

ABSTRACT

BENNETT, SHAUN RICHARD. Christian Writers, Pagan Subjects: The Preservation of Norse Religious Imagery through Legal Culture in Iceland. (Under the Direction of Dr. Julie Mell.)

The rich literary history of medieval Iceland has served as a phenomenal historical resource for life in medieval Iceland both before and after Christianity came to the island in the summer of the year 1000. The sources even offer a wealth of information on the Norse or "pre-Christian" religious practices of the Icelanders, while simultaneously avoiding negative moral judgments about their non-Christian past. The Icelanders who wrote down their histories in this unusually non-judgmental manner were themselves Christians, which raises the question of how such a writing environment was formed. Iceland produced a literary culture which utilized the writing system which Christianity brought to Iceland while refusing to separate itself from the rich "pagan" oral culture of the past. The products of that literary culture can be used to discover not only the official history of Iceland, but by utilizing tools such as narrative theory concepts such as intent and meaning can be drawn from the text to give a fuller understanding of the mindset of the writers and the audience. Through this research, this thesis argues that the major reason behind the unique literary environment of medieval Iceland was the manner in which Iceland converted to Christianity, an oddly secularized event which had little to do with actual religious belief. The term "secular conversion" can be applied in this case, as Iceland's legal system was used to create a secular conversion which then allowed Iceland's rich "pagan" past to survive and flourish in a literary culture.

Christian Writers, Pagan Subjects: The Preservation of Norse Religious Imagery through
Legal Culture in Iceland

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BIOGRAPHY

The author received his Bachelor of Arts in Medieval History from the Pennsylvania State University in 2007, after which he spent several years working outside of the universities while searching for an appropriate degree program. After enrolling in the North Carolina State University in 2009 he worked under the direction of Dr. Julie Mell on exploring the literary and legal culture of medieval Iceland. During his time at North Carolina State the author was given the opportunity to learn both Latin and Old Norse, along with a basic understanding of the Scandinavian runic writing system.

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Note on Translations

Whenever possible, the original Old Norse has been provided alongside an English translation. The translations which appear in this manner are my own except for the cases where the original Old Norse source material was unavailable, most conspicuously in the case of the *Heimskringla*.

Introduction: Historical Questions and Roadmap

A surprisingly large amount of information has survived regarding the religious beliefs which existed in the Scandinavian countries of Norway and Iceland before Christianity became the dominant religious system. This information comes down through a variety of sources both literary and archaeological. The largest body of literature comes from Iceland's literary renaissance in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, long after Iceland's conversion to Christianity in the summer of 1000. Not only were the sources written after Christianity was adopted as the official religion, but they have a remarkably secular tone. The writers typically avoided any moral judgment of the subject, and instead simply discussed the old myths and legends alongside Christianity in the same breath by placing the older religion in the position of a cultural heritage, a tradition which seems not to have interfered with the Christianity which they professed.

This leaves historians with a quandary; why were Christian writers like the thirteenth-century Snorri Sturluson producing handbooks of myths and legends, and writing histories in which the secularized figures of the Norse gods played the part of major dynasty-founding figures? Why did skalds continue to use Norse religious imagery in their poetry long after conversion?¹ Most varieties of medieval Christianity were not known for tolerance, so why were these myths and legends not only allowed to exist, but in fact produced by Christian writers and priests? This paper argues that a major factor in the survival and continuance of the Norse religion as a form of cultural tradition was the conversion of Iceland in the year

¹ Skalds were Scandinavian poets, typically attached to a specific patron.

1000, and the legal culture which surrounded the event. This could accordingly be termed a "secular conversion". This secular conversion took place not because of a religious movement, but because the final Christian missionaries used Iceland's Alþingr, or court of laws, to legally change the official religion. This left behind a relatively strong Norse religious base which became part of the literary cultural traditions of Iceland while avoiding any major persecution by the dominant Christian religion.

Additionally, it is possible that the religion which was practiced in Iceland before Christianity came was not a religion in the modern sense of the word, but more of a set of cultural practices which did not demand as much adherence as Christianity typically does. This possibility becomes more apparent in certain scenes narrated in the sagas, in particular Coðran's ancestor stone from the *Christne Saga*, which will be described below. If the Icelanders were used to dealing only with cultural practices which did not place daily demands such as regular prayer, reading, or church visitations, the conversion of Iceland would not have fit the model of two religions fighting for prominence. Instead, the Norse cultural practices would take the position of a cultural heritage, preserved through literature and memory, while their official religion became Christianity. Any attachment to the Norse religion was more centered on the loss of a cultural heritage, or simply sadness at the old passing away in favor of the new.

This thesis is broken into five chapters. The first chapter discusses the terminology used in the paper and the scholarly argument regarding the historical validity of the sources. The second chapter discusses the elements of Norse religious belief which survived long past the conversion of Iceland. Close readings of the primary texts will be introduced with a brief

overview of narrative theory tools introduced by scholars such as Mieke Bal. The third chapter discusses the narrative of the conversion itself, which introduces the unique elements of Iceland's conversion and discusses how the Icelanders themselves told the story of conversion. The fourth chapter focuses on the aftermath of the conversion, when the actual "Christianization" of Iceland took place, and includes a discussion of the first bishops in Iceland. The final chapter also links the narrative of conversion with the surviving elements, pointing out how Iceland's unique conversion paved the way for the survival of Nordic religious elements.

It should be noted here that the exceptional amount of writing which was produced by the medieval Icelanders was probably a product of their culture and the manner in which their society formed. The Icelanders were fully aware of their own history, and wanted to preserve it as much as possible. The stories written down from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries were likely orally transmitted before the Latin writing system was introduced with Christianity. Once the ability to write and store their histories was introduced, it made sense for the Icelandic writers to transcribe as many of the oral stories of their culture as possible. An oral culture is particularly susceptible to losing their history when a learned individual dies without passing down the histories, and writing down vast amounts of history and story was the Icelandic attempt to preserve their past in a more permanent form.

Chapter One: Definitions and Discussion of Primary Sources

To speak of "the Scandinavian religion" is not possible, as there was no unified church in the manner of the Roman Latin church in Europe. As far as scholars are aware,

there was no major holy book from which “orthodoxy” could be drawn, thus when discussing the Nordic religion we are often relegated to using the term “pre-Christian”. Unfortunately, this term defines the existing religion by the religion which replaced it. While this is not completely incorrect, it tends towards historical determinism, inferring that Christianity was simply waiting to replace the existing religion and removing a great deal of agency from the Nordic religion. The terms “pagan” and “heathen” are also problematic, as both are pejorative terms used by Christians to define non-Christians.

One solution is to call the religion “Óðinnic”, or to refer to “Freyr-worship”, when dealing with aspects of the Scandinavian religion where a specific deity, in these cases, Óðinn or Freyr, was worshipped. However, the settlers who arrived in Iceland during the settlement period from the mid-ninth to mid-tenth centuries were not a cohesive group even in cases of worship. In the *Landnámabók*, or *Book of the Land-Taking*, an Icelandic work begun in the eleventh century and added to over the course of the next two centuries, the original settlers of Iceland are listed by name, and information is given on any defining traits they might have possessed. The settlers seem to be split into three main groups; those who are not given a specific religion in the text, the Christian settlers, and the settlers who specifically worshipped Þórr, Óðinn, or Freyr. Out of the hundreds of settlers mentioned in the text, only seven are specifically noted as worshipping a specific non-Christian deity. It could be inferred that not marking someone as worshipping Þórr or Óðinn or Freyr could simply mean they were typical non-Christians: those mentioned as specifically worshipping a non-Christian deity were singled out because of their unusual level of devotion, such as Thorolf Mostur-Beard, who was noted as being “blot-maðr mikill, ok trúðe á Þór”, “a great

man for sacrificing, and had faith in Thor", or Végeir, who was also "blot-maðr mikill", "a great man for sacrificing".² It should be noted that Végeir's original name was Geir, but the "Vé" was added on as a signifier of his devotion to the gods. Unfortunately this in itself could not be used as terminology for the religion he practiced, because the prefix "Vé" only appears in this one instance throughout the entire *Landnámabók*, indicating that Végeir was probably a special case. Even if the term was used by itself, it simply means "holy".

The *Landnámabók* also gives us information on what happened to the Christians who originally settled in Iceland: "Héldo sumer vel Christne til dauða-dags. En þat geck ú-víða í ætter; þvi at syner þeirra sumra reisto hof ok blótoðo. En landet vas heiðet ner hundraðe vetra." [Some held well to Christ until their death's day. But this was not widely practiced among families; and so many of them raised up halls and temples. And the land was then heathen for nearly a hundred winters.]³ The term heathen here is almost certainly a Christian construction, as the text of the *Landnámabók* was not finished until the thirteenth century. This still leaves historians with the persistent question of how to refer to the medieval Norse religious practices and beliefs, since to individually pick out each settler's religious affiliation in terms of which deity they worshipped would be extremely difficult if not impossible, as few settlers were given a religious designation.

For the sake of clarity here, future references to the Norse religion which existed in the Scandinavian countries mentioned above and was popularly practiced by the native Scandinavians until the adoption of Christianity will be referred to as the "Norse religion" or a variant thereof. When possible, reference will be made to the specific deity being

² Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, trans. and ed. "Landnáma-bóc" in *Origines Islandicae*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 45, 110.

³ Vigfusson and Powell, "Landnáma-bóc", 236.

worshipped, and careful attention will be paid to the use of the term “pagan” or “heathen” in the primary texts. It should also be noted that many of the sources used and quoted use a more Anglicized version of common names: Þorgeir becomes Thorgeirr, Óðinn becomes Odin, etc. Whenever possible, this thesis will use the original Old Norse names.

Information on the Icelandic conversion and the Norse religion comes down to historians through a variety of sagas written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, long after Christianity had been officially accepted. There are four major Icelandic sources for the conversion, with numerous smaller sagas which mention the conversion in passing. The *Islendingabók* is the first source chronologically, written early in the twelfth century by Ari Thorgilsson, a figure generally recognized as the father of Icelandic saga historiography. The saga is sometimes referred to as the *Libellus Islandorum*, a Latin title for the earlier text of which only the *Islendingabók* now survives. According to Icelandic scholar Gudbrand Vigfusson, the language of the text in the original Norse is more “*political* in tone, though it reaches us through such ecclesiastical sources, and is valuable as preserving for us the *legal* aspect of the change of faith.”⁴ Possibly the most important and certainly the most informational source on the conversion is the *Christne Saga*, which deals directly with the conversion to Christianity. Vigfusson notes that the author of the *Christne Saga* was probably a man named Brand, who lived in the twelfth century in Iceland, probably slightly after the *Islendingabók* was written. Unfortunately we know little of the author other than his name. The *Christne Saga* tells the story of the conversion with more vigor than the *Islendingabók*,

⁴ Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, trans. and ed. “Christne Saga” in *Origines Islandicae*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 370.

focusing on the emotional dramas and personal interactions of the characters in the story, and also gives more information on the missionaries sent from continental Europe.

Another major source has already been mentioned, the *Landnámabók*. This saga details the first settlers coming to Iceland from Norway, helping to set a background for the larger conversion narrative, and the final version was written by the Icelander Sturla Thordarson in the early thirteenth century.⁵ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards note in their translation of the *Landnámabók* that Icelandic scholar Jón Jóhannesson has shown that the text probably originated even earlier, at sometime in the twelfth century. It was probably written originally by Ari Thorgilsson, who would have had access to many of the original settlers and thus makes the account of the *Landnámabók* that much more reliable. The *Heimskringla* is the fourth major source, a thirteenth century saga written by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson. It mentions the conversion only briefly, as part of the larger narrative of the “Saga of Ólaf Tryggvason” within the text, but does contain extra information from the Norwegian side dealing with the happenings in Olaf’s court. *Njal’s Saga* or *The Saga of Burnt Njal* also has information on the conversion, and was probably written in the late thirteenth century by an unknown author. *Njal’s Saga* focuses on a specific family living in Iceland from the tenth century onward, and mentions the conversion events in passing. These sagas and others not mentioned in this introduction will be discussed in more detail in later arguments.

The word “saga” in the Old Norse means both “history” and “story”, and thus the texts should not be taken at face value. However, neither should they be discarded, as they

⁵ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans. *The Book of the Settlements: Landnámabók*. (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), 3.

provide a window into the sensibilities and interests of the Icelandic writers after the conversion. The problem of how precisely to treat the Icelandic sagas and what degree of historical credence to give them has been an ongoing struggle in the field of Icelandic studies, and the status of the sources as either primary documents or simple literary texts is still debated. Historians in the field tend to use them cautiously, realizing that while the history itself may not be exact, it still provides a useful insight into the culture which produced it. Medieval scholar Jenny Jochens noted in her article on the Icelandic conversion:

It is true, of course, that historians must be careful about sources that parade as primary evidence but were written between 125 and 300 years after the event. For a people, however, who for centuries had been trained to remember and perform ancient poetry, to recite laws by heart, and to recall, transmit, and tell events they found worth remembering and thus to be ‘saga-like’ (*söguligr*), memory was a powerful tool for cultivating the soil of the past. Many of the medieval accounts cannot be summarily discarded merely because they were written generations after the events they relate. As to the conversion, it does not seem unwarranted to adopt a receptive attitude to the first crop of these accounts- despite contemporary concerns that manifest themselves through bias and silences- because they were recorded by individuals who, in a few cases, had received information from eyewitnesses and, more generally, from persons related to the actual participants and separated from them by only one or two generations.⁶

The idea that oral cultures may have been able to remember events more clearly due to their training is a compelling facet of this debate. Before Christianity came to Iceland, the Icelanders had no written culture, but instead orally passed down both laws and stories through generations. It is likely that a variant of the Scandinavian runic script was known in Iceland, but was not practical for large literary projects. In 1998 V. E. Wynn and R. H. Logie published their findings on long-term memories after testing two hundred first-year

⁶ Jenny Jochens, “Late and Peaceful: Iceland’s Conversion Through Arbitration in 1000,” *Speculum* Vol. 74, No. 3 (July, 1999): 624.

psychology students, noting the following important results: time had little impact upon the amount of information and the type of detail remembered by the test subjects.⁷ How much more would a trained Icelandic skald or Lawspeaker remember, especially when witnessing something as obviously important as the conversion to Christianity?⁸

A similar argument is espoused in another article by Jan De Vries, who asked how it was possible that an Icelandic writer could create such a detailed account of events in the past:

There is only one possible explanation: the authors of the sagas had at their disposal oral accounts going back to pagan times, and these were so rich that the life of the past could be freely recreated in their novels. In addition, these novels were not hypothetical sketches of the way of life and manner of living in these former times, but narratives depicting with precision the mentality of this period.⁹

Even if this second argument perhaps takes the credibility of the sagas too far, the sources are still useful as pieces of literature which both reflect the ideas and situations at the time of their writing. Mieke Bal in his *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* noted that narrative often contains a "structural correspondence" between the textual narrative and real-life events and structures, which he termed a "homology" of narrative.¹⁰ This homology refers to the general structure of a narrative: each type of narrative, be it fantastic or historical, has a homology which it must follow in order to be comprehensible to a reader. Bal further noted that "if no homology were to exist, no correspondence however

⁷ V. E. Wynn and R. H. Logie, "The Veracity of Long-Term Memories – Did Bartlett get it Right?", *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 12, (1998), 13.

⁸ The term Lawspeaker or *lögsögumaðr* will come up in the discussion again, but for now it is enough to know that the Lawspeaker held a position in the Icelandic parliamentary system which required him to memorize a great deal of laws and regulations.

⁹ Jan De Vries and Victor A. Velen, "The Enigma of the Icelandic Saga," *Diogenes* Vol. 12 No. 69 (1964): 78-79.

¹⁰ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 12.

abstract, then people would not be able to understand narratives."¹¹ The Icelandic sagas may not have followed the events exactly as they happened, but the narrative homology of the sagas was not one of fantastic literature: it was instead one of factual retelling. Furthermore, the Icelandic writers were typically consciously attempting to write factual histories, as they themselves noted when beginning many of the sagas.

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen in his "Some Methodological Considerations in Connection with the Study of the Sagas" put forth another convincing argument that can help explain the complex nature of the sagas. Sørensen argued that traditional historiography could not accept the sagas as historical texts because "The saga writer and the modern historian are not looking for the same things in history. The saga presents meaningful images of the past. The historian seeks facts from which he can construct his own meanings."¹² He also cautioned against viewing the texts as purely literary, noting that "Once it had become clear that the family sagas had a 'poetic form', most literary research into the sagas concerned itself with the form and context of the texts without acknowledging that their meaning is based on direct reference to historical reality."¹³ Sørensen finally molds this into the following complex argument:

Methodologically speaking, it is not enough either to read the text solely as a historical source or as a work of fiction with its own world, quite independent of its historical references. From the point of view of our conceptual world, we are unable to decide whether the family sagas are primarily fictitious expositions of general patterns of ideas or interpretations of reality making use of these patterns. They are in fact both; they are accounts of events that took place in a previous culture and as such are appropriate objects for historical and

¹¹Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 12.

¹² Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "Some methodological considerations in connection with the study of the sagas" in *From Sagas to Society, Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Middlesex: Harislik Press, 1992), 29.

¹³ *Ibid*, 33.

anthropological study, but they are also narrative presentations of that past and therefore suitable objects for literary analysis and interpretation. In order to encompass this double meaning, we must choose more than one approach to the texts; on the one hand, a generalized cultural-anthropological description of the ideas about individual and society- honor, family, status, power and religion- which the family sagas refer to and themselves expound; on the other hand, literary analysis and interpretation of individual texts.¹⁴

The final take on how to deal with the sagas as historical sources is thus immensely complex, but potentially very rewarding to the diligent historian willing to look beyond the face value of the texts. It is possible to peel back the layers of the sagas by asking questions such as who was the text written for, why was the text written, where is the narratorial voice, and who is the implied reader for the text. Furthermore, performing close readings of the text, in which even the sentence structure is carefully analyzed, can bring even more information to light.

Chapter Two: Images of the Past

This chapter focuses on the Icelandic sagas themselves, using them as a semi-reliable guide to Icelandic culture. By carefully reading the literature which was produced after the conversion, clues can be gleaned as to what effect the conversion actually had. Indications of the cultural attitude of Icelanders towards their non-Christian past can be pulled from a text by asking questions such as who the author was, what knowledge level was necessary to understand the text, the authorial tone of the text, and the comparison of the texts to more typical post-Christian-conversion literature. Utilizing techniques from the study of narrative, or narratology, such as the use of focalization and the absence of argumentative textual

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 33-34.

passages can pull even more information from these sources. These terms and others will be described in more detail below.

References to the Norse religion of Iceland and the use of Norse subjects within literature exist in a multitude of sources, most of which were written at least fifty years after the conversion by ostensibly Christian writers. One of the great ironies of the survival of Norse religious elements is the use of the writing system brought by Christianity to record and preserve the religion which it supposedly replaced. The first chronological mention of the older beliefs cropped up almost immediately after conversion, in the numerous works of skaldic poetry which were written down in the eleventh century. An excellent example of this is the work of the skald Arnór Thórdarson, born in 1012 in Iceland, twelve years after Iceland converted to Christianity. His most famous composition is a series of verses for Magnus Olafsson and Harold Harðráði, the two men who ruled Norway jointly after the death of King Ólaf Tryggvason. Like all skalds, Arnór used kennings, a uniquely Norse method of creatively describing objects within the poem. They were used to enhance the creative weight of the poem by turning mundane objects into highly complex figurative descriptions, which the reader or listener would have to unravel to completely understand the poem. A major part of the enjoyment of a poem was hearing the kennings skillfully woven throughout by a skald. As a performer, it would have been vitally important for skalds to know their audience: creating kennings that no one could understand would simply confuse the audience, rather than impress them. An excellent example of the kennings comes from one of Arnór's poems:

Bucklers red then bor'st thou, Ygg-of-battle, into Swedish hamlets, and the franklins of the folkland flocked to thee to aid thy progress. From the east

there thronged the thingmen thence, with gilded spears and white shields-
reddener-of-ravenous-wolves'-tongues- rallying, chosen for the sword-thing.¹⁵

There are three kennings hidden within the verse, which would have enhanced the imagery of the poem for those who understood them. “Ygg-of-battle” is a kenning for warrior or perhaps even "God of Battle", as Ygg is one of the names of the Norse god Óðinn, a deity heavily associated with battle and death. The “sword-thing” is a kenning for battle, as a þingr was the term for a meeting, thus a “sword-meeting”. The final kenning is the “reddener-of-ravenous-wolves'-tongues”, which may be a kenning for warriors, imbedded in a kenning for swords: the ravenous wolves' tongues are swords, while those who “redden” them with blood are warriors. These kennings are typical of skaldic verse, but note that the first kenning references a Norse god, and was written mere decades after Iceland converted. Not only would the skald himself need to have a working knowledge of Nordic legends to construct the kenning, but more importantly his audience would also need to understand his construction.

Another skald working during the same time period, born in 1010 in Iceland, was Thiódólf Arnórsson. He was part of King Harald Harðráði's court in Norway, and fought alongside the king at the ill-fated battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. According to the sagas, King Harald asked Thiódólf to compose a verse about a fight between a tanner and a smith which the king had witnessed, using characters from the legend of Sigurd and Fafnir. This done, the king congratulated his skald then told him the following:

¹⁵ Lee M. Hollander, trans. *The Skalds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945): 184.

‘Well done’, said the king. ‘Now compose another one, and now let one be Thor and the other the Giant Geirrod, and refer to each one according to his trade.’ Then Thiódólf spoke this verse:

The thewful Thor-of-bellows threw from the
 seat-of-quarrels jagged jaw-lightnings at the
 giant-of-the-goat-skins; but the gladsome
 Geirrod-of-the-gear-of-tanning caught with ear-
 hands that glowing ingot out of the smithy-of-
 magic.¹⁶

Thiódólf’s verse is obviously very rich in kennings, the understanding of which relies upon a fairly deep knowledge of the Norse religious legends. In this case the jumble of kennings referred to the legend where Þórr meets the giant Geirrod, and defeats him in combat. Each kenning refers back to that story, as well as the entire verse being a parody of the legend by replacing Sigurd and Fafnir with Þórr and Geirrod. The king congratulated his skald again, with the saga noting that “all praised the composition of the verses.”¹⁷ There was no commentary on the non-Christian nature of the subject, only the technical skill which the skald displayed.

King Harald himself was also known to try his hand at poetry, and used several Norse religious images within his compositions. In particular he used the term “Hild-of-combat”, a kenning for woman.¹⁸ Hild was a valkyrie, a gatherer of the slain from the field of battle for the god Óðinn, a Norse religious subject which the king was apparently familiar with.

The man considered to be one of the first major figures in Icelandic medieval literature was Ari Thorgilsson, a Christian-trained writer who lived from the late eleventh to mid twelfth century. Ari is best known for the *Islendingabók*, which outlined the history of

¹⁶ Hollander, *The Skalds*, 190-191.

¹⁷ Hollander, *The Skalds*, 191.

¹⁸ Hollander, *The Skalds*, 206.

Iceland by listing the various men who held the position of *lögsögumaðr*.¹⁹ The book was commissioned by two bishops, but despite this the text contains no overtly Christian tones: even the conversion itself is discussed in a terse, legalistic manner. Even stranger, the final genealogy which Ari provides includes the names of two Norse gods as the progenitors of a major family line.

Ari's other great work, the *Landnámabók*, contains a great deal of Norse imagery, despite being technically a history of the settlement period. The *Landnámabók* is a late twelfth century saga which deals directly with the initial settlement of Iceland from the late ninth century onward, and has been mentioned earlier in relation to the problem of religious terminology. The *Landnámabók*'s listing of settlers contains numerous mentions of sorcery, witchcraft, "second sight", and shape-changers. Even though the *Landnámabók* was finished in the thirteenth century, no Christian judgment of these elements is present, and a certain element of belief is present in the text. For example, the sorcerer Thrasi redirected a flood eastwards, away from his home in Skogur and towards Solheimer. Another sorcerer happened to be living at Solheimer, called Lodmund the Old, and he pushed the flood back towards the west. This continued for several rounds, until the two sorcerers met and agreed that the flood should be placed in a certain position, which supposedly created the Jokuls River.²⁰ No derogatory comments were made about the moral standing of the sorcerers or the implausibility of the events described, and the text moved on to the next settler's history. There are other examples from the *Landnámabók*, such as the shape-changers Dufthak and

¹⁹ The position of *lögsögumaðr* was one of the most important judicial and legislative positions in Iceland's system of government, which will be explained in more detail in later arguments.

²⁰ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 116.

Storolf, who changed form into a bull and a bear, respectively. They could be seen only with the “second sight”, and their battle created a massive crater called Oldugrof.²¹

From a narrative perspective, the works of Ari provide a great deal of information on how both he and his audience perceived the past. Mieke Bal in his work on narrative theory has noted that the use of a focalizing element in the text can reveal a great deal: a focalizer in this case means "the relation between the vision [the manner in which elements of the story are presented] and that which is 'seen', perceived."²² In the case of Ari, his focalizer was not a character, but instead an outside non-omniscient observer: Ari managed to mostly remove his authorial voice from the text. Rather than the reader being forced to see events through the perspective of a figure in the saga or even Ari himself, Ari chose to write in a removed manner. This was likely due to Ari's intent to write a history, not a fantastic story; the plot may have fantastic elements but Ari's intent was historical. This is not to say that the text is completely unbiased, but rather to say that Ari and the other saga writers were constantly attempting to distance themselves from the text, primarily by using a focalizer which was outside of the narrative. This same care shows up in the lack of what Bal refers to as "argumentative textual passages", parts of text which offer an opinion on some aspect of the story.²³ Examples of this would be signifiers such as "unfortunately", "sadly", "luckily", and others. Ari avoided these entirely, and simply told the story of the settlers in the dispassionate tones of a professional historian. The lack of noticeable bias towards the older Norse religion in Ari's writings is remarkable, especially given his Christian training.

²¹ *Ibid*, 133.

²² Bal, *Narratology*, 100.

²³ Bal, *Narratology*, 128.

Some of the best examples of Nordic religious elements thriving after conversion come from another famous writer in medieval Icelandic history, Snorri Sturluson. Snorri was born in Iceland around 1179, and served as a *lögsögumaður* for much of his life. He died in 1241, the victim of a feud between family members, but left behind a legacy of literary greatness. Two major works are certainly his, the *Heimskringla* and the *Prose Edda*, but due to the anonymous nature of many other sagas other works have been tentatively attributed to him.

Snorri's *Prose Edda* was written in the early thirteenth century, and is split into two major parts: *Gylfaginning* is the first, and is our main source for Nordic religious material. The second deals with how to construct poetry, and is called the *Skáldskaparmál*. Snorri began his work with a brief prologue which attempted to explain the origins of life in an oddly non-Christian manner. He followed the traditional Biblical storyline until Noah's flood, where he then branched off into Troy, which he peopled with mythical Scandinavian ancestors such as Þórr and Óðinn. These odd mixtures of Nordic gods and mythical historical figures become the ancestors of the major Scandinavian countries, including Norway and Sweden. After this quick genealogy, he delved into the *Gylfaginning* without a backwards glance, never again mentioning his prologue. Scholars have even claimed that this prologue was Snorri's attempt to "show that there is a natural and common basis for all forms of religion and to explain how they have branched out from this stock."²⁴ This would fit with Snorri's apparent attitude: he offered no apologies for writing about pagan subjects, and no argumentative textual passages appear even in the sections obviously drawn from Norse

²⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jean I. Young (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 12.

religious material. Interestingly, he also made no negative commentary on Christianity.

Snorri seemed to walk the line between Christianity and the religion it replaced, remaining ostensibly Christian but utilizing the Nordic religious past in his writings.

Snorri's other major work entitled the *Heimskringla* also discusses the early history of the world, in even more mythical terms. The *Heimskringla* primarily deals with the lives of the kings of Norway from their mythic past up to Snorri's time. Snorri again places Óðinn in the position of a great king, but ascribes to him a large list of magical powers, most of which come directly from the Nordic legends of the deity version of Óðinn:

Óthin had with him Mimir's head, which told him many tidings from other worlds; and at times he would call to life men out of the ground, or he would sit down under men that were hanged...He had two ravens on whom he had bestowed the gift of speech...And all these skills he taught with those runes and songs which are called magic songs. For this reason the Æsir are called Workers of Magic.²⁵

Snorri's account continued with details on Óðinn's death, at which point Snorri noted that "Then the belief in Óthin arose anew, and they called on him. Often, the Swedes thought, he revealed himself before great battles were fought, when he would give victory to some and invite others to come into his abode. Both fates seemed good to them."²⁶ Snorri seemed to be mixing the Nordic legends into his history at will, with little concern to how the elements are mixed. Once again, Snorri offered no moral judgment upon the Swedes, merely noting that they worshiped Óðinn without adding in any Christian argumentative passages into the text.

²⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 11.

²⁶ Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 13.

Returning to the *Prose Edda*, the *Gylfaginning* goes into great detail on the pre-Christian legends, as the figures within Snorri's narrative enlighten the mythical figure of Gangleri on the nature of his world. This constructed narrative allows Snorri to present the mythical stories in the form of question and answer, with the figure of Gangleri asking questions of three figures seated on a throne. For example:

Then Gangleri said: 'I can certainly understand it's true. I can see these things you have taken as examples, but how was the fetter made?'
 High One replied: 'I can easily tell you that. The fetter was as smooth and soft as ribbon of silk, but as trusty and strong as you are now going to hear.'²⁷

The overall narrative continues to teach readers about the Nordic myths and legends, and tends to be seen today as a sort of handbook to Norse mythology. The second section of the *Prose Edda*, the *Skáldskaparmál*, also deals with stories Norse religious myth, some of which have survived in modern culture today, such as the vivid imagery of the god Þórr: "At once he saw flashes of lightning and heard great claps of thunder; he was seeing Thór in his divine wrath."²⁸ These stories continue throughout the *Skáldskaparmál*, giving a wealth of unashamedly Norse myth and legends.

One of the more interesting aspects of Snorri's writing is visible in the excerpt above: Snorri never questioned the validity of his stories, and the figure of Gangleri above agrees with High One that the stories must indeed be true. This contrasts sharply with other medieval Christian writers, especially the Venerable Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written sometime in the early eighth century. Bede also constructs a narrative, and while Bede's narrative is intended to be a history, the use of characters is still

²⁷ Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, 57. This passage describes the fetter used to bind the wolf Fenrir.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 105.

important and can be examined side by side with Snorri's largely fictional characters. In chapter thirteen Bede discussed the conversion of King Edwin's council, a group of priests who previously followed a "pagan" religion. When the king asked his council for their opinion of Christianity, he received the following reply:

Coifi, the chief Priest, replied without hesitation: 'Your Majesty, let us give careful consideration to this new teaching; for I frankly admit that, in my experience, the religion that we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless... Therefore, if on examination you perceive that these new teachings are better and more effectual, let us not hesitate to accept them.'²⁹

Bede's voice within the narrative is one of faith in the truth of Christianity, and equal faith in the falsity of the "pagan" religion which the priest followed. The historical truth of whether or not this conversation between King Edwin and his council ever took place is irrelevant: the importance here is the manner in which Christianity and the religions it replaced are presented in Christian writings. Narratives regarding Charlemagne are another excellent example of typical Christian treatment of non-Christian "pagan" religions: Einhard, an adviser to Charlemagne who wrote in the mid ninth century, described the Saxons as "given to devil worship".³⁰

Returning to the Icelandic literature, the saga *Egils Saga Skallagrímsonnar* has also been attributed to Snorri by some scholars, though the anonymous nature of the saga makes it difficult to make any definite statement. However, the time period and writing style of *Egil's Saga* all point towards Snorri as the author. *Egil's Saga* was written in the early thirteenth century, and tells the story of four generations of the Mýramen family of Iceland from the

²⁹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 129.

³⁰ Lewis Thorpe, trans., *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 61.

early ninth century to the late tenth, with a small note on the conversion to Christianity. The center figure is Egil Skallagrímsson, a famous warrior and skald. While it is not necessary to describe the plot details, Egil is a thoroughly Norse figure, and uses the older magic traditions of the Norse religion in his travels in Iceland. In particular the text preserves some excellent examples of runic magic, which Egil used in one scene to discover poison in his goblet:

Egil plucked out his knife and stabbed at his palm. He took hold of the horn, graved runes on it, and spread them with blood. Then he chanted:

'Grave we runes on horn now
 With red blood make words ruddy;
 Here are the words I'm wanting
 On tree of aurochs' ear-root:
 Drain we what drink we crave for
 When merry maidens pour;
 Learn if fares foul or fairly
 The ale this Bárð has hallowed.'

The horn split apart and the drink ran down into the straw.³¹

Egil's use of the runes in the story saved his life, and later he would save the life of a young girl by carving the correct rune for healing and placing it under her pillow. A rune had previously been carved by a farmer's boy, but he had used the incorrect rune and made her condition worse. Another example in the text comes from Egil's feud with King Eirík and Queen Gunnhild of Norway, when he placed a "scorn-pole" on the island of Herdla off the coast of Norway. The pole was engraved with cursing runes, and a horse's head was placed on top. The pole was then turned towards Norway, while Egil chanted "I turn this scorn upon

³¹ Gwyn Jones, trans., *Egil's Saga* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1960), 106.

the landspirits which dwell in this land, so that they all fare wildering ways, and none light on or lie on his dwelling till they drive King Eirík and Queen Gunnhild out of the land."³²

Egil, being a skald, recited a great deal of poetry throughout the story and frequently used the Norse deities to construct his kennings. When Egil boasted to King Eirík of his skill, he used the terms "Word's breastfoam of Vidrir" and "Ódin's toast" to refer to poetry, kennings which could only be understood through knowledge of the medieval Norse religious beliefs.

Another source for Norse religious fragments existing long after the conversion is the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, written between 1230 and 1260. Interestingly, scholars have theorized that the writer of the saga was trained at the monastery in Holyfell, pointing towards a Christian writer. It is possible that the actual author of the saga was not simply Christian, but was Abbot Hall Gizurson, who would have had the experience and knowledge necessary to write the saga.³³ So not only was *Eyrbyggja Saga* a product of traditional saga literature, but it was probably created by someone who embodied the fusion of older Nordic traditions and newer Christian literacy: a higher-ranked Christian priest including Old Norse legends into his histories.

At about the midpoint in the story of the saga, an episode is narrated in which the last request of a dying servant woman was not honored by her employer, and a terrible curse fell upon the house. *Draugar*, or what in modern popular culture are called "zombies", infested the house, terrifying the living members of the household. The *draugar* were not very aggressive, and the first *draugr* which appears merely made dinner for the living men, while

³² Jones, *Egil's Saga*, 151.

³³ William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, trans., *Eyrbyggja Saga* (London: Bernard Quartich, 1892), xxi-xxiii.

the others later in the saga seemed content to warm themselves by the fire. However, a sickness spread in their wake, the same sickness which claimed the original woman from which the curse came. However, after a ghostly seal's head appeared in the kitchen (a problem which was solved by beating it back into the floorboard with a hammer), a door-doom was called to solve the problem, with two men called Kjartan and Thord Kausi presiding. A door-doom was a smaller version of an Icelandic court, effectively a temporary court of law which was used to quickly resolve local problems. The final portion of the saga is worth quoting:

Eptir þat stefndi Kjartan Þóri viðlegg, en Þórðr kausi Þóroddi bónda, um þat, at þeir gengi þar um hýbýli ólofat ok firði men bæði lífi ok heilsu; qllum var þeim stefnt, er við eldinn sátu.

Síðan var nefndr duradómr ok sagðar farm sakir ok farit at qllum málum, sem á þingadómum; váru þar kviðr bornir, reifð mál ok doemð; en síðan er dóms orði var á lokit um Þóri viðlegg, stóð hann upp ok mælti: “Setit er nú meðan sætt er.”

Eptir þat gekk hann út, þær dyrr sem dómrinn var eigi fyrir settr; þá var lokit dómsorði á sauðamann; en er hann heyrði þat, stóð hann upp ok mælti: “Fara skal nú, ok hygg ek, at þó væri fyrr soemra.”

En er Þorgríma galdrakinn heyrði, at dómsorði var á hana lokit, stóð hon upp ok mælti: “Verit er nú meðan vært er.”

Síðan sótti hvern at qðrum, ok stóð svá hvern upp, sem dómr fell á, ok mæltu allir nökkut, er út gengu, ok fannz þat á hvers orðum, at nauðigr losnaði. Síðan var sókn feld á Þórodd bónda; ok her hann heyrði þat, stóð hann upp ok mælti: “Fátt hygg ek hér friða, enda flýjum nú allir.”

Gekk hann þá út eptir þat. Síðan gengu þeir Kjartan inn; bar prestur þá vigt vatn ok helga dóma um qll hús. Eptir um daginn segir prestur tíðir allar ok messu hátíðliga, ok eptir þat tókuz af allar aptrgongur at Fróðá ok reimleikar, en Þuríði batnaði sótarinnar, svá at hon varð heil.

[After that Kjartan summoned Þóri wooden-leg, and Þórðr Kausi summoned the bondsman Þóroddi, in regards that they went around the house without permission and deprived men of both life and health. All {the *draugar*} who sat before the fires were summoned to the court.

Then was made a Door-Doom and cases were declared to all with speeches, as at a public court; verdicts were given, speech and judgments presented; when

then the court's word was come to Þóri Wooden-Leg, he stood up and said "I sat here while I wanted to sit here."

After that went he out, through the door which the court was not sitting before. Then was come judgment to the shepherd, and when he heard his sentence, he stood up and said "Go will I now, and think I this, that before now this shelter was fitting."

And when Þorgríma Spell-Cheeks heard that the court had given her judgment, she stood up and said "I stayed here while I wished to stay."

After that the court sought the others, and each stood up as judgment fell upon them, and each that left said something, and it was known by their words that they were unwilling to leave. After that was prosecuted in the fields the bondsman Þórodd, and when he heard his sentence, he stood up and declared, "I think here is little peace, and now will we all leave."

He went out after that. Then went Kjartan and his people went into the house; the priest brought holy water and sanctified the court and all around the house. Later that day the priest sang all the hours and masses solemnly, and after that stopped all the apparitions and haunting at Fróðá. But Þuríði's sickness improved, and thus she became healthy.]³⁴

The two characters first summoned to the door-doom were the two most important *draugar*, and they were sued for trespassing and bringing bad luck. One by one each *draugar* was summoned and dismissed into the woods, in a striking example of Icelandic legalistic approach to all aspects of life, even fantastic episodes. Afterwards a priest was summoned, holy water was spread throughout the house, and mass was sung to finally end the *draugar* menace. What's truly interesting in the *Eyrbyggja Saga* in relation to Nordic religion is that holy water and a priest were only called to the scene after the door-doom had already taken care of the immediate *draugr* problem. In effect, legal summons were the only way to deal with a supernatural attack, and Christianity was only needed to clean up afterwards. This is certainly not typical of medieval Christian narratives, and indicates that the old mythic dangers from monsters such as the *draugar* not only still existed in the Iceland narratives, but that the method of dealing with such dangers was firmly rooted in traditional Icelandic

³⁴ Hugo Gering and Eugen Mogk, eds. *Eyrbyggja Saga*. (Halle: Max Neimeyer, 1897), 196-197.

legalistic tradition, not the Christian religion which had ostensibly been in control for the last two hundred years at the time *Eyrbyggja Saga* was written. There may also be an element of parody in the saga, though attempting to gauge the humorous qualities of a thirteenth century text is problematic. The idea of using legal summons to remove *draugr* has comic possibilities, and may have been a commentary on Iceland's highly legalistic society. In any case, the significance of *draugr* being driven out by lawyers still remains, even if the story itself was a parody: the element of agency within the text for removing the supernatural menace rests with the legal summons, not Christianity.

Another side of Icelandic literature which provides an interesting comparison to typical Christian narratives is the manner in which Icelanders narrated the conversion itself in the year 1000. For example, in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, he discussed the various missions sent to Iceland by the Norwegian king Olaf Tryggvason, but his final line on the conversion is quite simple: "And we are told about the mission of Gizur and Hjalti that they arrived in Iceland before the meeting of the Althing and journeyed to the assembly; and at this assembly Christianity was adopted in Iceland by law, and all the people were baptized."³⁵ The *Eyrbyggja Saga* uses very similar language: "Snorri the Priest dwelt at Holyfell eight winters after Christ's faith was made law in Iceland."³⁶ *Landnámabók* uses the conversion to date events but still offers a legal subtext, such as "This was fifteen years before Christianity was adopted by law in Iceland."³⁷ The anonymous *Njall's Saga*, written in the early thirteenth century, is the only example which shows some emotion: "The

³⁵ Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 228.

³⁶ Morris and Magnússon, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 153.

³⁷ Pálsson and Edwards, *Landnámabók*, 49.

heathens considered that they had been greatly deceived, but the new law took effect and everybody became Christian in this land.”³⁸ The sagas all focus on the law as the primary agent of change, and none of the examples above make any mention of the triumph of Christianity, a phrase which could be expected from most medieval conversion narratives written during the same period. It is much more typical in European Christian conversion narratives for faith to be presented as the driving influence. For example, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, written in 1185 by Gerald of Wales, briefly discusses the conversion of Ireland by Patrick but couches it in the language of faith: “He [Patrick] baptized the people, whole crowds at a time, and, the entire island having been converted to the Faith of Christ, chose Armagh as his see.”³⁹ In another example from the great French epic *Song of Roland* written around 1100, Queen Bramimonde was converted to Christianity and baptized. The language in the poem also describes a change in religious affiliation in terms of faith: “A noble captive is in my train. She hath hearkened to sermon and homily, And a true believer in Christ will be; Baptize her so that her soul have grace.”⁴⁰

By examining these sources a very important trend becomes apparent: the Icelandic writers did not hesitate to delve into their own Norse past and pull out fantastic elements to use in their histories, even when those histories were commissioned by Christian church officials. They were obviously very comfortable using such material, and the Christian church in Iceland apparently presented little barrier to using overtly non-Christian material. In addition, the writers were quite adept at removing their own authorial voice from the texts:

³⁸ Robert Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc, 2001), 181.

³⁹ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John J. O'Meara (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 105.

⁴⁰ John O'Hagen, trans., "The Song of Roland" in *Medieval Sagas and Epics* (Ann Arbor: Borders Classics), 660.

They avoided placing argumentative text in their works, instead opting for a dispassionate style which gave little hint as to their own personal opinions, or the opinions of the dominant religious tradition in Iceland at the time of writing. This was probably due to their desire to produce historical texts, rather than fictional tales. As mentioned before, the homology of the narrative is one of historical retelling rather than fictional imagination.

Such an unusual attitude towards the past I suggest can be explained by the mode of Iceland's conversion to Christianity, which itself was a product of Iceland's legal culture. The narrative of the conversion will be explained in more detail below, where it will be seen that Iceland's unique conversion experience allowed the continuation of old religious traditions as a literary heritage, examples of which have been seen above.

Chapter Three: The Narrative of Conversion

Attempts to Christianize Iceland began late in the tenth century, but the Icelanders would have been at least somewhat familiar with the Christian religion even during the earliest stages of settlement in Iceland. According to the *Íslendingabók* the first Norwegian settlers in Iceland found people already living on the island:

Þá vóro her men Christner þeir es Norðmenn calla Papa. En þeir fóro síðan á braut, af því at þeir vildo eige vesa her við heiðna menn: ok léto epter bækr Írscar, ok biollor, ok bagla: af því mátte skilja at þeir vóro menn Írscer.

[Then were Christian men here, which the *Norðmenn* called ‘papa’. And they afterwards went away because they wished not to be here with heathen men: and they left behind Irish books, and bells, and crosiers: from this it was seen that they were Irish men.]⁴¹

⁴¹ Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, trans. and eds., “Libellus Islandorum” in *Origines Islandicae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 288. *Norðmenn* simply means “men from the north”, which we could translate today as simply Scandinavians.

In addition, one of the first settlers by the name of Aurlygr came to Iceland with the intent of building a Christian church dedicated to Columba at the behest of the bishop of Southreys (possibly the Orkney Isles). The *Landnámabók* says that

Byscop feck hónum kirkjo-við, ok bað hann hafa með ser; ok plenarium; ok iarn-clocko, ok goll-pening; ok mold vigða, at hann skylde leggja under horn-stage, ok hafa þat fyrer vígslo; ok skylde hann helga Columcilla.

[The bishop gave him wood for a church and bid him to take it with him, and a *plenarium*, and an iron bell, and a gold penny, and consecrated earth, so that he could place it under the corner posts before consecrating the church, and told him that he should venerate Columba.]⁴²

The significance of the gold penny is unknown, but the *plenarium*, a book of prayers, would have been enough to give Icelanders a decent idea of what Christianity was, if they were able and willing to read it. Aurlygr succeeded in founding a church in Iceland and the saga noted that his great-grandson took Christianity, despite apparently being *troll-aukenn*, “possessed by a troll”.⁴³ This would seem to indicate that Aurlygr’s descendants reverted to the Norse religion shortly after Aurlygr himself managed to found his church. The great-grandson’s conversion may reference the official conversion of 1000, since Aurlygr would have founded his church in roughly 864. The same saga also notes that an Irishman named Cathal also settled in Iceland at around the same time as Aurlygr, and his family kept the traditions of Christianity up to the conversion itself. In fact, his son was named Eor-wend the Christian and his grandson was a Christian hermit.

Jenny Jochens, a prominent scholar in the field of medieval women's studies, has previously discussed these early Christian influences on the island, and in particular focused

⁴² Vigfusson and Powell, “Landnáma-bók”, 27.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 29. Unfortunately the term *troll-aukenn* is never fully explained in the text. However, Dr. Norman Keul has pointed out that the term literally means troll-enhanced, “suggesting such a person has taken on the nature or characteristics of a troll.”

on the impact that Irish Christianity may have had on the conversion of Iceland. In her research, Jochens combed through the *Landnámabók* for any mention of Celtic names. She surmised that those of Celtic ancestry probably brought their Christian heritage with them from Ireland, thus planting the seeds of Christianity on the island as early as what is termed the Settlement Period of Iceland in the ninth century. Jochens' focus on the Irish Christianity is useful but somewhat tenuous; there is no proof that those who possessed Celtic names followed Christianity or were interested in spreading it among their fellow Icelanders. However, if Jochens is correct it would mean that Christianity already had a strong base to work with in Iceland, allowing it to be seen as at least somewhat familiar to the inhabitants of the island.

Orri Vésteinsson in his *The Christianization of Iceland* took the opposite stance shortly afterwards, and argued that the existing Christian presence on the island before the conversion event had a negligible effect on the population:

Explanations have been put forward claiming that the Icelanders were so well acquainted with Christianity as the result of their journeys from Norway through the British Isles to Iceland, a century earlier, that the conversion was almost a formality. This explanation is contradicted by the archaeological evidence which suggests that in the tenth century burial practices at least were thoroughly heathen.⁴⁴

The net effect of these arguments and the evidence from sagas is difficult to gauge. The only definitive statement which can be made is that the Icelanders were not completely ignorant of what Christianity was, even if they were unaware of the actual practices and “orthodoxy” of Christianity. Christianity probably had a base to work with on the island, but

⁴⁴ Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, power, and social change 1000-1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 18.

was not considered a threat to the Nordic religion until serious missionary efforts were underway. The final effect of the pre-existing Christian influences on the conversion was likely very small, and the missionary attempts starting in the late tenth century probably had the greatest impact.

The first official missionary attempt on the island was instigated by the Icelander Þórvaldr, who was raiding in the south and met a bishop called Frederick in Saxland, probably somewhere in southern Germany. He converted to Christianity and brought Frederick back home with him somewhere between 979 and 989 (the *Christne Saga* gives the date as 981).⁴⁵ Þórvaldr translated for Frederick as the bishop had no knowledge of Icelandic, and at least three men were named as having converted soon after the bishop arrived in Iceland. Þórvaldr's own father Coðran was baptized by Frederick after the bishop demonstrated his power over the ancestor spirit which the family worshipped:

Coðran lézt eige mundo fyrre skíraz láta, en hann visse hvárr meirr mætte, byscop eða áe-maðr í steinenom. Efter þat fór byscop til steinsens, ok sæng yfer þar til er steinnen brast í sundr. Þá þóttez Coðran skilja at ármaðr var sigraðr.

[Coðran would not allow himself to be baptized until he was certain which was more powerful, the bishop or the steward in the stone. After that the bishop came before the stone, and sang over it until the stone burst asunder. Thus Coðran thought that he could perceive that the steward was overcome.]⁴⁶

While this may seem like a fairly standard medieval Christian conversion scene, with Christianity reigning triumphant at the end, careful examination of the text can reveal some interesting facets. First, the "steward" in the stone was not described in negative language,

⁴⁵ Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, trans. and eds., "Christne Saga" in *Origines Islandicae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 376. The saga gives the date as "sumar þat es landet hafðe bygt veret c vetra ok vii vetr.", "in summer after the land had been settled for one hundred and seven winters."

⁴⁶ Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 378.

but instead was simply a power which the bishop overcame. In addition, the text uses the phrase " Þá þóttez Coðran" [Then thought Coðran], which contains the verb “þóttez”, a verb which has no sense of certainty, but rather one of opinion. Coðran’s conversion was not narrated as moment of truthful revelation but rather one of being presented with a potentially stronger spiritual ally.

Furthermore, a separate version of this story was included in the *Saga of Thorwald the Far-Farer*, written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. It depicts the shattering of Coðran’s stone as a much more emotional event, with the ancestor crying out for mercy and begging to know why Coðran had forsaken him after the spirit’s long years of faithful service. After Frederick poured holy water onto the stone to exorcise the spirit, it appeared to Coðran in a dream, saying “Bethink thee now, who will hereafter care for thy goods so carefully as I have done up till now? Thou callest thyself an upright and faithful man, but thou hast repaid me evil for good!” and “my children suffer no small torment from the burning drops [Frederick's holy water] that drip in through the thatch and though it doth not hurt me myself much, all the same it is grievous to listen to the wail of small children as they cry with their burns.”⁴⁷ This was not a triumphant conquest of evil but the melancholy passing away of the old in favor of the new. It is also important to note here that the spirit was still given agency in the text: it was able to help Coðran in the past, and still had power, albeit not enough to resist the efforts of Frederick.

Interestingly, Coðran's stone also brings up the possibility of the Norse religion existing not as a religion as Christianity was defined, but more as a series of cultural

⁴⁷ Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, trans. and eds., “Thorwald the Far-Farer” in *Origines Islandicae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 410. Original Old Norse unavailable.

practices which the Icelanders had only a passing loyalty to. The steward in the stone is not narrated as a particular god or spirit, but instead as a personal guardian of Coðran's goods, fitting more into the pattern of ancestor worship than that of an established religion.

Christne Saga relates that the two men travelled for at least four years in Iceland, preaching Christianity and being well-received by the population. Frederick eventually came across two men who were described as berserkers. Berserkers were Scandinavian warriors who relied on their own strength and fury in battle rather than any defensive armaments or any sense of self preservation. They were typically described as maniacs who enjoyed battle, and some modern scholarship has argued that their mania was drug-induced, while some sagas describe their abilities as a type of magical curse activated during certain periods.⁴⁸

Their characteristics were nicely summed up by medieval military scholar Kelly DeVries:

In some cases, these appear to have been specific warriors, while in others, they are more conventional soldiers who 'go berserk' in the heat of battle. The latter would work themselves into a frenzy, a blood-lust which would give them incredible strength and made them seemingly indifferent to blows or pain.⁴⁹

Frederick's encounter with this particular pair of berserkers is narrated thus: "Þar kómu berserker tveir, er Haukr hét hvárr-tvegge; þeir buðu mannom kúgan, ok gengo grenjande ok óðo elda." [there came two berserks, who were both called Hauk; they challenged many men, and went around screaming, and waded through fire]⁵⁰ Frederick was asked to fight the berserks, and turned their boast back upon them by sanctifying the fire, causing it to badly burn them. After the two men were set on fire the watching Icelanders immediately took advantage of the situation, killing the two berserks. The slaying of the

⁴⁸ Kelly DeVries, *The Norwegian Invasion of England in 1066* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1993), 205.

⁴⁹ DeVries, 205.

⁵⁰ Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 378.

berserks seems to be a pattern found within the conversion narratives, as will be seen later with the missionary Thangbrand. The killing of berserks has typically been seen in previous scholarship through the lens of Christianity triumphing over the Norse berserk warrior, but there is another more compelling possibility. A reverence for the laws of Iceland is seen in the sagas, and it is entirely possible that the berserks were not figures of the Norse religion, but figures of lawlessness, maniacs who reveled in violence and did not obey the laws of society. The triumph of the missionaries over the berserks could then be seen as law and order triumphing over chaos, rather than Christianity overcoming the Norse religion. The berserks certainly had overtones of Norse religious worship, but in the setting of the *Christne Saga* they existed more as figures of lawlessness.

After his encounter with the berserks, Frederick and Þórvaldr travelled to the Alþingr, the national judicial and legislative meeting held each year in central Iceland. Frederick's attempt to bring Christianity to the Alþingr marked the first real resistance Christianity met on the island. Once the two men arrived at the Alþingr, two poets lampooned them within earshot of Þórvaldr with skaldic verse, saying "Hefer barn boret byscop nio, Þeirra es allra Þórvaldr faðer" [Nine children has the bishop born, and Þórvaldr's the father of all], a verse which probably played on the similarity between the typical Christian priest's robes and female clothing to insinuate a homosexual relationship between Frederick and Þórvaldr. This type of verse was common in the sagas, and was known as a *nið* verse.⁵¹ Þórvaldr responded by killing the two poets, which resulted in both Þórvaldr and Frederick being outlawed from Iceland by the Alþingr. This is strange because under Icelandic law anyone slandered as a

⁵¹ Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 381.

niðingr by such a verse was within his rights to kill his accusers, but Frederick and Þórvaldr were both outlawed. In fact, the *nið* insults were “classified alongside killing, rape, and adultery in their legal consequences”.⁵² It should be noted here that being outlawed in Icelandic society was much more serious than simply being told to leave. William Miller has written that “the term outlaw [was used] to indicate someone who had been expelled from the community and who as an outlaw was shorn of all jural status and all jural rights: he or she was supposed to be killed by anyone hearty enough to undertake the task.”⁵³

This first attempt to gain a real Christian foothold on the island is noteworthy in several respects, chief among them being that the missionary efforts of the bishop were tolerated by the non-Christian population until he took steps to speak to the officials of Iceland at the Alþingr. Once that occurred things began to fall apart, leading to the conclusion that Christianity was still seen as an outside force trying to overwhelm the existing structure. Frederick is also important because of his success in contrast to the two missionaries who followed him, Stefnér and Thangbrand. Unlike his successors, Frederick acted peacefully throughout his campaign, building churches and overcoming “pagan spirits” while simultaneously making friends with the population. *Christne Saga* even noted that Frederick was a guest in many homes in Iceland. This first push of Christianity was arguably the most vital, because it set the tone of Christianity’s approach, despite the somewhat counterproductive efforts of the following two missionaries.

⁵² Siân Grønlie, “Preaching, Insult, and Worplay in the Old Icelandic ‘kristniboðsþættir’” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* Vol. 103, No. 4 (October 2004): 460.

⁵³ William Ian Miller, “Of Outlaws, Christians, Horsemeat, and Writing: Uniform Laws and Saga Iceland,” *Michigan Law Review* Vol. 89, No. 8 (August 1991): 2082.

After Frederick left Iceland the Norwegian king Ólaf Tryggvason took an interest in converting the country to Christianity (he had recently finished converting Norway to Christianity through violent means) and sent the missionary Stefner to Iceland, a man who had kinsmen in the country and thus in theory had a better chance at converting his relatives. However, the *Christne Saga* noted that "En er hann kom til Íslannz, þá tóko menn illa við honum, því at allr lyðr var þá heiðenn á lande her." [But when he came to Iceland, men treated him poorly, because all people were then heathen in this land.]⁵⁴ This is an odd statement to make since Frederick's efforts as noted above were narrated as being very successful, and only a few years had passed since Frederick and his guide had been outlawed. It is possible that the legal action taken against Frederick reflected badly on Christianity and thus acted as a deterrent to further conversions and as an impetus to revert back to the existing Norse religion. In any case, after Stefner was not well-received he began to deface the Norse temples, and due to his actions the Alþingr took legal action against Christianity. However, they did not outlaw it entirely; instead, "Þat sumar á Alþinge vas þat í lög teket, at fraendr enna Christno manna skylldo sóekja um þá goð-laoston" [That summer at the Alþingr it was made law that kin of the Christian men should prosecute them as god-blamers/blasphemers] and the *Christne Saga* noted that "Þat sumar vas Stefner sóttur um Christne; þá sœk sóttu þeir fraendr hans - því at Christnen vas þá kaolloð fraenda-skaomm:" [That summer Stefner was prosecuted for being a Christian: his kinsmen pursued the suit, because it was then called a kin-shame]⁵⁵ Christianity became a problem not for the Icelandic government to deal with directly but for individual families to handle themselves through the

⁵⁴ Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 384.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 385.

judicial system. Rather than take personal action against Stefner, he was effectively taken to court, because simply being related to a Christian reflected badly upon a family. The law regarding kinsmen bringing suit against Christians does not appear again in the conversion texts, possibly because the following missionary had no relatives in Iceland. Once the suit was brought up against Stefner, he fled Iceland and was not mentioned again in the conversion narratives.

After Stefner's failure, King Ólaf sent another missionary by the name of Thangbrand to Iceland, both to convert the population and to get rid of Thangbrand himself, who had earned a reputation as a troublesome individual back in Denmark and Norway. Interestingly, the *Christne Saga* credits Thangbrand with meeting King Ólaf before his conversion and planting the first seeds of Christianity in the king's mind. Despite his supposed role's in Ólaf's conversion, Thangbrand's background was less than stellar for a missionary. *Christne Saga* relates the following story of him before he left for Iceland:

Þangbrandr kaupur mey eina Írska ok fagra með silfrena. En er hann kom heim með hána, þá vilde sá maðr, er Otto enn Unge keisare hafðe gíslat þangat, taka af hónum meyna: en hann vilde eiga lausa láta. Gislen var kappe mikell, ok bauð Þangbrande á pataldr, en Þangbrandr hafðe sigr, ok drap hann - því mátte Þangbrandr eige vera í Denmark, ok fór hann þá til Ólafs konungs Tyggvasonar.

[Thangbrand bought a fair Irish maiden with the silver. And when he came home with her, then wished a certain man, whom Emperor Otto the Young had sent there as a hostage, to take from him the maiden: but he [Thangbrand] did not wish to let her go. The hostage was a great champion, and challenged Thangbrand to battle, but Thangbrand had the victory, and slew him - for this reason Thangbrand was not able to stay in Denmark, and he went then to King Ólaf Tryggvason.]⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 384.

Christne Saga also relates that Ólaf previously built a church for Thangbrand on an island called Moster, but Thangbrand "var eyzlo-maðr mikell ok ærr, ok geck brátt upp fé hans. Þá feck hann ser lang-skip, ok herjaðe á heiða menn, ok rænte við, ok lagðe þat fé fyrer lið sítt" [was a very wasteful man, and crazy, and quickly used up his money. Then he got himself a longship, and harried the heathen men, and plundered widely, and gave that wealth as compensation to his men.]⁵⁷ The *Heimskringla* further describes Thangbrand as: "a man of great overbearing and much inclined to violence, but otherwise a good cleric and a brave fellow. However, because of his turbulent ways the king did not want to have him about him."⁵⁸ Olaf was displeased by Thangbrand's actions, and recalled him to Norway, intending to discharge the priest from his service, calling him a "ráns-maðr", meaning thief or robber.⁵⁹ Instead, as punishment Thangbrand was sent to convert Iceland, with the promised reward of being reconciled to the king if he managed to accomplish the conversion.

The sagas spend a great deal of time on Thangbrand and his efforts in Iceland, a focus which is reflected in this discussion. However, it is worth briefly asking why Thangbrand was focused on so intently by the saga authors. One possibility is that Thangbrand was the last official Christian missionary in Iceland before the country converted, and thus was given more "credit" for the conversion by the saga writers. He was not present for the official conversion, or at least he was not described as being present, but his efforts could be seen as a final push for Christianity. However, a more compelling possibility is that Thangbrand was more of a saga-style roaming warrior along the lines of the great skald Egil (as mentioned above in the first chapter) than the typical Christian priest, and this may have appealed to the

⁵⁷ Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 384.

⁵⁸ Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 209.

⁵⁹ Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 386.

literary sensibilities of the Icelandic writers. Thangbrand was easy to fit into the Icelandic sagas, as he roamed around Iceland winning converts, fighting berserks, and confounding the efforts of local Norse priests. I suspect that this blurring of the lines between Christian ideals and Norse ideals in the case of Thangbrand increased his popularity with the saga writers. Because the sagas present so much information on Thangbrand, the section below which discusses his efforts in Iceland is necessarily more in depth.

Thangbrand managed to convert the family of Hall of Siðe upon his arrival in Iceland, despite the frosty reception of most of the locals. Hall was intrigued by the feast of Michael the Archangel and the other Christian rites which Thangbrand demonstrated such as incense, bells, and vestments, and was baptized along with his family. Interestingly, Thangbrand's next step was to ride with Hall to the Alþingr, the same step which started the troubles for Frederick. The Norse religion is again shown to still have some agency in the text, when as Thangbrand and Hall rode towards the Alþingr a man called Galdra-Heðenn was hired "at hann felde iaorð under Þangbrande" [in order to make the earth fall under Thangbrand].⁶⁰ Thangbrand escaped by leaping off his horse as the ground opened up beneath him, but lost his horse in the process.

This seemed to mark a turning point in how Christianity was treated afterwards. Thangbrand baptized many on his journey to the Alþingr, and once at the meeting he preached and "ok tóko þá margar menn við trú í Sunnlendinga-fiórðunge, ok Norðlendinga-fiórðunge" [and many men there took with the faith among the South-land quarter and the

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 387.

North-land quarter].⁶¹ Instead of the hostile reaction which the Alþingr gave to Frederick and Stephen, Thangbrand managed to find a receptive audience. However, the sagas relate that "En þeir vóro þó fleire es í gegn mæltu ok neitto" [But there were yet more among them which opposed it and refused it], so while Christianity was spreading it was still in the minority in the island.⁶² Thangbrand continued his work in Iceland, but quickly ran into trouble again after being targeted by a *nið* verse. He killed the two men who made the verse, and the *Heimskringla* further noted that he killed three more men before he returned to Norway. The *Islendingabók* also notes the slayings, but both the *Christne Saga* and the *Saga of Burnt Njal* go into more detail on Thangbrand's efforts, seeming to include an extra year after the previous sources claim he left for Norway.

The pieces of Thangbrand's mission which the *Christne Saga* and the *Saga of Burnt Njal* describe give further details regarding the missionary's actions on the island. Thangbrand and his men attempted to buy meat from a non-Christian and were rebuffed, so they stole the food and when the local authorities found them, engaged in pitched battle and killed nine men. At this point Thangbrand went into hiding with a prominent chieftain and early convert to Christianity called Gizur the White, and was approached by a priestess of the Norse religion named Stan-wor. This is perhaps the best example of direct Norse and Christian religious interaction in the sagas, as Thangbrand and Stan-wor preached at one another for some time and their debate eventually developed into a *flyting*, "a form of 'ritual

⁶¹ Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 388.

⁶² Vigfusson and Powell, "Libellus Islandorum", 295.

name-calling' that function[ed] as a verbal and intellectual combat."⁶³ Their exchange went as follows according to *Christne Saga*:

'Hefer-þú heyrst þat', sagðe hon, 'es Þórr hauð Criste á holm, ok þorðe hann eige at berjast við Þór?' 'Heyrt hefe-ek' seger Þangbrandr, 'at Þórr vas ecke nema mold ok aska, ef Goð vilde eige at hann lifðe.' 'Veiztu', seger hon, 'heverr broteð hefer skip þitt?' 'Hvat seger þú til?' seger hann. 'Þat mon-ec segja her' seger hon.

[‘Have you heard that’, said she, ‘Þórr challenged Christ to a duel, and he dared not fight with Þórr?’ ‘I have heard’, said Thangbrand, ‘that Þórr was nothing but earth and ashes, if God wished him not to live.’ She said, ‘Who broke the ship you had?’ ‘What say you on that?’ said he. ‘That shall I tell you here’, said she.

Thor drove Thangbrand’s ship from her moorings,
The Powers broke the sea-bird of the bell-ward,
Christ did not guard the vessel,
God did not watch over the boat.]⁶⁴

Interestingly, Thangbrand actually lost the combat according to both *Christne Saga* and the *Saga of Burnt Njal* as he had no reply to the verses of Stan-wor, and Zoe Borovsky has written that this would then mean that “Christ would be considered a *níðingr*, a coward” because Thangbrand was unable to counter the *flyting* versus of Stan-wor. Despite Thangbrand's defeat, the story of Norse religion successfully resisting Christianity was not expunged by the later Christian writers such as Snorri Sturluson and Ari Thorgillson. The lack of argumentative textual passages in this section is especially interesting. Thangbrand’s failure to counter the attack of the Norse priestess was probably devastating from a native

⁶³ Zoe Borovsky, “Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature,” *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 112, No. 443 (Winter, 1999): 9.

⁶⁴ Vigfusson and Powell, “Christne Saga”, 391. The original Old Norse is unfortunately not available for the poetic portion of the saga: the poetic verse was translated by Vigfusson.

Icelandic perspective, even though he seems to have reclaimed some of his personal reputation after the next major event related in the sagas.⁶⁵

Christne Saga relates that the next spring Thangbrand travelled west to try and win more converts, and was challenged to a wager of battle by a berserk, similar to the pair that Frederick defeated:

Berserkrenn mælte; 'Eige muntú þora at berjaz við mik, ef þú sér íþrótter mínar. Ek ganga berom fótom um eld brennanda, ok ek læt fallaz berr á sax-odd minn; ok sakar mik hvárke' Þangbrandr svarar; 'Goð mun því ráða' Þangbrandr vigðe eldenn, en gerðe cross-mark yfer saxeno. Berserkrenn brann á fótom er hann óð eldenn. En er hann fell á saxet, stóð í gegnom hann; ok feck hann af því bana.

[The berserk said; 'You will not dare to fight with me, if you see my feats. I go barefoot over burning fire; and I allow myself to fall on a bare knife-point; and neither does any harm to me.' Thangbrand replied; 'God shall decide this'. Thangbrand consecrated the fire, and made the sign of the cross over the knife. The berserk's feet were burned when he waded through the fire, and when he fell upon the knife it stabbed through him; and he received his death this way.]⁶⁶

With these actions Thangbrand perhaps restored some of his lost honor by besting the berserker. He does end up converting several more Icelanders among those at the home he stayed at. Interestingly *Njal's Saga* paints a slightly different picture, with Thangbrand smiting the berserk with a crucifix after he is burned by the fires, then driving a sword through his chest and killing him.

Thangbrand continued his missionary work on the island, and *Christne Saga* once again contains extra information here, describing how several of Thangbrand's converts were forced to flee to Norway from Iceland after an incident at the Alþingr. A recent convert by

⁶⁵ Borovsky, "Never in Public", 9.

⁶⁶ Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 391.

the name of Hialte (or Hjalti, or Sholto, depending on the translation) recited a ditty at the Rock of Laws, saying

Vile ek hauga Goð geyja: grey þicke mer Freyja:
Æ man annat-tveggja Óðinn grey eða Freyja.

[Revile shall I the god of graves; Freyja is to me a bitch;
One or the other of the gods must be dogs, Odin or Freyja.]⁶⁷

Hialte along with a few others fled after being outlawed by the courts for this blasphemy, and ended up at the court of King Ólaf Tryggvason of Norway. The group was oddly enough not all Christian according to the *Christne Saga* and thus when some attempted to escape from King Olaf's well-known militant desire to convert the pagan, they were forbidden to leave Norway. It is possible that the reason some non-Christians fled with Hialte's party was that simply by associating with Hialte, they were outlawed as a group. This is extremely important as it shows that the Icelandic legal system was not being used to actively go after the Christian converts on the island, but instead was still working along the apparently much more important ties of family and social groups. Even more importantly, it was only a specific group which was outlawed: the other Christians in Iceland remained, and no record exists of legal action taken against them in response for the incident with Hialte.

The Icelanders at the court of Ólaf were soon joined by Gizur the White and Thangbrand himself, who brought news that the Icelanders had refused to convert and claimed they treated him poorly: "At that very time Thangbrand the priest came to the king from Iceland, and told him what enmity men had shown him there, and said that there was no

⁶⁷ Vigfusson and Powell, "Libellus Islandorum", 296.

hope of Christendom being received there.”⁶⁸ The *Heimskringla* also relates the scene, with similar wording: “Thangbrand the priest arrived from Iceland at King Ólaf’s court and told him that his mission had not been so successful, that the Icelanders had composed lampoons about him, and that some had wanted to kill him.”⁶⁹ Ólaf flew into a rage at Thangbrand’s report, and ordered the torture and death of the Icelanders at his court. The king was immediately approached by Gizur the White and Hialte, who gave an impassioned speech and offered to bring Christianity to Iceland themselves, and explained why Thangbrand was not well-received: “En Þangbrandr fór þar sem her heldr úspaklega drap hann þar menn nokkora; ok þótte maennom hart at taka þat af útlendom mann” [But Thangbrand went there as here, rather unwisely, killing there certain men, and it seemed to men hard to take that from a foreign man.]⁷⁰ The plea worked, and the following summer they made for Iceland, where the final stage of conversion began.

Gizur and Hialte headed directly for the Alþingr of Iceland, and were joined by the other Christian Icelanders. The adherents of the Nordic religion also assembled, and the two forces armed themselves, nearly coming to blows before the Alþingr actually began. Fortunately men from both sides began to talk, foremost among them being Gizur and Hialte. The *Christne Saga* relates that “Þát báoro þeir Hialte ok Gizorr upp ærende sin vel ok skorolega; en þat unraðo menn hversu snialler þeir vóro, ok hversu vel þeim mæltesc. En svá mikel ógn fylgðe orðom þeirra, at enger óviner þeirra þorðo at tala móte þeim.” [Then preached they, Gizur and Hialte both well and boldly; and men were amazed at how eloquent they were, and how well they spoke. And thus a great conflict followed their words, but no

⁶⁸ Vigfusson and Powell, “Christne Saga”, 395.

⁶⁹ Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 217.

⁷⁰ Vigfusson and Powell, “Christne Saga”, 396.

enemy of theirs dared to speak against them.]⁷¹ After their speech, both sides of the debate began to call witnesses against the other, and since the sides were roughly equal at this point, a deadlock developed. Interestingly, before the issue could be further decided, an incident displayed some of the pragmatic concerns of the Icelanders:

Þá kom maðr hlaupande á þinget ok sagðe, at iarð-elldr vas upp komenn í Olfuse, ok munde hann hlaupa á boé Þóroz Goða. Þá tóko heiðner menn till orðz: 'Eige es undr í, at goðen reiðesc taolom slikom.' Þá maelte Snorre Goðe: 'Um hvat reiddosc goðen þá es her brann hraunet es nú staondo ver á?' Efter þat gengo menn frá til Laogberge.

[Then came a man running to the Alþingr and said that earth-fire was coming up in Olfuse, and had come to the house of Þóroz the *goði*. Then took the heathen men to saying 'This is not to be marveled at, as the gods are angry at such speeches.' Then said Snorre the *goði*: 'About what were the gods angry when where we stand now was burning lava?' After that went men from the Rock of Laws.]⁷²

It should be noted here that Gizor's standing with the Alþingr may have played a major part in him being able to stand before them and proclaim Christianity in the manner he did. According to *The Saga of Burnt Njal* Gizor was involved in the legal killing of the outlaw Gunnar, but refuses to burn Gunnar out, considering it to be a dishonorable tactic.⁷³ Robert Cook notes in his translation of *The Saga of Burnt Njal* that "The laws make it clear that burning a man's house was a heinous crime, punishable by full outlawry even if no persons were burned. The saga itself shows burning to be shameful as well as heinous."⁷⁴ If the saga is accurate this would imply that Gizor was considered a good and honorable man under Icelandic law, someone who could hold the attention of the Alþingr in a matter such as the conversion to Christianity.

⁷¹ Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 399.

⁷² *Ibid*, 400.

⁷³ Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 127.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, xiv.

The deadlock which developed between the two factions was not unheard of in the Icelandic legal system, and thus could still be resolved peacefully. Because the legal system of Iceland was integral to the process of conversion, it is helpful to briefly outline its inner workings before continuing. Iceland was governed legally by the *goðar*, which translates roughly as priest or chieftain, a man who held a chieftainship in Iceland and was supported by the freemen and farmers of his region. The word has connotations of religious responsibility, but the connection between priest and legal representative in medieval Iceland was not well defined; some of the *goðar* may have also functioned as temple priests, in addition to their legal duties. The *goðar* were not noble lords in the continental European sense of the word, but were instead more district chieftains of the people. They were not elected officials, but were still expected to represent the desires and interests of their people at the Alþingr, where judicial and legislative decisions were made. The Alþingr was held each summer in Þingvellir at a landmark called the Rock of Laws, and typically was held for two weeks. Legal decisions were made by majority votes at the Alþingr and the smaller Þings spread around the country. The system was not unlike the current American system of courts, with the Alþingr ruling over the smaller regional Þings. Smaller impromptu courts could also be set up if necessary, typically referred to as a “door-doom”.⁷⁵ The term relates to the idea that a court could easily be set up at the door of a house and used to preside over local cases.

One final aspect of the Icelandic system must be addressed, the lawspeaker. The lawspeaker, or *lögsögumaðr*, was in theory the highest office in Iceland but one with little to no autonomous political power. The *lögsögumaðr* was required to recite one-third of the law-

⁷⁵ Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, trans. and eds., “Eyrbyggja Saga” in *Origines Islandicae, Volume II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 99.

code of Iceland at each Alþingr, and also to announce new laws put into practice by the Alþingr. This position was inextricably linked with the oral traditions of Iceland, since before Christianity brought the Latin writing system to Iceland all legal records were memorized by the *lögsögumaðr*. As William Miller notes, “If the surviving laws dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are any indication of the size of the body of law in the year 1000, then Þorgeir [the *lögsögumaðr* during the Christian conversion] would have had nearly 700 pages of densely printed rules and regulations packed away in his head.”⁷⁶ Þorgeir was also a *goði*, and could thus participate more actively as well. Jesse Byock in his *Medieval Iceland* notes also that the Icelandic system had a great number of options for the typical freeman when pursuing legal matters: “an individual could turn to the formal legal system with its prescribed rules for summoning, pleading, announcing, and so on. Then there was the less formal option of arbitration, which tended to introduce into a quarrel the influence of new, often more neutral parties.”⁷⁷ This system of arbitration is exactly what came to the forefront in the dispute between the two religious factions at the Alþingr in 1000.

Because of the deadlock, the Christian faction appealed to the *goði* Hall of Siðe, one of Thangbrand’s original converts, to arbitrate a decision. However, Hall apparently decided it was too much of a burden and passed the responsibility on to Þorgeir the Lawspeaker. Þorgeir was an odd choice for Hall, since the *lögsögumaðr* was not a Christian and in theory at least was unlikely to rule for Christianity. Þorgeir responded by contemplating the decision under a cloak for a day and a night, emerging only to announce that all men should meet him at the Rock of Laws for his verdict.

⁷⁶ Miller, “Uniform Laws and Saga Iceland”, 2084.

⁷⁷ Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 69-70.

There has been much debate over what Þorgeir was doing under his cloak and the possible significance of the event, and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson uses a very convincing comparison to argue against the previous assumption that Þorgeir was simply mulling over the decision. He claims that that Þorgeir “did not lie under his cloak to think but in order to carry out an ancient soothsaying ritual and to search into the future.”⁷⁸ Using this line of thought, it can be argued that Þorgeir’s eventual decision to rule in favor of Christianity was more a matter of following decision-making traditions and not religious or personal preference, since Þorgeir was obviously a follower of the Norse religion who still believed in using the rituals to divine the correct choice. In addition, if it was known by others at the Alþingr that Þorgeir was enacting the ritual, which Aðalsteinsson argues is possible, it could have been seen as a clear sign to the non-Christian faction that Þorgeir was not compromised by the Christians and thus an acceptable arbitrator in the dispute. As Aðalsteinsson writes, “This action [the soothsaying ritual] gave Thorgeir the right of jurisdiction he needed to adjudicate in the dispute. If this theory is correct, it also explains why the pagans accepted Thorgeir’s decision.”⁷⁹

Alternately, Carol M. Cusack in her *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples* argues directly against Aðalsteinsson’s jurisdiction argument, saying that “One obvious problem is that most of the Scandinavian sources which Aðalsteinsson cites relating this practice are later than Ari the Learned, and the practice may have gained credence through Thorgeir’s use of it rather than his use deriving authority from earlier pagan uses.”⁸⁰ She also references

⁷⁸ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak: A Pagan Ritual Turning Point in the Conversion of Iceland* (Reykjavík, University of Iceland, 1999), 143.

⁷⁹ Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak*, 144.

⁸⁰ Carol M. Cusack, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples* (London, Cassell Publishing, 1998), 172.

Strömbäck's argument that the conversion was necessitated by political pressure from Olaf Tryggvason, but then points out that Olaf Tryggvason died very soon after Iceland became Christian. Olaf's death would have relieved such political pressure, yet they remained Christian. Unfortunately Cusack offers no other explanation: she simply notes that "It is not clear why all the Icelanders accepted Thorgeir's decision."⁸¹

While Cusack may be right in that Þorgeir's authority to arbitrate the decision was not derived from the ritual, this paper argues that it was not necessary for Þorgeir to search for legitimacy in this case. As *lögsögumaðr*, Þorgeir would already have the authority to act over issues of arbitration in legal disputes, which is what the conversion question became. Þorgeir had no need to convince the two factions of his legitimacy because the conversion was seen as more of a legal issue than a religious issue. This is not to say that the decision would not have religious ramifications, but that the Icelanders taking part in the process at the Alþingi would have realized that Þorgeir's priority was to uphold the legal codes of Iceland and to keep the peace, not to side with one particular religious belief.

However, Þorgeir was clearly not planning on taking any chances; once at the Rock of Laws, he took oaths from the assembled *goðar* requiring that all would stand by his decision. He proceeded to make an impassioned speech on the dangers of civil war, telling a story of two mythic kings of Norway and Denmark who were forced into peace by their subjects after years of war, and reminded both sides that compromise and settlement was the heart of Iceland's peaceful existence: "Ok þicke mer þat ráð, at láta þá eige ráða, es her gangasc með mesto kappe í móte; ok miðlom svá mql miðlim þeirra, at hvárer-tveggja hafe

⁸¹ Cusack, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples*, 166.

nockot til síns máls. En ver haofom aller ein lög ok einn sið; því at þat mon satt vesa, ef ver slítom lögum, þá slíto ver friðenn." [And it seems to me wisest, to not let them decide who are here contending the most against one another; and to mediate thus a compromise between them, so both may have some of their case. However, we should have all one law and one religion; since true shall that saying be, if we break the law, then we break the peace.]⁸²

Jochens argues that this speech was not simply Þorgeir's own reasoning, but was probably built on decades of Icelandic modes of government;

Without a king themselves, Icelanders were conscious of their unique situation. Þorgeir capitalized on this, stressing that by avoiding the solution proposed by kings and following the one suggested only later by ordinary people or popular leaders in other countries, Icelanders from the beginning would be able to accomplish peacefully what monarchies had arrived at only belatedly and despite their rulers.⁸³

Once all the men assembled agreed to his terms, Þorgeir ruled in favor of Christianity, but he left the interesting loophole that the exposure of children and the eating of horse meat was allowed to continue, albeit in secret. Lesser outlawry, meaning simply cast out of society but not under the threat of death, would be brought upon anyone who was seen worshipping the old gods. Amusingly, the newly-made Christians were apparently not looking forward to their baptisms, and promptly made for the hot springs instead of the cold waters near Þingvellir. However, the Icelanders apparently embraced at least the outer trappings of their faith; Douglas Bolender noted that his excavations in the Langholt region of Iceland show churches springing up immediately after the conversion event, with the larger farms each

⁸² Vigfusson and Powell, "Christne Saga", 403.

⁸³ Jochens, "Late and Peaceful", 651.

having a church for the surrounding smaller farms to come to.⁸⁴ He also indicates that the way in which church buildings were constructed was yet another product of the unique method of Iceland's conversion: "The early world of Icelandic Christianity appears to have been both localized and well-distributed. Instead of an emerging church spreading and formalizing practice and institutions, practice and churches may have spread rapidly but informally as individual families adopted Christian practices"⁸⁵ This supports the narratives of the sagas, which as noted above detail individual families being converted before Iceland officially converted, so it's logical that the "real" conversion process (the instruction in *how* to be a Christian) would continue along the same lines, spreading family to family rather than being a government-mandated operation. What's interesting to note here is that the sagas do not address the numerous churches Bolender found, but instead focus on the singular bishop of Iceland. Other sagas mention a shortage of priests, so it's possible that the newly converted Icelanders simply followed the letter of their new law, built a church, then promptly left it there until a priest was available to take up residence.

Chapter Four: Historiography of Conversion and Survival

Scholarly debate about the nature of the conversion experience in Iceland has continued for quite some time. Even the concept of conversion itself has been examined in detail by a variety of writers, including James Muldoon in his introduction to the collection of scholarly works on conversion *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*.

⁸⁴ Douglas Bolender, "The Creation of a Propertied Landscape: Iceland at the Millennium." (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Medieval Academy of America, Yale University, New Haven CT, March 18th 2010), 4.

⁸⁵ Bolender, "The Creation of a Propertied Landscape", 8.

Muldoon pointed out that previous writers such as A. D. Nock had defined conversion as something in between one of two points: Conversion, or “the reorientation of the soul of an individual”, and adhesion, or “the acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes.”⁸⁶ The Icelandic conversion would thus lie closer to adhesion than actual conversion. Also of interest in Muldoon’s writings is his idea of “corporate or communal conversion” and the politics which lay behind it.⁸⁷ Muldoon focused on the political power of a society and how it dealt with Christianity, but the Icelandic situation was unique in that sense because of their highly decentralized method of government with the Alþingr. What this means for the purposes of this argument is that Muldoon’s points about many conversions being political due to the ruler either forcing conversion or using conversion to increase his power can then be turned around to show that the Icelandic conversion was not one of purely political reasons, but more a legalistic concern that was dealt with in a traditional Icelandic manner. The decentralized nature of the Icelandic parliamentary-style government made it impossible to centralize power around one figure, preventing any one *goði* from using the conversion as political capital.

The largest issue discussed by most authors is what the motivation for the conversion was, and the arguments tend to fall into one of three categories: political conversion, legal conversion, or faith-based conversion. This is not to say that all authors adhere to these strict boundaries, but that often the scholarly debates range between those three main positions.

In 1975 Dag Strömbäck wrote *The Conversion of Iceland: A Survey* and in it argued that the main impetus behind the conversion was the political pressure placed on Iceland by

⁸⁶ James Muldoon, ed., *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 3.

⁸⁷ Muldoon, *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, 7.

the Christian Norwegian king, Ólaf Tryggvason. He argued that “I also believe that the high-born Icelandic chiefs were afraid that the king would not hesitate to subjugate their country by force, if Christianity was not accepted.”⁸⁸ There are several major problems with this argument, all of which have been pointed out by later authors. First and foremost, King Ólaf Tryggvason died less than a year after Iceland accepted Christianity, and while the new king of Norway reverted to the old Norse religion, Iceland remained Christian. If the political pressure of a powerful Christian king had been the reason behind the conversion, surely the sudden release of that pressure would prompt a reversal of the conversion decision. Second, simply stating the conversion was political ignores the many complicated facets of the event, especially in relation to the highly legalistic nature of Icelandic society and the decentralized power structure unique to their society at this time.

In 1988 Jesse L. Byock wrote in his *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* that the conversion was more a matter of political unity than any true religious change. He discarded the purely political argument of Strömbäck and instead looked to Icelandic social fears for explanation.

With so skillful a compromise the Icelanders peacefully accepted the conversion, avoiding a sharp break with the past. Although the pagans were in the majority, they joined the Christians in legislating the adoption of Christianity. We may guess that they feared social upheaval more than they disliked religious change. This supposition is reinforced by the fact that Iceland continued to abide by Thorgeirr’s ruling, even though, with King Ólaf’s death that same year (1000), Norway partly reverted to paganism.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Dag Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland: A Survey* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1975), 36.

⁸⁹ Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, 143.

Byock's argument edged away from political arguments of Strömbäck, but it still ignored the unique nature of Iceland's legal system, which allowed the Icelanders to approach Christianity not as an invading religion but as a legal decision going through the traditional process of arbitration. This is not to say that Byock's argument is irrelevant. Byock's arguments are quite valuable, but do not encompass the legalistic side of Icelandic society, and do not address how that legalism may have impacted the literary culture.

William Ian Miller in 1991 argued that the conversion of Iceland was a matter more of legislation than religion. "One of the more interesting features of the Icelandic conversion is that the chief story the medieval Icelanders told themselves about it was not a story of good beliefs driving out bad, but a story of the success of a unified system of law in which there was enough leeway for astute political actors to maneuver."⁹⁰ This argument fits in perfectly with the evidence from the primary sources available, where often the story of conversion was not one of good triumphing over evil but instead a melancholy passing away of the old in favor of the new. The continued existence of the Old Norse cosmological system long after the Christian conversion also points back to Miller's argument, since if the conversion was more a legal than religious event, there would be little reason to demonize or repress the old Nordic religion. The only failing of Miller's argument is one of omission; more evidence from literary sources needed to be examined carefully and applied to the theory of legal conversion, a task which this thesis has aspired to achieve.

In 1992 E. Paul Durrenberger wrote his *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland*, but neatly skipped the issue of conversion and instead wrote only on the aftermath. He wrote that

⁹⁰ Miller, "Uniform Laws and Saga Iceland.", 2087.

the church offices established after the conversion “were not any meek servants of the Church of Rome in this period. They feuded, sponsored suits, mediated, had followings, made alliances, intimidated, fought, and killed in the same way as secular chieftains.”⁹¹ This backs up the legal argument beautifully, because it explains that the church offices in Iceland were essentially no different from the offices of the *goðar* or chieftains which existed before the advent of Christianity. Durrenberger further related stories of bishops engaging in battles with other chieftains in Iceland, cementing his argument that the church offices were not given any special status in Iceland after the conversion.

Ruth Mazo Karras in 1997 wrote along the same lines, but argued that “conversion represented a transfer of loyalty, not an inner transformation.”⁹² She further argued that Christianity and the existing Nordic paganism could be seen as almost interchangeable, with Christ simply replacing the old gods as equal in power and authority. This brought up several questions which she attempted to answer:

The second question is, why do Saxo, Snorri, the author of *Njal's Saga*, and other authors present the religions as basically similar? . . . The similarity that the texts present is in the nature of belief. Belief is not in a system but in a particular deity or group of deities; it amounts to trust or allegiance. A change in belief involves merely switching the object of one's trust; it does not require divine revelation, although that could be a persuasive factor.⁹³

Interestingly, Karras then tied this in to the feudal system of Europe, where allegiances were tied to a specific lord but could change over time. She argued that the matter of conversion was simply switching a sort of feudal allegiance over to a new deity. This is possible under

⁹¹ E. Paul Durrenberger, *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 75-76.

⁹² Ruth Mazo Karras, “God and Man in Medieval Scandinavia” in *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 101.

⁹³ Karras, “God and Man in Medieval Scandinavia”, 100-110.

the Icelandic legal system, where adherence to the law was probably more important than individual religious choice: by agreeing with Þorgeir and accepting Christianity, the Icelanders preserved the strength of law and thus the social stability of their country.

The conversion itself, from the evidence the literature has left behind and from the many discussions by scholars, must then be approached as more of a legal "secular" conversion than a religious experience. Without the religious aspect, this allowed Iceland to experience a new type of Christian conversion, one without militancy or zealotry. The literary aftermath of this conversion has already been discussed, and the more immediate Christianization process will be discussed below.

Chapter Five: Aftermath of the Conversion

Iceland ostensibly became a Christian country through the actions of Þorgeir in the summer of 1000, but the actual process by which Christianity became the dominant ground-level religion took place over a much longer period of time. This helps to further show that the decision to convert to Christianity was much more a legal decision than one of faith. The slow spread also helps to answer the original question of why the literature of Iceland was able to mix Old Norse religious elements: Christianity was not an aggressive force in the early years of Christian Iceland, as will be seen below.

The spread of official Christianity was extremely slow, even by medieval standards. Orri Vésteinsson has noted that "Only five churches can with reasonable certainty be said to have been built in Iceland before 1100...and only nine Iceland priests – who can be regarded

as historical personages – are mentioned as being active before that date.”⁹⁴ As mentioned earlier this has since been argued against by Douglas Bolender in his archeological expeditions, where he noted that churches appeared rapidly after the conversion event. However, Vésteinsson’s argument is still valid in one sense, that the number of priests was extremely limited. There may have been a great many churches, but very few were fully staffed.

The *Eyrbyggja saga* also demonstrates the severe lack of Christian priests, by noting that while many churches had been built, "priests could not be got for the serving at the churches, though they were built, for in those days but few mass-priests there were in Iceland.”⁹⁵ The author even noted that "it was promised them by the teachers, that a man should have welcome place for so many men in the kingdom of Heaven as might stand in any church that he let build.” a strange theological stance which immediately conjures up images of confused Icelandic converts standing in a newly-built church, having absolutely no idea as to the use of the building, but simply admiring the architecture.⁹⁶

In addition to a slow start, the Icelandic church would have wrestled with the amorphous nature of the Norse religion, which had no source text or “orthodoxy” such as Christian Bible. Laurence Larson pointed this problem out in his *Problems of the Norwegian Church in the Eleventh Century*. Larson pointed out that the Norse religion of Norway was decidedly tenacious, even after Christianity had technically taken over.⁹⁷ Larson noted that

⁹⁴ Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland*, 25.

⁹⁵ Morris and Magnússon, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 136.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 135.

⁹⁷ The Norwegian version of the Nordic religion was probably quite similar to the Icelandic version discussed in this paper. The Icelanders were originally from Norway, so their belief system would have originally come from mainland Scandinavia.

the Norwegian skald Eilif Gundrunsson wrote ““They say Christ sits in the south by the Weird’s fountain; the mighty King of Rome has conquered the lands of the mountain gods.”” For Larson, this meant that “in mythic lore the Weird’s fountain was in the heaven of the Anse-gods. In Eilif’s view Christ had simply taken the throne that once belonged to Woden.”⁹⁸ In Norway at least the Norse cosmology was simply merged with the new Christian cosmology, albeit with Christ triumphant. A similar phenomenon likely occurred in Iceland, however the Christian church which was established there had little interest in actively stamping out the Norse religion (unlike Norway), thus it thrived as a literary phenomenon and was preserved.

The main Icelandic source which can offer details and perspective on the process of Christianization in Iceland is the *Hungrvaca*, or *Hunger-Waker*, written by an unknown author sometime early in the thirteenth century. It focuses on the first seven bishops in Iceland, starting with Bishop Ísleifr, a descendent of Gizorr the White, one of the prominent men in the conversion narrative. According to *Hungrvaca*, Ísleifr began his term as bishop in 1056, and set up his see in Scála-holt. The author of *Hungrvaca* did not follow the typical Christian narrative of the pious bishop however, and instead describes Ísleifr as “Ísleifr vas vænn maðr at álite, ok vin-sæll við alþýðo, ok alla æve réttlátr ok rðvandr, giaofoll ok góðgiarn, en aldri auðegr.” [Ísleifr was a handsome man in aspect, and popular with all people, and lived all his life correctly and uprightly, and was benevolent, but he was never wealthy]⁹⁹ The texts describing the bishop also mention that he had money troubles due to low revenue

⁹⁸ Laurence M. Larson, “Problems of the Norwegian Church in the Eleventh Century” *Church History* Vol. 4, No. 3 (September 1935): 166.

⁹⁹ Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, trans and eds., “Hungrvaca” in *Origines Islandicae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 428-430.

generated by his farm, but no other defining characteristics are noted. A few minor miracles are mentioned, and the account ends by simply noting the great events which happened in Scandinavia and the British Isles while Ísleifr was bishop.

This pattern continues with the rest of the bishops in *Hungrvaca*, in which their secular qualities are praised but there is little evidence of the typical holiness which is given to bishops in medieval Christian narratives. Bishop Gizœrr, son of Ísleifr, took the bishopric after his father died in 1080, and was described in a similar style: "Gizœrr vas mikell maðr vexte ok vel bols-vexte, biart-eygr ok nockot opin-eygr, tígolegr í yfer-bragðe, ok allra manna goð-giarnaztr, rammr at afle, ok forvitre." [Gizorr was a great man in stature and well built in body, bright-eyed and somewhat open-eyed, lordly in appearance and to all men most kind, strong in force, and wise].¹⁰⁰ The most important event in his life according to *Hungrvaca* was the creation of tithe laws in Iceland, an idea which he brought before the Alþingr and argued persuasively for. He was followed by Bishop Þorlákr, who is described in somewhat mediocre terms: "Þorlákr vas meðal-maðr vexte, lang-leitr ok lios-iarpr á hár; þocka-góðr; en kallaðr ecke vænn maðr af alþýðonne, né all-skaorogr at á-varpe vel-flestra manna." [Þorlákr was a man of average height, long-faced and with light chestnut hair; amiable; but not called a handsome man by anyone, nor very notable in the opinions of most men].¹⁰¹ In a similar fashion to his predecessor, the major event of his life described in the text was the establishment of the Cristinna-Laga-þætrr, or Christian Law Section, while the only miraculous event associated with Þorlákr occurred at the moment of his death in 1133. When the bishop died, the *Hungrvaca* noted that a priest in northern Iceland heard a

¹⁰⁰ Vigfusson and Powell, "Hungrvaca", 433.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 441.

disembodied voice which intoned “Sic animum claris coelorum reddidit astris” [Thus the bright spirit of the heavens returned to the stars], which interestingly was written down in Latin despite the rest of the text being written in the Old Norse vernacular. Magnús was the next bishop, and was described in a by-now familiar style:

Magnús vas vænn maðr at álite, ok heldr hárr maðr vexte, fast-eygr ok vel limaðr; þýðr ok þeckeleggr, ok allra manna skaorligaztr í aollo yfir-bragðe ok lát-gæðe. Hann vas liúfr ok lítelátr við alla; stór-lyndr, ok stað-fastr í skape; fullræðasamr, frænd-røkenn; marg-fróðr ok mál-snjallr. Hann reyndesc ok vel brugðenn við hvárt-tveggja, bunað ok farar; ok vas off-allt alla menn sættande, hvarge es hann vas við máol manna staddr; ok sparðe þess ecke, hvarke orð sín né auðoeft.

[Magnús was a man of handsome features, a man of rather tall stature, hard-eyed and well-limbed; kind and pleasant to all men, manly in all appearance, and well-mannered. He was kind and humble to all; great of character and steadfast in mood; a good steward, and attached to his kin; very wise and clever of speech. He tried and did well in both keeping his household and in travelling, and was above all men in making settlements, no matter where he was placed, and thus he spared nothing, neither words nor wealth.]¹⁰²

Bishop Magnús is described using highly legal language throughout the *Hungrvaca*, with his fame coming from his ability to arbitrate disputes and keep the peace. No miracles were attributed to him, and the typical Christian descriptors of sanctity and holiness were never applied to him.

The next bishop, Kløngr, was described in *Hungrvaca* using the typical description of physical characteristics as outlined repeatedly above, along with a note that "hann vas mál-snjallr ok oer-uggr at vin-feste; ok et mesta skáld" [He was eloquent and trustworthy in friendship; and a great skald]¹⁰³ It was also noted that "Kløngr byscop vas svá mikel mála-fylgis-maðr, ef hann vas at sótrr til ásiá með þvi at hann vas bæðe haofðinge mikell ok saker

¹⁰² Vigfusson and Powell, “Hungrvaca”, 445.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 451.

vizko ok mál-snille." [Bishop Klængr was such a great lawyer, that he was often sought for help, both because he was a great chief, and because of his cleverness and wisdom]¹⁰⁴.

Nowhere in the text is any mention of miracles or any aspect of holiness or sanctity in the bishop, but there is a constant reaffirmation of Klængr's apparently superb legal abilities.

The mention of his skaldic abilities is also interesting; as noted above, skalds were Scandinavian poets who used Norse religious imagery in their poetry to create complex kennings and intricate poetic verse. If the bishop acted as a typical skald, his verse was likely also peppered with Norse religious kennings, the creative use of Norse religious imagery that was naturally a part of most skaldic verse.

This is not to say that Christianity tolerated the survival of the Norse religion completely. John Lindow in 2001 wrote his *Norse Mythology and the Lives of the Saints*, dealing with the hagiographic literature that naturally sprang up in the centuries after the conversion. Lindow makes it clear that in the late thirteenth century some of the hagiographic accounts were deeply concerned with the Norse gods, with saints battling against the evils of Þorr and Óðinn. Lindow cites a great many examples of these sorts of saints lives, which indicates that the Icelandic church was finally beginning to expand and feel threatened by the surviving elements of the Norse religion it had replaced. While writers like Snorri Sturluson were not actively oppressed by the Icelandic church, the process of eradicating the Norse "paganism" only really began almost three hundred years after the conversion. This type of aggressive literary opposition was simply not needed between the conversion event and the

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 453.

early thirteenth century because the conversion was mostly a legal process, and as such the Icelandic Christians had little reason to engage in religious warfare even on a literary level.

Conclusions

This thesis began by questioning why Christian Icelandic writers of medieval period were apparently comfortable using obviously non-Christian subjects in their texts, even going as far as to construct handbooks on the Norse religion which existed before Christianity came to the island. As has been seen, there was no standard method of using the Norse religious imagery in the texts, but instead each author used their rich non-Christian heritage in different ways. The *Landnámabók* of the eleventh century described sorcerers, shape-changers and trolls in a matter-of-fact style, easily mixing history, legend, and pre-Christian myth. Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* of the thirteenth century took a more direct approach, laying out the Norse mythology in narrative style, with allegorical figures explaining not only how the world began, but how it would end in a terrible *ragnarökr* which popular imagination has seized upon even today as the "Twilight of the Gods". Other stories written by anonymous authors such as the *Eyrbyggja Saga* mix in legalism with the fusion of Christianity and Norse religion, hinting at the forces behind this unique mixture of Christianity and the religion it supposedly replaced.

Iceland's comparatively late conversion in the early eleventh century stands out not only because of the late time frame, but because it was both peaceful and permanent. While this thesis does not discount the possibility of medieval Icelanders believing in the tenants of Christianity, the conversion was a legal shift in religion rather than a sweeping faith-based

movement. A legalistic yet peaceful conversion is an anomaly in the history of Christian conversions in the medieval period, and can be traced back to the culture of Iceland itself. Iceland was fiercely proud of its parliamentary style of government, which diffused power throughout the country. This diffusion limited the possibility of a single tyrant such as king Harald Hárfagri of Norway, the ruler whose ambitions caused the original settlers to flee to Iceland. Furthermore, the Icelanders lived within a complicated system of individual and family feuds, which despite their seemingly chaotic nature followed a set system of rules and customs, and were often eventually decided through legal wrangling rather than bloodshed.

Iceland's narrative of conversion follows that legal angle, with sagas such as the *Christne Saga* and *Saga of Thorwald the Far-Farer* describing the conversion not as the conquest of righteousness over a pagan religion, but as the passing of the old but respected in favor of the new. The sagas did not celebrate the coming of Christianity, but instead described it in what could be described as the dry tones of a historian. The ability of the Christian writers to discuss the conversion in such dispassionate tones again points back to the conversion itself, which came about not as an overwhelming change forced by an outside influence, but as an internal change. While Christian missionaries did visit the island frequently in the fifty or so years before the conversion, the final impetus for the legal change in religion was not a foreign missionary but a native speaker, a member of the Icelandic *Alþingr* and a respected member of the community.

Because the conversion was brought about through legal means through the *Alþingr*, no stigma was attached to the Norse religion which Christianity replaced. Icelandic Christianity for at least a century after the conversion was decidedly unorthodox, at least by

Roman Christian standards; bishops in the sagas act not as pious churchmen but as typical Icelandic chieftains, operating within the same structure of legal and feuding culture which their predecessors, the *goðar*, lived. Christian writers, using the newfound literacy brought by Christianity to the island, carefully recorded their own stories and histories. Because Christianity came about legally and peacefully, the writers could delve into the non-Christian traditions of their past when constructing their texts.

The Icelandic saga writers were able to use the images of Þórr, Óðinn, and even describe *draugar* rising from their graves in their histories because while they were Christian, they were primarily Icelanders, proud of their culture and traditions. The rich legal heritage of Iceland allowed them to approach their pre-Christian past not as a stigmatized remnant of a false religion but as a tradition of literary and oral culture passed down through generations. The skalds used stories of Þórr the giant-slayer to boast of their prowess in verse construction, and writers such as Snorri Sturluson were able to create that unique fusion of history and story spiced with the fusion of Christianity and Norse religion. Christianity was their professed religion, but their culture was firmly Icelandic, and was rooted in a pre-Christian world.

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