosmos.[83] At the center of this struggle is an unfortunate youth, an unwilling observer of this cosmic struggle.

In contrast to the emphasis in both *Íslendingabók* and *Kristnisaga* on powerful men and political actors the conversion in the *Great Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason* involves not only such aforementioned actors but also the old and young, the humble as well as the mighty. In its outline, the version of events is the same as in *Kristnisaga*; the novelty here is the narrative emphasis on the parts played by such marginal people.

This emphasis on humble agents of the conversion might of course very well be derived from the lost saga of Gunnlaugr Leifsson, or some other earlier work; its provenance is not easy to establish. What we know is that it suited the tastes of a new age of Christian thought, shaped by the ideas and preaching of the mendicant orders. In the 1320s, at the time that the *Great Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* is often thought to have been composed, a former Dominican friar, Jón Halldórsson, became bishop in the diocese of Skálholt. Jón was an enthusiastic gatherer of stories, as witnessed by his role in the collecting the stories known as *Íslensk ævintýri* as well as his involvement with romances such as *Clari saga*.[84] Jón Halldórsson was a unique character among mediaeval Icelandic bishops, as he is one of the few Dominicans known to have journeyed to Iceland at all.[85] While in no way implying that Bishop Jón was personally involved in composing the *Great Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, his literary activities attest to the presence of the mendicant tradition in Iceland at the same time in which the narrative was composed. Generally speaking, historical works by mendicant chroniclers are notable

[81] *Íslenzk fornrit* XV, 125.

[82] Hjalti Hugason, *Frumkristni og upphaf kirkju*, 117.

[83] Siân Grønlie, "'Reading and Understanding': The Miracles in Þorvalds þáttr ens víðfǫrla," *The Journal of English and German Philology* 112 (2013): 475–494, 481–482.

[84] Shaun F. D. Hughes, "Klári saga as an Indigenous Romance," in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland*, Islandica 54, eds. Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2008): 135–164.

[85] Erika Sigurdson, *The Church in Fourteenth-Century Iceland: The Formation of an Elite Clerical Identity*. The Northern World 72 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 44.

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for their sympathies for the poor, ordinary people and the lower clergy.[86] The general tenor of the *Great Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* has a similar perspective.

V. Conclusion

In medieval sources, there were several and often contradictory narratives concerning the conversion of Iceland. In the oldest account, offered by Adam of Bremen, Iceland was converted by the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, who sent a properly ordained bishop to the Icelanders at their bequest. This happened during the reign of Archbishop Adalbert (1043–1072). There is, however, also a vague hint in the narrative of Adam of Bremen that Anglo-Saxon missionaries, brought to Norway by Saint Olaf (r. 1015–1030), had already been active on the islands beyond Norway. According to this view, the conversion of Iceland was a process that happened in the early eleventh century, culminating in the ordination of a bishop by the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. The main emphasis is on the Icelanders acceptance of Christianity through the proper channels. They are presented as exemplary Christians who accept the authority of the legitimate archbishop. This narrative embodies the view of Christianization as an institutionalized process in which belonging to a proper hierarchy is the defining characteristic of its ultimate success. It reflects the interest of the Archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen but did not become embedded in the cultural memory of the Icelanders, due to the separation of the Nordic Church from the Archdiocese in 1104.

In an alternative version, found in Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* from the 1120s and 1130s, after the separation from the Archdiocese had taken place, no mention is made of the archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen. The conversion of Iceland is credited to the Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason (r. 994–999), whom Adam had depicted as an apostate and magician in his narrative. In these efforts the Norwegian king is depicted as firmly supported by Icelandic chieftains from South and East Iceland, all of whom happened to have close connections to the historiographer responsible for this account, Ari Þorgilsson. The conversion is a transformative event, which happened over a few years, culminating with a political solution at the Icelandic parliament. The emphasis is on the wise chieftains who ensure the proper political result through legal channels at the parliament. In this narrative, the focus is placed on the active agency of the people accepting Christianity, which may one of the reason for its popularity among later generations of Icelanders. In the

[86]See Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c. 550–c.1307* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 426–444.

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collective memory of Icelanders, the adoption of Christianity was a covenant made by the people and the Church, echoing the original covenant made by Jehovah and the people of Israel described in the legend of the Exodus.

In addition to these eleventh- and twelfth-century versions of the conversion story, a third account emerged in the thirteenth century, that of the *Kristnisaga*, composed by an anonymous author. According to this version, Iceland was partly Christianized during its settlement, through the influence of Christian settlers. Although there was a brief relapse after a century, the mission started a few years later due to the initiative of Icelandic agents, assisted by a bishop from Saxony. These individual agents of the mission provided a model of emulation, missing in earlier narratives. In *Kristnisaga*, powerful men from the north and west of Iceland play a much more prominent role than in *Íslendingabók*. Although the latter is an important source of *Kristnisaga*, the emphasis on an earlier start to the mission, as well as the presence of Christian settlers in the country long before the turn of the millennium, makes the role of Óláfr Tryggvason and his Icelandic agents much less prominent. Essentially, *Kristnisaga* combines two accounts of the conversion, that of *Íslendingabók* and another one with a completely different viewpoint from that of *Íslendingabók*. The result is an amplified account with episodic characteristics. Much more emphasis is on the role of missionaries from the north and west of Iceland, who were more or less excluded in the narrative of Íslendingabók. This narrative is much more amplified than the others and stresses the role of diverse agents. It serves as a coda to the conversion narrative in *Íslendingabók* rather than replacing it, but with a much larger emphasis on the plight of the missionaries who had to win ground for this new faith before the final decision at the parliament.

The prevailing version in fourteenth-century narratives, such as the *Great Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, was one that had already been established in *Kristnisaga*. However, there is a much greater emphasis on the contribution of less exalted people to the chain of events, old women and young scions of chieftain families. In this later version, the conversion finally became a truly collective effort by the agency of the inhabitants of Iceland. The conversion was no longer that of the elite but of all Icelanders. The gradual Christianization of Iceland was thus accompanied by the gradual absorption of the whole populace into the grand narrative of the key event, already established as such in the narratives of *Íslendingabók* and *Kristnisaga*.

The Christianization of Iceland was an important and traumatic event which became embedded in the cultural memory of Icelanders. Through the reconstruction of this event in historical narratives there was an ongoing debate on the identity of Icelanders as a group. This is reflected in very different emphasis on individual agents in this process, which can be found in various historical works composed between 1070 and 1330. The general

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trend is that the narrative became more inclusive for a larger group with each major version, as the leading role passed from the archbishop to a select group of few leading families to a larger group including leaders from all parts of Iceland and, finally, to the general population, the humble as well as the mighty.

The process, however, was not only linear and expansive but also circular in that the later narratives also demonstrate one of the main points made in Adam of Bremen narrative, which was that the Icelanders had always been Christians at heart, as underlined in *Kristnisaga*, and that Christianization involved the whole people, not only an elite group of chieftains at the parliament. The true hope of eternal joy was a value to be shared by everyone.

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