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“A Considered Conversion”: The Conscious Choice to Accept Christianity by the
Populace of Iceland and Greenland in the Era of Scandinavian Conversion

Robert A. Burt

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Paul B. Pixton, Chair
Craig Harline
George S. Tate

Department of History
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

“A Considered Conversion”: The Conscious Choice to Accept Christianity by the
Populace of Iceland and Greenland in the Era of Scandinavian Conversion

Robert A. Burt
Department of History, BYU
Master of Arts

Most studies of the Christianization of Scandinavia attribute the phenomenon to the influence of powerful kings. However, many times the conversion experiences of Iceland and Greenland are either ignored, or tied to the influence of these distant kings.

This thesis unites sociological ideas relating to conversion along social and familial lines, ideas introduced by Roger Stark and Rodney Finke, with historical details of Icelandic and Greenland family genealogies found in *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók*, *Kristni saga*, and *Njáls saga* to demonstrate a clear pattern of Christian conversion along social and familial lines on the islands of Iceland and Greenland during the era of Scandinavian Conversion.

Keywords: Conversion, Scandinavia, Christianity, Iceland, Greenland, Roger Stark, Rodney Finke, *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók*, *Kristni saga*, *Njáls saga*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Christian conversion of Scandinavia near the turn of the first millennium A.D. marked the essential completion of the spread of Catholic Christianity over Western Europe. Yet while the beginnings of the growth of Christianity at the start of the first millennium have been extensively documented and argued about by historians, the concluding scenes of the first thousand years of Christianity have been largely overlooked by most historians. To date, relatively few historians of religion have investigated the Scandinavian conversion; instead, the majority of research has been pursued by area historians who tend to focus on overall studies of early Scandinavia and the Viking experience. The official introduction of Christianity to Scandinavia also coincided with the early development of stronger, more centralized monarchies in the area; as a result, Christianity is often linked to the development of monarchies by most of the area historians. Indeed, most Scandinavian historians have argued that the Christianization of Scandinavia proceeded largely as the result of the forced conversion of the populace by monarchs seeking to use the new religion to bolster their growing power.

This argument is not wholly without evidence or some merit. In many instances monarchs, or potential monarchs, did indeed champion Christianity and often acted to introduce it into their realms. However, the argument that the acceptance of Christianity in the north was solely the result of the actions of kings seeking to consolidate power is simplistic. Like any major societal shift, acceptance of a new religion involves various actors and influences all working together on a society. In the case of the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity, the conscious acceptance of the new faith by the populace was just as important as the will of monarchs. It is therefore necessary to examine the actions and ideas of the populace concerning

the acceptance of Christianity in Scandinavia in order to gain as complete an understanding of their conversion insofar as is possible.

The most striking examples of popular conversion are recorded in the history of the outlying areas of Scandinavian dominance, Iceland and Greenland, rather than in the central areas of mainland Scandinavia. In addition, though monarchs occasionally exerted pressure on them, these areas were not under the control of monarchs, but rather under the control of the local populace via *things*, or local assemblies. These assemblies were in turn often influenced by powerful chieftains, but these individuals were only successful insofar as they could rally familial and social support for their actions. These decisions, especially as reflecting the introduction and acceptance of Christianity, will be the focus of this investigation.

Religious conversion is, by its very nature, not only a social choice involving political, economic, and social questions, but also a singular and personal spiritual phenomenon unique to the experience of an individual. For the historian, or anyone outside the process for that matter, it is very difficult to determine what exactly qualifies as the moment of conversion. It is much easier to examine the conversion process as it takes effect in large groups. Furthermore, when dealing with early Scandinavian paganism and Christianity the historian encounters the messy fact that Scandinavians were polytheists. Many had no trouble including Christ in their pantheon as another deity to turn to. In established Christian terms this mindset denotes that the individual is obviously not fully converted and needs competent spiritual guidance at the very least or at most is verging on blasphemy. However, when this syncretism is examined more closely, from either a pagan standpoint or from the perspective of an active Christian missionary, one realizes that a partial acceptance of Christ is vital to the progression of an individual or a society in accepting the tenets of Christianity. While not as desirable as full conversion, at least the full

outward acceptance of a faith's tenants and rites, partial conversion at least allows for common dialogue and continuing attempts at full conversion. Therefore, for the interests of this investigation, "conversion refers to shifts across religious traditions;" or, in other words, conversion in this case is the acceptance of Christianity whether in whole or in part by the people of Scandinavia demonstrating a shift from their previous religious beliefs.¹ Furthermore, as accounts of personal spiritual experiences are virtually non-existent in the extant records, conversion for the sake of societal, cultural, and personal benefit will also be considered valid forms of conversion.²

The areas of focus for this investigation primarily consist of the medieval people of Iceland and Greenland, while the time period in question will center on the late ninth, tenth and early eleventh centuries. Scandinavians experienced contact with, and conversion to, Christianity in many locations throughout northern Europe before the new religion reached their homelands. However, the majority of these previous conversion cases came in areas that had already experienced significant Christian contact and which therefore possessed a strong native Christian element. In effect these initial cases of conversion were the result of an outside minority assimilating into the dominant local culture. While these initial interactions generated important contacts between Christianity and the Scandinavian world, and some reports of this early contact will be used sparingly in this study in analyzing Scandinavians' shift towards Christianity, these initial events will be relegated to positions of secondary importance in this investigation. The

¹ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 114. Stark and Finke's work will form a major portion of this investigation, and further in-depth discussion of their ideas is found latter in the chapter. For now, it is sufficient to introduce their definition of what constitutes conversion.

² Spiritual conversion is more easily understood by the modern sensibilities, and in the eyes of believers is often the only "real" conversion. However, for those faced with the question of conversion there are any number of reasons, ranging from societal to economic to cultural, to accept or reject conversion, and all possible reasons behind the decision to convert should be seriously considered by the historian.

primary focus of this thesis will be the conversion of the western-most of the Scandinavian homelands, reactions of the local populace, and the manner in which they faced the question of the acceptance of, and conversion to, a new religion.

Historiography of the Study of Scandinavian Conversion

Historians have approached the phenomenon of the Scandinavian conversion in different ways. Overall, two main divisions exist. The first camp belongs to the religious historians who follow the growth and development of early medieval Christianity. The second group deals directly with the question of Scandinavian conversion. This group consists of those historians who have either commented on religion in the course of general histories of the period or who have generally spoken about religion as specifically relating to political movements.

At first glance it is somewhat puzzling why religious historians have not examined the conversion of the north in greater depth. In a way Scandinavia represents a new frontier for the spread of Catholic Christianity. It was one of the few areas of Western Europe that did not experience extensive contact with the Roman Empire, whether through being a part of the Empire, having extensive trade relations with it, or engaging in armed conflict.³ The success or

³ See Dagfinn Skre, "Missionary Activity in Early Medieval Norway. Strategy, Organization, and the Course of Events," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 23 (1998):2. Skre argues in his article, and cites several studies, that at least the nobility of Scandinavia were acquainted with Rome before its fall. These theories are still the subject of much debate within the circle of Scandinavian/Viking historians with Skre and similar thinkers presently in the minority but gaining in popularity. This author was inclined to doubt these claims of contact between ancient Rome and Scandinavia, but in the course of further research for this thesis discovered this was not the case. An article by the Norwegian historian Torstein Jørgensen notes the discovery of graves on Norway's west coast containing Roman military arms and armor, thus arguing the case that at least some Norwegians served as auxiliaries to the Roman legions in England. See Torstein Jørgensen, "Kristningen av Norge- naturlig samfunnsutvikling eller resultat av bevisst misjonsstrategi," *Frå Haug ok Heiðni: tidsskrift for Rogalands arkeologiske forening* 2 (1995):3-4. The spread of ideas and some knowledge between north and south undoubtedly took place in the late Roman period (250-450 A.D.) but how much occurred and what exact effect this early contact had, especially on Northern society, is difficult to ascertain given the lack of records, and so the question must remain in the realm of tantalizing possibilities and likely probability. Subsequent contact during the early middle

failure of conversion in the north represents a litmus test of how Christianity might fare in the larger world beyond Roman Europe and North Africa. Yet, despite the interesting potential for this area of study, Scandinavian conversion remains a mostly neglected field by religious historians.⁴

Comments by such eminent medieval historians as Jeffrey Burton Russell, whose acclaimed general work on the history of medieval Christianity contained only a single sentence concerning the north countries, illustrate this trend: “Scandinavia, the Slavic countries, and vast tracts of Germany were yet to be converted and civilized...”⁵ Robin Lane Fox’s 1986 work does even less, commenting on the conversion of pagans within the late antiquity/early medieval period, but only those pagans living within the cities of what was once the Roman Empire and not those living in the countryside or those living immediately outside its boundaries.⁶ By 1996

ages (700-900 A.D.) clearly did occur, and the more substantiated effects of this contact will be addressed in this thesis.

⁴ It should be mentioned, however, that the study of Christianity in the North does bear some unique burdens for the average student pursuing Medieval religious studies in mainland Europe. Unlike most of Europe where records are written in Latin and are fairly plentiful and timely insofar as time of event reported and composition date, Scandinavian records are far fewer and tend to have much more of a gap between event and composition. Most importantly many of the early records are written in Old Norse, and many of the secondary sources tend to be written in modern Scandinavian languages which do not tend to have wide readership outside Scandinavia itself. In recent years however, more than adequate translations of primary sources have been either published or re-published and a growing corpus of secondary literature is appearing in English and other widely read European languages.

⁵ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Medieval Christianity: Prophecy and Order* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), 65.

⁶ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Viking Press, 1986). Although Fox’s time period does not directly overlap with that of the Christianization of Scandinavia, it is mentioned here to illustrate one of the seeming inconsistencies within late Antiquity/ early Medieval religious studies: the idea of the pagan. Fox ignores those pagans living outside cities in his study. Those he concentrates on are the inheritors of an advanced Roman tradition and seen as accepting of Christianity as almost a logical progression in society’s climb towards perfection. However, not all pagans fit into this category. Germanic pagans were seen as a threat to the Empire and settled pagans. The logical fallacy therefore concludes that Germanic pagans (of which Scandinavians were the last to be converted) must be therefore hostile to Christianity as well. This mindset of seeing non-Roman pagans as violent towards or disinterested in Christianity seems to have affected historians as well, as it is nearly impossible to find an historian who asks whether Germanic pagans might not have also considered in a rational manner if Christianity were good for their society in the same way as classically trained Roman and Greek pagans.

the situation had advanced enough for Peter Brown in his work, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, to include Scandinavia within his final chapter concerning the overall conversion of northern Europe.⁷ In discussing the motivators behind Scandinavian conversion, Brown focuses primarily on the impact of kings. The only exception is Iceland where the national assembly decided the issue; he does admit that the situation was more complex than merely the kings imposing their will, but he does not pursue what these other factors were, with one exception. When discussing a confrontation between missionaries and skeptical Swedes during which the Swedes cast lots before accepting the message, Brown postulates a tantalizing new view of the general acceptance of Christianity. “In retrospect at least, Scandinavian societies chose to associate their adoption of ‘Christendom’ with solemn moments of decision-making, in which the new religion was subjected to long-established divinatory techniques before it gained public approval.”⁸ Unfortunately, he does not pursue the idea of how involved individuals were in their acceptance of the new religion.

Specialists in Scandinavian history have more to say on the subject of conversion than most religious historians. Johannes Brøndsted attributed the triumph of Christianity to the weakness of paganism’s answers to life’s questions and the active efforts of monarchs to promote the new religion.⁹ Gwyn Jones also credited ambitious kings as well as zealous missionaries as the “main movers” in the Scandinavian conversion.¹⁰ *The Viking Achievement*, co-authored by Peter Foote and David Wilson, presents kings as the instigators and introducers

⁷ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity AD 200-1000* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), 299-321.

⁸ Brown, *Rise*, 303-304

⁹ Johannes Brøndsted, *The Vikings* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1965), 306-312.

¹⁰ Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 315.

of Christianity. Foote and Wilson also comment on the benefits of Christianity to all levels of society, but they do not discuss how the choice was actually made to convert or who was instrumental in the decision.¹¹

One of the most prolific historians to write about the Viking age is Peter Sawyer, yet his interpretation of the question of conversion varies widely. His 1972 work, *The Age of the Vikings*, does not deal with the subject of conversion at all.¹² Ten years later in *Kings and Vikings*, he argues: “In all areas the lead was taken by rulers; there is no evidence that conversion was ever the result of popular demand.”¹³ This statement is followed by his co-authored *Medieval Scandinavia* wherein he comments on the public acceptance of Christianity and then immediately begins discussing the conversion of kings.¹⁴

A lone counterpoint to the interpretation that kings controlled the outcome of Scandinavian conversion among general scholars of Scandinavian history comes from one of the earliest twentieth century historians to look at the issue, Axel Olrik. Surprisingly his work has been largely overlooked by subsequent historians. Olrik writes:

The conversion of the North was accomplished by voluntary means. Of course, we must not assume that compulsion was never used against any individual; the conditions of the times would forbid any such assumption. But no Scandinavian tribe was forced as a body to assume the new law. What happened was that the leading men of the tribe appeared in considerable numbers as its advocates, drawing the stragglers in their wake. Behind the many decisions at the *thing* meetings in which the acceptance of Christianity was voted, we cannot

¹¹ Peter G. Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement: A Survey of the Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

¹² P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972).

¹³ P. H. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings: Scandinavia and Europe AD 700-1100* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 139.

¹⁴ Birgit Sawyer and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation circa 800-1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 101-104.

always assume the presence of a majority but surely that of a very important minority. And once the choice had been made, it was never rescinded; we do not encounter any pagan reaction of real moment.¹⁵

Although Olrik places rulers as the prime movers of society, he does recognize voluntary acceptance by the populace. His claim that no group was forced to accept the change to Christianity has been adequately disproved; such pressure did indeed occur in certain instances. However, he is unique in clearly asserting that individuals could and did choose conversion as a result of internal choice and not solely as a reaction to outward pressure and this claim deserves investigation.

When specialists in the study of Icelandic conversion are consulted, the historiographical situation also appears divided and uncertain. Dag Strömbäck, a Swedish philologist specializing in the study of Icelandic texts, as well as a religious historian, argued that "...in order...to grasp the essentials of *what actually happened...*" in the conversion of the Icelanders only strict textual criticism of the primary sources is acceptable in determining what sources to consult in attempting to understand how the process of conversion took place.¹⁶ To this end, Strömbäck argues to allow only the use of Ari Thorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* to inform study of the conversion with a few additional exceptions; those limited exceptions consist of "...one or two small notes in *Landnámabók* and a few stanzas of contemporary verse, all the other sources must be considered secondary."¹⁷ Strömbäck's strict interpretation of sources and therefore how the question of conversion can be analyzed, is heavily influenced by his friend and mentor Sigurður

¹⁵ Axel Olrik, *Viking Civilization* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1930), 140; italics added.

¹⁶ Dag Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland: A Survey*, trans. and annotated by Peter Foote (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 1975), 17, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Strömbäck, *Conversion*, 20-21. In this thesis, the Anglicized form of Old Norse names will be used, except when quoting from a source that uses original spellings, for example, *Thorgilsson* instead of *Þorgilsson*.

Nordal, who championed the cause of Icelandic nationalism; in the process, Nordal and likeminded scholars formed a strict interpretation of Icelandic texts known as the Icelandic School, whose viewpoints on what constitutes valid sources for historical study in Iceland, and more broadly in Scandinavia, has heavily influenced research in the field, and is only now beginning to be seriously questioned and new approaches offered.

More recently the Icelandic archaeologist Orri Vésteinsson, of the University of Iceland, published his own investigation of Iceland's conversion. His research also limits itself to Ari's account, and notes that "[a]ll other accounts are much later and do not seem to derive material on the conversion from any other source [than Ari]."¹⁸ For Vésteinsson the Christianization of Iceland is a long, drawn-out process relating to the formation of a centralized political structure on the island.¹⁹ The events relating to the decision to convert are relegated to a few opening pages of a chapter entitled "Prehistory." For Vésteinsson the real work of spreading the new religion took place after the Althing meeting of 999/1000, and in this view he is not incorrect. There was much work and teaching involved to fully educate the entire island concerning the new religion which was adopted. But Vésteinsson does not address a crucial question—how did the process begin which led up to the conversion? Unfortunately, he avoids the question as unanswerable due to insufficient sources, as he limits himself in sources, just as Strömbäck and the Icelandic School.

In contrast to the ideas represented by Strömbäck and Vésteinsson concerning acceptable sources, is another archaeologist of Icelandic history, Jessie L. Byock from UCLA. Byock argues for the use of a wide range of sources to understand the conversion, including family sagas, king

¹⁸ Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priest, Power, and Social Change 1000-1300* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17,

¹⁹ Orri Vésteinsson, *Christianization*, 4.

sagas, diplomatic texts, and later church writings, in addition to historical works such as *Íslendingabók*.²⁰ Byock's investigations argue for conversion as the result of established patterns of conflict resolution within Icelandic society, specifically the use of compromise, the acknowledgement of political expediency, and the use of third party arbitration.²¹ He is also one of the most emphatic voices within the Scandinavian historical community calling for a review of previous academic viewpoints and new scholarship based on interdisciplinary techniques developed in the past quarter century and his views will be discussed shortly.

Matters of Geography, Views of Kingship, and Encounters with Christianity

Geography was a crucial matter in the spread of Christianity in Scandinavia, yet little to no importance has ever been placed on the geographical realities of Scandinavia when considering the question of the coming of Christianity. The main peninsula of Denmark is connected to mainland Europe and allows for direct land access to Denmark proper, if the Danes allowed the traveler passage. However, continuing to Norway and, more importantly for this study, even further to Iceland is a much more daunting task. At the closest point approximately 120 miles separate Denmark from Norway across the Skagerrak; 300 miles separate Norway from Scotland across the North Sea, and it is over 600 miles from Norway to Iceland across the North Atlantic. More than 850 miles separate Iceland from the southwest coast of Greenland, where Scandinavian settlement occurred; travel would have been by open sailing vessel over some of the most tempestuous waters in the world.

²⁰ Jessie L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 292.

²¹ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 300-301.

If the ocean crossing from Denmark, England, Norway or from elsewhere on the continent were successful, a prospective evangelizer would next confront the internal geography of Iceland. A missionary to Iceland would encounter somewhat less difficult terrain, than for example that found in much of Norway. In Norway the south and southeastern portion of the country is fairly easy to navigate, and its extremes of weather are similar to the rest of northern Europe. The central portion of the country, west coast, and the north, however, are very difficult to traverse with steep mountainous terrain, deep fjord valleys divided from each other, and extremes of weather due to the exposed Atlantic coast.²²

Iceland, by comparison, possesses a similarly rugged coastline of fjords; however, these inlets do provide for ample grazing land, and at the time of conversion enough arable land to feed the population. The interior of the island, however, consists of volcanic terrain and is almost useless for human habitation. Furthermore, Iceland did possess a mild summer climate despite its northern latitudes due to the Gulf Stream which keeps the island relatively warm. However, winter weather could be especially harsh, coupled with long periods of darkness, and the island was devoid of trees after the first few decades of settlement. Without local assistance to provide shelter, food, and warmth one's situation would quickly become desperate.

The southwest coast of Greenland that was settled by the Scandinavians has a similar geography and climate to that of Iceland; however, the habitable zone is an even thinner strip along the coast, and the land was only marginally arable during the period of the 800-1300s due to a warming trend, allowing for only a very small settlement in comparison to that found in Iceland. Outside of the habitable coast, ice sheets blanket the island and make survival in most of

²² Land travel through central and western Norway is so difficult that to this day there is not a continuous highway or rail line running the length of the west coast, and ferry traffic still remains crucial in several areas due to the potential expense of constructing either underwater tunnels or lengthy bridges.

the country a matter of highly specialized training and knowledge. If a missionary or invader were forced away from the life-giving zone along the coast, the odds of survival would be virtually nil.

All of these geographical facts point to the physical difficulties faced by missionaries coming from mainland Europe or from the British Isles. Iceland and Greenland could not, therefore, be flooded by missionaries backed by a fortified base of operations. The geographical conditions necessitated the support of individuals within the country, monarchs or other powerful individuals or groups, but would also rely on the acceptance of the local population. Just as the geography could greatly affect external forces attempting to work on Scandinavia, the geography also comes into effect when contemplating local power fluctuations.

The harsh conditions in Iceland and Greenland also limit the population the land can support. However, during the conversion period Scandinavia as a whole was undergoing a warming trend that boosted the amount of marginal land available for cultivation. As a result the population increased, but it was not at any time comparable with that of mainland Europe. The population size combined with geography and weather conditions becomes relevant when considering the question of kings' enforcing Christianity by the sword, first at home, and then farther afield in Iceland and Greenland. In effect the issue then turns into a military question, and the issues of geography and population become even more important.

In order to subdue a recalcitrant population, a zealous Christian king would first need sufficiently loyal forces to side with him to ensure any chance of success. These numbers would by necessity include a loyal personal bodyguard, loyal staff, and a mobile strike force capable of either terrorizing a prospective target or putting down an insurrection. Furthermore, in order to effect long term change, the king would be required to station loyal troops in troubled areas to

keep an eye on the local situation. In areas such as Norway, where communication and transportation routes are limited overland, waterborne transportation becomes a necessity.

With all of these factors the potential costs grow exponentially. With a relatively docile population, the king would have little to fear and could rely on a smaller force. Yet historians have argued that the Norwegian kings faced active and violent opposition. In fact, the missionizing kings of Norway, Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson, are depicted dying martyrs' deaths in battle against violently anti-Christian foes. Yet these are the only major instances noted of armed rebellion against the influence of Christianity, and the overthrow of the Olafs had just as much to do with external Danish political desires as internal religious conflict. These difficulties multiply exponentially if royal power were to be employed in influencing Iceland or Greenland towards Christianity. All these factors point to the need to understand more clearly the effect of geography and the projection of military power in Scandinavia and how these factors play into questions of potential support for or rejection of Christianity as a royally enforced proposition, as most historians have argued for an enforced conversion reliant on some sort of military power. This also calls into question Scandinavians' views on the make-up of society.

Scandinavians, especially those who had experience as Viking raiders, tended to view society as more egalitarian, with the king being the first among equals, rather than as a hierarchical model where the populace was required to bend to the monarch's will. This mindset is perhaps best illustrated by Dudo of St. Quentin who recounts events outside Paris in the 880s in a conversation between a Frankish emissary and a group of Viking raiders.

Representatives of the king's authority command you that you say who you are, and where you come from, and what you want?

And they replied:

We are Danes...
And the others asked:
By what title does your chief hold office? They answered:
By none, because we are equal in power.

Then later in the conversation:

Are you willing to bow your necks to Charles, king of Francia, and apply yourselves to his service, and accept many grants of land from him?

They replied: We will never bow the neck to any man, nor will we bind ourselves to serve any man whatever, nor will we accept land-grants from anyone. That grant of land will suit us best which we win for ourselves, with weapons and the sweat of battle.²³

These sentiments make it clear that Scandinavian society, while divided into classes, did not view themselves as beholden to the will of the monarch. The idea of fealty and feudalism had been introduced and was developing in mainland Europe, but such considerations had not yet reached the North. Scandinavian kingship still relied on the Germanic conception of following the king due more to his ability to bestow gifts as the result of success in warfare and as a result of his personal charisma than as the sole director of national policy. In Iceland and Greenland where there was not even the presence of royalty, familial and social ties were even more important in influencing the course of society concerning social development, especially the coming of Christianity.

Nor were Scandinavians ignorant about the existence and teachings of Christianity. As early as the ninth century Scandinavians began to venture out from their homelands as Vikings,

²³ Dudo of St. Quentin, *History of the Normans*, trans. Eric Christiansen (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 1998), 36-37. It must be admitted that Dudo's history was written more than one hundred years after the first reported events and that his early history has been proven to be very suspect. It is more likely that most of his early accounts are fabrication, while the latter portions are more accurate. The account reproduced here is from the earlier part of his history. This does not rule out the possibility, however, that the egalitarian views expressed about the Vikings raiders were accurate of Vikings in his own time. Given the amount of literature, especially from Iceland, depicting strong independent tendencies in the population and the similarity between Scandinavian and the more well-documented German culture, where kings are seen as the first among free equals, it is well within the realm of probability that this independent streak was common in Scandinavian society and influenced the interactions between king and people in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

traders and mercenaries. Danes and Norwegians invaded the British Isles and raided deep into France and the Mediterranean. Vikings even became the personal guard of the Byzantine emperor, and they formed corps of mercenaries throughout Europe. Icelandic sagas recount Icelanders and, later, Greenlanders also taking part in this multi-cultural contact. By the late tenth century the Christian rulers employing Scandinavians needed some method to make these pagan mercenaries or merchants acceptable in the eyes of the Church and their subjects.

The method employed is described in the thirteenth-century *Egils saga*, an Icelandic work detailing the family history of one of the major families who originally settled the country. The main protagonist, Egil, along with his brother Thorolf, accepted mercenary service under king Athelstan of England sometime in the late tenth century.

England was Christian when these events took place, and had been for a long time. King Athelstan was a good Christian: he was called Athelstan the Faithstrong. He requested Thorolf and [Egil] that they should have themselves primesigned, for that was a common custom of the time among traders and those who went on war-pay along with Christian men; for those who were primesigned held full communion with Christians and heathens too, yet kept to the faith which was most agreeable to them. Thorolf and Egil did this at the king's request; they both had themselves primesigned. They had three hundred men of theirs there who took the king's war-pay.²⁴

Primesigning was a Christian ritual which made the receiver acceptable in the eyes of the Church and community. It was given by a priest who made the sign of the cross over the recipient and declared them acceptable in the eyes of the Church and the community, and who could therefore interact with and be employed by Christians. Often the recipient undertook the ritual as an intention of latter receiving baptism. There are two significant aspects found in the account of Egil and Thorolf. The first is that the ritual of accepting primesigning was a normal

²⁴ *Egil's Saga*, trans. and with an introduction by Gwyn Jones (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1960), 120-121. The author of *Egils saga* is unknown, but Jones makes a convincing argument that the writer may have been Snorri Sturluson, the Icelandic historian.

practice among Scandinavians. The second comes from the phrase “for those who were primesigned held full communion with Christians and heathens too, yet kept to the faith which was most agreeable to them.” This observation indicates there were Scandinavians who felt more comfortable with Christianity and associated themselves with the new religion. Some of these early contacts eventually accepted baptism and returned to their native Scandinavia as will be highlighted later in this study.

Primary Sources

Before investigating the specifics of Scandinavian Conversion, an overview of the primary literature is necessary due to the interrelated nature of the sources as well as questions of historical accuracy. With respect to Iceland and Greenland the most important literature on the subject was composed beginning in the 1120s, two generations after the conversion, and extended through the thirteenth century. It should be clearly noted that the historical accuracy of many of the thirteenth century texts as relating to specifics of the conversion have been called into question by the historical community; at the same time these texts are accepted as accurately reflecting the social viewpoint of the eras in which they were composed. These observations do not invalidate the subject of conversion in these documents. The most important sources for this investigation are briefly presented in the following pages in order to gain an understanding of how they fit into the overall historiographical context.

Iceland

Medieval Icelandic sources are best broadly divided into three categories. The first are histories dealing with the history and law of Iceland as a whole; many of these sources have been

correlated with outside sources for historical accuracy, or were used extensively as source material for other sagas. Although not numerous, these historical works, which include *Íslendingabók*, or Book of the Icelanders, and *Landnámabók*, or Book of the Settlements; the former is considered one of the best examples of history in medieval Europe. Another work, *Kristni saga*, contains additional history concerning the coming of Christianity to Iceland. The second category consists of the family or regional sagas (“sagas of Icelanders”) which are perhaps the best known examples of early Icelandic literature. These thirteenth century works, such as *Njáls saga*, contain insights into the society and culture of medieval Iceland, and to a greater extent wider Scandinavia. They are unique in the field of medieval studies in that they portray the experience of common individuals and their life struggles rather than chronicling the histories of kings or engaging in ecclesiastical history. Unfortunately, for reasons that will be discussed shortly, they have been largely ignored, unjustly, by historians as sources of meaningful information and predominantly left to the study of literature.

The third broad category falls somewhere between the first two; that is the category of kings’ sagas. These works, whose authors include Snorri Sturluson and Oddr Snorrason, detail the lives of Scandinavian monarchs, mostly Norwegians, and lie somewhere between the historical and literary. Some details are verified in outside documents, others are recorded only within the king sagas themselves, while still others are clearly literary inventions, contradicting established sources. In some ways the kings’ sagas, on which many historians have based their claims of Christian conversion backed by royal authority, are the most difficult to use precisely for these uncertain characteristics. However, with properly exercised caution, the royal sagas will

also be presented in this investigation. With this overview in mind, the first group of sources to be detailed are the historical works.²⁵

The 999/1000 C.E. conversion of the Icelanders contains the most well-documented instance of the official Scandinavian acceptance of Christianity. The event was most likely recorded in the 1120s by Ari Thorgilsson in his *Íslendingabók*.²⁶ Ari was born in Iceland in the late 1060s to a prominent family. After his father was killed at sea, Ari was fostered in the home of Hall Thorarinsson. Hall was over 80 years old at the time he fostered Ari and a prominent chieftain who had witnessed first-hand many of the events Ari later recorded. Through Hall, Ari also met many of his principal informants, including Teit Isleifsson, the son of Iceland's first bishop, and the man whom Ari considered his mentor. Ari also received the benefit of a clerical education during his fosterage with Hall. In his historical writing Ari is known for being scrupulous in recording where he received information that was included in his record. By his own account Ari authored two manuscripts called the Book of the Icelanders, both a longer and a shorter version. Sadly, the shorter version was the only one of the two to survive. Details pertaining to the conversion as recorded in *Íslendingabók* form some of the most basic precepts of this investigation.

In addition to authoring *Íslendingabók*, Ari Thorgilsson appears to have had some involvement in the antecedents of another critical Icelandic work, *Landnámabók*.²⁷

²⁵ Both the family sagas and kings' sagas use and contain orally transmitted skaldic poetry, contemporary to the time of the conversion, as a source. These priceless sources give insight into society at the time of the conversion. Although they are not consulted in this thesis, as different techniques were employed to investigate conversion, skaldic poetry remnants remain invaluable to researchers of Scandinavian history.

²⁶ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók* in *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*. Trans. by Siân Grønlie. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006).

²⁷ *Landnámabók- The Book of Settlements*, Trans. and with an introduction and notes by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), 4.

Landnámabók, represents a unique work in medieval studies. The focus of the work is detailing the genealogies and settlement of the original settlers of Iceland. Although the earliest surviving manuscript dates to the late thirteenth century, other historical evidence indicates that Ari and other Icelandic historians had worked on earlier versions of the work. These earliest works, on which the others came to rely, were compiled in the late eleventh to early twelfth century and were only a few generations removed from the actual settlement.²⁸ The early works also benefited from other advantages:

In many cases the direct descendants of the original settlers were still living on the farms where their ancestors had made their first homes in Iceland, and this helped the compilers [Ari and others] to create a reasonably clear picture of the settlement. Boundaries between farms, and memories of boundary disputes also provided the Icelanders with knowledge about the original land-claims. In any case, the boundaries often co-incided with natural features, particularly rivers and mountains which helped to fix the details more firmly.²⁹

Landnámabók also represents a unique feature specifically of the Icelandic cultural landscape and, to a lesser degree, of wider Scandinavia in general: the importance Scandinavians placed on genealogical connections. The sheer number of familial connections and histories recorded in *Landnámabók*, when combined with smaller genealogies found in other sagas, allow for an unprecedented reconstruction of medieval family genealogies. This specific information makes possible the analysis of conversion patterns within Iceland and Greenland based on familial and social lines. This data can then be interpreted utilizing sociological methods allowing a never before seen look at conversion patterns in medieval Iceland.

²⁸ *Landnámabók*, 3-5. The earliest extant version, *Sturlubók*, written in approximately 1275-80 C.E., is the version from which this translation is derived.

²⁹ Introduction to *Landnámabók*, 5-6.

The anonymous *Kristni saga*, or Saga of Christianity (Story of the Conversion), holds a tentative place between the historical texts and the family texts.³⁰ The earliest surviving copy dates from the early fourteenth century, and the work itself is part history, part hagiography. Internal evidence has led some scholars to suggest a creation date as early as the mid-1200s, but dating continues to be a source of debate.³¹ Ari is mentioned as a source in the work, but it is unknown what other sources contributed to its creation. What makes *Kristni saga* unique is that while Ari deals predominantly with conversion efforts in the south, *Kristni saga* deals with efforts of the entire country. Luckily, for purposes of this study, *Kristni saga* includes the genealogies and relationships of individuals who take part in the conversion; when these are compared with other sources a larger pattern of conversion based on familial/social lines begins to emerge.

The second grouping of Icelandic sources are the family sagas. Until recently, these singular sources have remained nearly untouched by the historical community, instead being perceived as the domain of literary scholars. Jesse L. Byock has argued convincingly why the family sagas have remained in effect *persona non grata* for the historical community, and argues that a change is long overdue.

These extensive medieval texts filled with realistic descriptions of the private and public lives of farmers and their feuds, have been treated almost entirely as literary fictions. So deeply ingrained has this narrow approach to saga studies become that, until recently, the impact of social and historical research has scarcely been felt. Through a series of theoretical arguments advanced in the first half of the twentieth century, the validity of historical and social analysis of the texts was not simply denied it was virtually banned. Of the numerous reasons for

³⁰ *Kristni saga* in *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006). Although technically anonymous, the work is usually attributed to Sturla Thordarson. See Peter Foote, "Conversion" in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Philip Pulsiano (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 106-8.

³¹ See *Kristni saga*, xxxii-xxxv for a full discussion of the various dating debates.

this curious state of affairs, I concentrate on what I see as a prime factor: the role of Icelandic nationalism, a forceful movement that has had a substantial influence in shaping both academic and popular views of the sagas.³²

Byock argues that it was the work of Icelandic nationalist scholars, led by the philologist Sigurður Nordal and championed by the historian Jón Jóhannesson, which led to the family sagas being accepted as literary works of fiction, and not containing information of historical value. The reasoning behind this attempt was twofold; the first was an attempt to assert an independent Icelandic identity, separate from that of mainland Scandinavia, concerning the intellectual heritage contained in the family sagas. The second reason concerned the nationalist's understanding of the meaning of history.

The historical sagas were fairly straightforward in their historical meaning and therefore open to all to claim them. Also, since the subject of the king sagas were the royal heads of Norway they must be grudgingly shared with the rest of Scandinavia.³³ However, Nordal and his fellow Icelandic nationalists hit on an argument that would keep the family sagas, which also happen to be the largest corpus of medieval Icelandic writings, solely the cultural heritage of Iceland.

For them the sagas were not simply validations of national greatness, but evidence of cultural uniqueness. If they could be shown to be products of "one of the most powerful literary movements in recorded history," then the emerging Icelandic urban culture would no longer be a poor cousin of the Dane's culture. In fact, Iceland with its sagas would have reached a state of cultural sophistication centuries in advance of anything that the Danes achieved before the nineteenth century. The literary basis of the sagas equipped Iceland with a cultural heritage worthy of its status as an independent nation.³⁴

³² Jesse L. Byock, "History and the Sagas: The Effect of Nationalism" in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock, England: Hisarlik Press, 1992), 43.

³³ Byock, "History and the Sagas," 57.

³⁴ Byock, "History and the Sagas," 55.

How Nordal and his confederates accomplished this goal was, in their capacity as the modern authority on these works, to pronounce them works of literary fiction, and not as the product of oral tradition, and, therefore, removing them as objects of historical study and making them works of literary genius.³⁵ In order to support this assertion, Nordal argued the lack of historical information in the family sagas, and was supported in this assertion by his fellow Icelandic historian Jón Jóhannesson. However, this argument brings into play the second portion of the nationalists' agenda, namely what they termed to constitute history.

Both Nordal and Jóhannesson viewed history according to the early twentieth century definition of the term: institutional history.³⁶ In the case of Nordal, he was a scholarly child of that tradition, and Jóhannesson a student of that generation. In fact, in one of his exhortations against the use of the family sagas as historical sources, he argued that they "...deal principally with private lives and affairs which do not belong to history in its proper sense...."³⁷ To compound the matter, this attitude has gone largely untested by the scholarly community until recently. This may be the result of the small size of the specialist community, many of whom have been affiliated with these eminent scholars who have done much to further Icelandic and Scandinavian studies.

As Byock argues, however, it is time for a fresh look and fresh approach to the use of these sources:

What do we achieve by freeing ourselves from exclusionary prejudices? The answer is a renewed study of medieval Iceland which puts the sagas back into the context of the medieval society that produced and used them. We are free then

³⁵ Byock, "History and the Sagas," 45.

³⁶ Byock, "History and the Sagas," 45-46, 52-53

³⁷ Sigurður Nordal, *The Historical element in the Icelandic Family sagas*. W.P. Ker Memorial lecture 15. (Glasgow: Jackson, Son, and Co., 1957) as quoted in Byock, "History and the Sagas," 46.

to explore the sagas within the framework of Iceland's rural society and to determine what role they played in that society. The two are, of course, complementary parts of the same dynamic, and I am confident that the coming years will observe all the possibilities that, individually and in combination, the historical, literary, and social disciplines can offer. To a degree our success in the future is dependent upon recognizing the barriers that in the recent past have kept us from widening our study in new and exploratory ways and have hindered us from treating the texts in a more innovative manner.³⁸

One such innovative use of these sources is as a source of familial information concerning the introduction of Christianity and subsequent conversion patterns and to analyze these patterns using techniques derived from recent sociological studies. As such, it is necessary to detail some of the family sagas referenced in this study.

Njáls saga is the longest of the Icelandic family sagas and one of the most well known of the genre, with much of the tale devoted to feuds, revenge, and the workings of the Icelandic legal system.³⁹ The earliest surviving manuscript dates from the thirteenth century, and no author is known. Interestingly placed among the related events of the main character, Njal is an account of the conversion efforts of the last years of the tenth century. As noted by Dag Strömbäck of this section: "The author of *Njals saga* fitted this text into the framework of his book but took no great pains to conceal the joints."⁴⁰ Although the section is discordant with the tone of the rest of the saga, it does reveal interesting familial and social connections of the spread of Christianity on the island.

³⁸ Byock, "History and the Sagas," 59.

³⁹ *Njal's Saga*, trans. and with an introduction and notes by Robert Cook (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

⁴⁰ Strömbäck, *Conversion*, 23.

Eyrbyggja saga is likewise of unknown authorship and is also one of the more well-known saga works.⁴¹ Also probably written in the thirteenth century, the saga opens with a discussion of one of the first part-Christian families to travel to Iceland. The details it provides allow for a greater investigation of familial politics and the decision to accept or reject Christianity.

A third type of Icelandic literature lies somewhere between the historical pieces and the family sagas. These consist of the kings' sagas. The most well-known examples of this type of literature, although not the sole specimens, include Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, a collection of sagas detailing the royal families of Norway and the various struggles and machinations to gain the throne. The validity of these types of sagas is difficult to determine, as some sections have been conclusively supported by outside corroboration, while other sections are so fanciful as to be classed as literary fiction.

One of these sources concerning the conversion of Iceland appears around the year 1200 authored by Oddr Snorrason as *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, or the Saga of Olaf Tryggvason.⁴² Olaf was king of Norway from 995-1000 and is often credited with being the catalyst for Icelandic conversion. Oddr was a monk in Iceland and originally authored the work in Latin; it was later translated into Old Norse. He appeared to have relied on numerous extant works for his own writing without citing as carefully as Ari, and the section concerning Iceland's conversion appears to be taken almost verbatim from Ari's more meticulously noted manuscript. However, there are slight differences concerning important specifics between the two records, so both will be consulted here, but the majority of the evidence concerning the actual proceedings in Iceland

⁴¹ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, trans. and with an introduction and notes by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (New York: Penguin Books, 1989)

⁴² Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, trans. Theodore M. Andersson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

will be taken directly from Ari's work. For small matters of contrasting detail Oddr's record will be used.

Greenland

Ari's *Íslendingabók* tells of the settlement of Greenland, but the fullest account its conversion is found in *Eiriks saga rauða* (Eirik the Red's Saga), believed written around 1265 in Iceland and numbered among the family sagas; the account mostly deals with the voyages of Eirik and his son Leif, but does include a limited account of how Christianity was introduced to the Greenland colony.⁴³ It details Eirik's acceptance of the new faith at the hand of Olaf Tryggvason of Norway and the former's introduction of Christianity and its relatively peaceful acceptance despite the division it perpetrated within his own family.

Sociological Studies on Conversion

The study of religious conversion in Scandinavia needs to take an academic step forward. One good path that has developed in recent years, and that would facilitate the investigation of Olrik's theory and follow in the suggestion of Byock to attempt fresh investigations using new research methodology, is highlighted by modern sociologists and their recent study of religious conversion. In particular *Acts of Faith: The Human Side of Religion* by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke deals with how and why religious choices are made and proposes theories as to how religion is spread based on the study of diverse religious groups.⁴⁴ A main argument, especially in the second part of their book, "The Religious Individual—Religious Choices: Conversion and

⁴³ "Eirik the Red" in *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, trans. Gwyn Jones (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 126.

⁴⁴ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000).

Reaffiliation,” deals with the argument that conversion is a result of social networks, and that the introduction of new social networks in an individual’s life makes the transition to a new religious mindset possible. While their examples come primarily from early Christianity, early Mormonism, or late-twentieth century alternative religions, the model of social networks looks especially promising for use in analyzing the conversion patterns of Scandinavia. Unfortunately, their section on ‘Choice or Compulsion’ is limited to modern examples of reported compulsion, and they do not investigate the possibility of historical coercion through violence or threat of violence. Nevertheless, Stark and Finke’s hypothesis is well argued and should transfer well to the case study of early Scandinavia. As part of their study, Stark and Fink introduced a set of definitions and propositions relating to religious conversion that can be applied to literary accounts of the Scandinavian conversion.

A brief introduction of the methods and ideas put forth by Stark and Finke is necessary. Stark had previously published a successful account of early Christian conversion in Europe, *The Rise of Christianity*, using some of the general principles further enumerated in *Acts of Faith*.⁴⁵ In the latter work, after explaining their research methods and defining basic concepts through the first four chapters, Stark and Finke’s fifth chapter finally arrives at the question of how individuals and groups approach religious conversion; the definitions and propositions they present through much of this chapter are central enough to an examination of Nordic conversion to discuss these ideas here in some depth.

⁴⁵ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). In this work Stark focuses more on the early decades and centuries of Christian conversion in southern Europe within the bounds of the Roman Empire. While the literary evidence is greater for this earlier period, by introducing the concept Stark has highlighted the possibilities by which sociological investigation can influence religious conversion studies.

Stark and Finke's base supposition is the same one which many investigators of human behavior and history first make concerning human social interactions. They propose: "Within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans attempt to make rational choices."⁴⁶ After defining humans as rational actors, several definitions affecting religious conversion are now necessary. The first is that "conversion refers to shifts across religious traditions," while "reaffiliation refers to shifts within religious traditions."⁴⁷ In other words conversion refers to a radical shift of religious thought, from Christianity to Buddhism, while reaffiliation refers to shifts within a tradition, such as from Baptist to Methodist.⁴⁸ By a strict religious definition, the Scandinavian acceptance of Christianity was a conversion rather than a reaffiliation because they radically altered their religious tradition, i.e. from paganism to Christian monotheism. However when viewed from a more liberal viewpoint, their religious transformation was more akin to a reaffiliation due to the many aspects of their culture that continued to have traditional influences and overtones. These ideas of conversion and reaffiliation will be discussed in depth in chapter two as specific instances from primary sources are presented.

Returning to examples of Stark and Finke's conversion model we can now explore the actual mechanics of religious change and the mindset of the subject. The next proposition which is derived from the first, which states that humans attempt to act rationally, declares: "In making

⁴⁶ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 85. This base idea comes from economic assumptions that individuals attempt to maximize their "investments" whether the investment be monetary, or social in nature. See *Acts of Faith*, chapter 1 for the full development of this idea.

⁴⁷ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 114.

⁴⁸ Nearly a half of Stark and Finke's Chapter 5, "Religious Choices: Conversion and Reaffiliation," is devoted to definitions, propositions, and examples of their ideas. The examples I present here are a shortened version of their well written and lengthy explanations. I quote directly from their definitions and propositions, but do not directly cite their specific examples in the interests of brevity. While the examples presented here are my own, the ideas behind them clearly originated with Stark and Finke.

religious choices, people will attempt to conserve their social capital” and “[s]ocial capital consists of interpersonal attachments.”⁴⁹ In other words, humans are surrounded and connected by a network of family, friendship, social, and economic relationships and in making religious choices they will attempt to maintain or increase the stability of these relationships; this does not mean they are controlled solely by these interests, but that these interests can play a significant role in conversion.

The following proposition is closely linked to the previous of preserving social capital. “Under normal circumstances, most people will neither convert nor reaffiliate.”⁵⁰ If an individual enjoys a comfortable and stable level of social capital within his social networks, there is no reason for that individual to contemplate religious conversion or reaffiliation. In terms of Scandinavian conversion in the Atlantic islands “normal circumstances” represents the time period before the introduction of Christianity. In effect these regions were closed societies. The introduction of Christianity itself represented a serious, non-normal circumstance and led directly to the phenomenon of the next two propositions.

First: “To the extent that people have or develop stronger attachments to those committed to a different version of their traditional religion, they will reaffiliate,” and secondly, “[t]o the extent that people have or develop stronger attachments to those committed to a religion in a different tradition, they will convert.”⁵¹

If for example, an individual follows the religious tradition of his or her parents but then moves to a new area and become influenced by a new religious tradition through friends, or perhaps a new spouse, then he/she will reaffiliate, or convert religions, if the new relationship

⁴⁹ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 118-119.

⁵⁰ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 119.

⁵¹ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 119.

becomes more important to them than the previous one with their parents. This phenomenon is even more apparent in instances of the social acclimatization of immigrant groups as they adapt and assimilate to the dominant society.

In addition to weighing the costs of social capital, the costs of religious capital also influence an individual's religious choices. "Religious capital consists of the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture."⁵² Also, similar to conserving social capital, "[i]n making religious choices, people will attempt to conserve their religious capital."⁵³ In other words, individuals invest considerable time, knowledge, and resources in participating in their faith through rituals, acts of piety, and even the understanding of particular religious vocabulary. When faced with a question of religious choice, a person attempts to conserve as much of his/her invested knowledge and experience.

However, this idea of conservation leads to another general proposition. "The greater their religious capital, the less likely people are either to reaffiliate or to convert."⁵⁴ The greater an individual's ties to a religious tradition, the less likely they are to be interested in switching faiths. A devout Methodist minister with years of experience and a faithful congregation has accumulated considerable religious, and also social, capital. Therefore it is less likely that he would be interested in another faith as opposed to a wavering neophyte member of the same congregation who has no significant social or religious ties to the other members of the congregation and little investment in the intellectual aspects of that particular religion.

⁵² Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 120.

⁵³ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 121.

⁵⁴ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 121

However, this proposition has a corollary which, although implied by Stark and Finke, they do not directly express. It is that the less a person's religious capital, the more likely they are to reaffiliate or to convert. A person marginalized within his or her community, or who has little investment or interest in the rituals of faith, has fewer religious ties to hold them to a stated faith. They are therefore more susceptible to the attraction of reaffiliation or conversion, as opposed to an individual who has firm religious and social ties in the community.

In so doing, however, dissatisfied persons will continue to exercise the principles of rational behavior and conservation of investment. This concept introduces Stark and Finke's final three propositions.

1) "Reaffiliation will be far more prevalent than conversion (under normal conditions)."⁵⁵

2) "When people reaffiliate, they will tend to select an option that maximizes their conservation of religious capital."⁵⁶

3) "When people convert, they will tend to select an option that maximizes their conservation of religious capital."⁵⁷

For example, an Anglican would be much more comfortable with the switch to Catholicism than to Quakerism, due to the greater similarities between the rituals and religious teachings of Catholicism and the Anglican Church than with the traditions of Quakerism. While the switch would require some new training and thought, the foundation of Anglican tradition would remain mostly intact under Catholicism and preserve the majority of the aspirant's intellectual investment.

⁵⁵ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 123.

⁵⁶ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 123.

⁵⁷ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 123.

Similarly, if that same Anglican were faced with the choice of converting to Islam or to Hinduism, it is more likely that Islam would be the selection due to at least some similarities between Anglican Christianity and Islam concerning the fundamental ideas of monotheism, and the purpose of life, etc. This choice would therefore maximize the preservation of religious capital and allow at least some previous intellectual beliefs and practices to be saved, whereas a radical shift would negate previous efforts.

Summation

Many historians argue that kings were primarily responsible for the conversion of the Scandinavians. From one point of view this argument is correct; the populous Scandinavian area of Norway, for example, had Christianity introduced and subsequently was converted under the leadership of pro-Christian monarchs. This argument goes on to add that Iceland was an irregularity, in that the people's governing body, the Althing, chose conversion on behalf of the people. What is not clear, however, is the exact manner of how Christianity spread among the Icelandic populace. What drove certain individuals to accept this new religion before it was accepted by the social majority?

In chapters two and three, rather than once again analyzing Christian conversion as the result of royal efforts in mainland Scandinavia, the unique conversion experiences in Iceland and Greenland will take center stage. The reason for this focus is twofold. First is that a significant portion of the Scandinavian conversion experience, perhaps as much as one fourth to one third of the total population, happened in outlying areas not directly controlled by monarchs. If royal pressure was therefore not a major factor in the conversion of these areas, what then was the cause? Chapter two will focus on this question as well as illustrating specific examples of

religious change based on the sociological examples of Stark and Finke in the early stages of Christianity in Iceland. Chapter three will do the same for the latter stages of the Icelandic conversion, and for the experience of Greenland.

CHAPTER 2

EARLY ICELANDIC CHRISTIANS

Traditionally, histories of the conversion of Scandinavia portray conversion taking place as the result of efforts made by monarchs in mainland Europe. The facts concerning the conversions of Iceland and Greenland present a problem to the traditional theory of a royal inspired, forced acceptance of Christianity in Scandinavia— namely, that neither Iceland nor Greenland were directly controlled, though they were occasionally influenced, by any of the emerging kingdoms of Scandinavia. At best, the islands were traditionally linked by ties of trade and kinship to Norway. However, these ties could have been broken, and the needs of trade met elsewhere, in the event of attempted royal control. Another answer to the reality of conversion must therefore exist, and the peculiar nature of documentary evidence in Iceland relating to its own religious conversion, as well as that of its colony Greenland, allows for a new interpretation of Christianization not only in this area of the Scandinavian world, but it also raises questions concerning conversion for the rest of the Viking lands.

Icelandic literature contains a wide breadth of documentary evidence concerning the unique culture and history of Scandinavia. Sagas, both historical and literary, exist chronicling not only events in Iceland, but also in Norway, Denmark, and beyond. However, one aspect of Icelandic literature has survived which is unique to the island, and by extension to its colony in Greenland—the extensive family genealogies found in *Landnámabók*, or Book of the Settlements.¹ Genealogy was an important aspect of medieval Scandinavian life, and the careful records kept in *Landnámabók* and the sagas allow for the study of the spread of Christianity

¹ *Landnámabók- The Book of Settlements*, trans. and with an introduction and notes by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972). This translation of *Landnámabók* is based on the *Sturlubók* manuscript, as edited by Jakob Benediktson. See *Landnámabók* , 3-5 for a discussion of the various manuscript copies which exist.

based on familial lines. This is an insight which has been overlooked by many modern scholars and which reveals surprising conversion patterns preserved in the historical records.

The text of *Landnámabók* highlights an interesting phenomenon concerning the acceptance of Christianity in Iceland: namely, that instances of known Scandinavian Christians are recorded as living and participating in daily life on the island far earlier than the traditional Icelandic conversion date of 999/1000. Furthermore, when the family genealogies of known early Christian Icelanders are compared to the pedigrees of Icelanders who latter accepted the faith closer to the traditional conversion era an interesting pattern emerges. When this pattern is subjected to analysis under theorems put forth by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, a new interpretation for Scandinavian conversion patterns results.

In this chapter the particular instances of conversion in early Iceland will be examined. The distinguishing features of this area are first, that little direct royal involvement occurred and second, the island was linked through Christian genealogical lines made most evident in *Landnámabók* along with other genealogical records listed in some of the sagas. These links reveal that conversion occurred along lines of social and familial contact. These characteristics, particularly visible in this outlying area of Scandinavia, argue that close social networks may have been just as important to the conversion of mainland Scandinavians as the more traditionally accepted royal efforts to impose Christianity; the local efforts deserve close study.

The Family of Bjorn Buna

Scandinavian Christianity arrived in Iceland almost from the beginning of its colonization by Norwegians and other Scandinavians.² Ari Thorgilsson places the beginning date of 870 C.E.

² Both *Landnámabók* and Ari Thorgilsson in *Íslendingabók* claim the presence of Irish monks on the island prior to the arrival of Scandinavian colonists. However, to date, only these literary claims point to the presence of

for the beginning of the migration that populated Iceland in *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* declares an end to the settlement period after some sixty years, or approximately 930 C.E.³ Sometime within this sixty year window, probably toward the earlier date, a family of Christian Scandinavians arrived on the island. Although some branches of the family would falter in their devotion to Christianity, others would remain firm in the faith and contribute to the later spread of the faith when more active proselytizing efforts began around the year 1000 C.E. The kinship and social networks established by this early group of Christians would subsequently play a vital role in the popular acceptance of the faith.

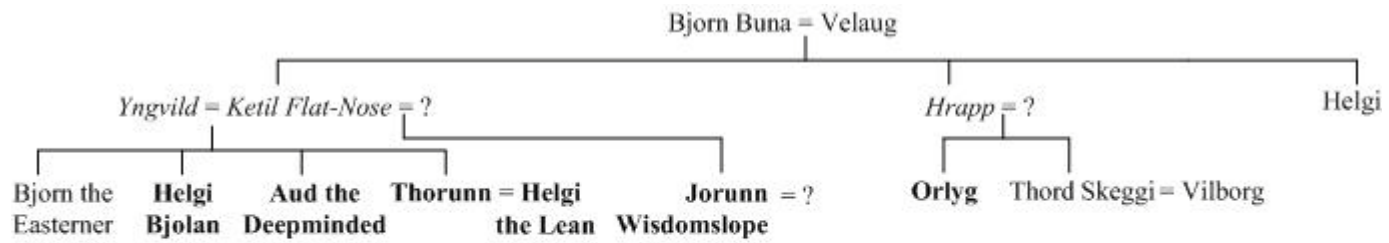
The pivotal family in question originated with the Norwegian chieftain Bjorn Buna and his wife Velaug. Bjorn is noted as descending from a line of chieftains from the Sogn area of western Norway.⁴ (See Figure 1.) The couple had at least three sons, Ketil Flat-Nose, Hrapp, and Helgi; all of the sons are recorded as eventually immigrating to Iceland and are noted in *Landnámabók* for being the progenitors of most of the important individuals in Iceland.⁵ However, when discussing the descent of Christianity in Iceland, the third son, Helgi, is not recorded as accepting Christianity himself, nor are any of his descendents so named in the surviving records. The focus of the family's affiliation with Christianity therefore shifts to the other brothers and their posterity.

these first Christians in Iceland and archeological confirmation of this claim has yet to produce any results. See *Landnámabók*, 15 and Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók* in *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006), 4 for the literary claims to the Irish presence.

³ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 3 and *Landnámabók*, 146.

⁴ *Landnámabók*, 22. The Sogn region is located to the north of present-day Bergen, Norway, and lies on approximately the same latitude as the Shetland Islands.

⁵ *Landnámabók*, 22.



Italics = Possible Christian

Bold = Known Christian, or Prime-Signed

Figure 1

The Family of Bjorn
Buna

On the other hand, both Ketil Flat-Nose and Hrapp are noted for having children who are remembered among the first Icelandic Christians, and there is strong circumstantial evidence that Ketil and Hrapp were themselves believers. In the case of Hrapp, the most obvious, though perhaps most questionable evidence, concerns a record of placing his son Orlyg in fosterage to a Bishop Patrick of the Hebrides.⁶ However, this argument begs the question, what connection did Hrapp and Orlyg have with the Hebrides? The answer to this question is found with Hrapp's brother, Ketil, and the latter's connection to Christianity.

The evidence for Ketil Flat-Nose's acceptance of Christianity is initially less obvious, but rapidly becomes more firm under examination. Geographically, Ketil's family in Sogn, and his wife's family in Ringerike were well located for early contact with Christianity within Norway.⁷ Also, Ketil's wife, Yngvild, was the daughter of a chieftain in Ringerike.⁸ Chieftains would have heard of Christianity from merchants and Viking raiders, and would have been the first contacts of potential missionaries. With links to prominent families in accessible areas of Norway, it is not impossible for either Ketil or Yngvild to at least have heard of and perhaps somehow be connected to the Christian faith.

Further evidence can be extrapolated from the records concerning the religious affiliation of Ketil's children. Of Ketil's four legitimate children, and one potentially legitimate/illegitimate

⁶ *Landnámabók*, 23. Note 20 from that same page points out: "No such bishop is known from any extant source, and it has been suggested that this is an allusion to St. Patrick of Ireland (d. 461)." However, given the circumstances of other family members being listed as Christians, and the family's reported involvement in the history of the Hebrides, it is not impossible that this account may refer to a Christian priest from those islands. On the other hand, the author of *Landnámabók*, may be speaking metaphorically in this instance. Orlyg might have been placed with an adherent of St. Patrick, and thus metaphorically could be stated to have been placed in fosterage to the well-known Irish saint.

⁷ *Landnámabók*, 22-23. Ringerike is the area located to the immediate west-northwest of present-day Oslo, Norway.

⁸ *Landnámabók*, 44.

child, Bjorn the Easterner is “...the only one of Ketil Flat-Nose’s children never to be baptized.”⁹ *Landnámabók* mentions a clue that may answer why Bjorn was the only one of Ketil’s offspring not to accept Christianity, as well as a possible answer to the question of Ketil’s own religious standing.

Harald Fair-hair, the first king to unite significant portions of Norway under one ruler, extended his territorial ambitions by personally conquering the Hebrides. With his return to Norway, however, the islands slipped from his control. *Landnámabók* states: “When King Harald heard about this, he sent Ketil Flatnose, the son of Bjorn Buna, to reconquer the islands.... When Ketil went west, he left his son Bjorn in charge.”¹⁰ Bjorn is listed as the oldest son of Ketil, and was the natural choice to fill the role of chieftain during his father’s absence. It appears that in connection with the order to re-take the Hebrides, Harald offered Ketil the control of the islands, and Bjorn expected the post of chieftain in Sogn to remain his. However, subsequent events proved him wrong.

“Ketil conquered the entire Hebrides and became chieftain over them, but paid none of the tribute to King Harald that had been agreed upon, *so the king confiscated all his possessions and banished Ketil’s son Bjorn.*”¹¹ Bjorn was apparently upset and angry at the betrayal of his father that cost him an established position. “After [King Harald’s actions] Bjorn went west over

⁹ *Landnámabók*, 44. The legitimacy of a third daughter, Jorunn Wisdomslope is questionable. She is not listed as a daughter of both Ketil and Yngvilde by *Landnámabók*, only as the daughter of Ketil. (See *Landnámabók*, 23, 123.) However, *Eyrbyggja saga* claims that Jorunn as the legitimate daughter of the couple. (See *Eyrbyggja saga*, trans. and with an introduction and notes by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 25.) Based on this inconsistency, Jorunn is listed in the genealogical chart as the daughter of Ketil, but an unknown mother.

¹⁰ *Landnámabók*, 23.

¹¹ *Landnámabók*, 23, emphasis added.

the sea, but wouldn't settle there, and that's why he was nicknamed Bjorn the Easterner."¹² The term 'went west over the sea' implies that Bjorn traveled to the Hebrides after his banishment from Norway.

Eyrbyggja saga corroborates this story in general, but differs in some slight details. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Ketil is also sent to re-take the Hebrides by King Harald, but he is recorded to have taken his family, minus Bjorn, with him. Bjorn is noted as living in Jamtaland, or west-central Sweden, pursuing a bride, and is not recorded as being placed in charge in his father's absence.¹³ Meanwhile, Ketil "...conquered and took charge of the Hebrides, making peace and alliances with all the leading men there in the west. After that, Ketil sent the troops back to Norway. When they came to King Harald, they told him how Ketil Flat-Nose had taken over the Hebrides, but without doing so much to bring the islands under King Harald's rule. Once the King heard this, he confiscated all Ketil's estates in Norway."¹⁴

According to *Eyrbyggja saga*, Bjorn returned from the east, found the king's retainers running his family estate, and subsequently ejected them and took command himself. It is for this seizure of power from the king's stewards that Harald outlawed him, not as retaliation for Ketil's betrayal.¹⁵ Regardless of the cause resulting in his expulsion from Norway, Bjorn then sailed to the Hebrides and reunited with his family. Upon his arrival he faced a startling revelation:

¹² *Landnámabók*, 44.

¹³ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 25-26.

¹⁴ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 25-26.

¹⁵ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 26. Here, *Eyrbyggja saga's* argument for the cause of Bjorn's outlawry seems to be weaker in comparison to the stated case in *Landnámabók*. Why should he eject the king's stewards when he might have appealed to the king to grant him control of the family estate? A probable defense that he was 1) distanced from his family at the time of the betrayal and 2) willing to serve under Harald would have probably played well with the king. However, if he was actively in control of the estate as his father's legal proxy, as stated in *Landnámabók*, it is much more likely that he would have been legally labeled an outlaw and forced to flee.

By the time he reached the Hebrides, his father Ketil had died, but he met his brother Helgi and their sisters, and they invited him to share in their prosperity. Bjorn discovered they had changed their faith and thought it very weak-minded of them to have renounced the old belief of their forefathers, so he didn't fancy the place and refused to make his home there, though he did spend the winter with his sister Aud and her son Thorstein. When the family realized that Bjorn intended paying no attention to them, they started calling him Bjorn the Easterner, and thought less of him for having refused to settle there.¹⁶

When combined together, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Landnámabók* demonstrate the clear conversion of Bjorn's siblings after their arrival in the Hebrides, and strongly argue for the conversion of Ketil as well. *Landnámabók* indicates that after King Harald's original withdrawal from the islands "...Vikings, Scots, and Irishmen invaded the islands, plundering and killing everywhere."¹⁷ These were undoubtedly the groups which Harald had forced to flee the islands during his invasion. *Eyrbyggja saga* records that Ketil "...fought a number of battles, and won them all. He conquered and took charge of the Hebrides, making *peace and alliances with all the leading men* there in the west."¹⁸ Thus, the leading men Ketil had to deal with were Híbreo-Norse, Irish, and Scots from the Hebrides and surrounding areas who had interests in the region, some of whom were undoubtedly proponents of Christianity. This argument is further manifest in the choice of husband for his daughters Aud and Thorunn. Aud was betrothed to Olaf the White, a Viking chieftain who had conquered Dublin, and Thorunn was matched with Helgi the Lean, son of Eyvind the Easterner and Rafarta, daughter of King Kjarval of Ireland.¹⁹ The

¹⁶ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 30-31.

¹⁷ *Landnámabók*, 23.

¹⁸ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 25, emphasis added.

¹⁹ See *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 26 and *Landnámabók*, 50-51, 96. Both sources cite a 'King Kjarval' who is identified with the Irish historical monarch Cerball Mac Dúnlainge according to the Irish historian Donnchadh Ó Corráin. (See Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Viking Ireland—Afterthoughts,' in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, ed. H. B. Clarke, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, and Ragnall Ó Floinn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 440-

family's acceptance of Christianity is further bolstered by the story of their cousin Orlyg, and his fosterage by Bishop Patrick. It is arguable that Hrapp and at least his son Orlyg joined Ketil for the expedition to retake the Hebrides, and both families became affiliated with local Christians in an effort to merge with the local hierarchy in the islands.

With the particulars of the conversion of Ketil and his family established, their conversion experience can now be reviewed in light of the findings of Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. The first two propositions to remember are that “In making religious choices, people will attempt to conserve their social capital” and “[s]ocial capital consists of interpersonal attachments.”²⁰ Also: “Under normal circumstances, most people will neither convert nor reaffiliate.”²¹ Ketil and his family would have faced direct social pressure to maintain their traditional faith from neighbors, kinfolk, and even King Harald—the result of Ketil's prominent position as chieftain, had the family remained in Norway. Instead, the family found themselves in a new, unique situation given Ketil's position as the successful conqueror of a remote, difficult-to-access area with previous ties to Christian dominated areas. This illustrates the

442.) In this work Ó Corráin takes issue with the Icelandic use of Cerball Mac Dúnlainge as an ancestor figure due to the wide time frame, from approximately 860-1039, in which Cerball Mac Dúnlainge's reported first generation offspring are listed as originators in Icelandic pedigrees, clearly an impossibility. This argument may work for some lines, but not for the particular line of Rafarta—Helgi. His main contention against Rafarta is that she has a “less easily explained” etymology for her name. He does not argue the argument of Cerball Mac Dúnlainge as a known figure from the late 9th century in a possible position to have marriageable offspring in the beginning of the Icelandic settlement; rather, he argues that errors in genealogical chronology later in Icelandic settlement void all usage of Cerball Mac Dúnlainge as a genealogical figure and argues that his inclusion in Icelandic sources is the result of Irish-Icelandic connections closer to the eleventh-century compilation of many of the Icelandic sources. The eleventh century is also the correct placement of the inaccurate Icelandic genealogical lines. While this theory fits the facts of errors in later familial claims to King Kjarval/ Cerball Mac Dúnlainge in Icelandic sources, it does not adequately argue the dismissal of earlier claims.

²⁰ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 118-119.

²¹ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 119.

principle that “[t]o the extent that people have or develop stronger attachments to those committed to a religion in a different tradition, they will convert.”²²

Likewise, Bjorn’s failure to convert is also illustrated in Starke and Finke’s hypothesis. Unlike his family, who were placed in a new position with the opportunity to grow their social capital through conversion, he remained isolated among the traditional society in Norway with no opportunity to convert. Furthermore, his social capital was significantly damaged as the result of his family’s conversion, resulting in his exile from Norway and the loss of a position which had increased his social standing. Therefore, when he arrived in the Hebrides and was given the opportunity to accept Christianity, he rejected it because of the personal and social damage he had already suffered. In fact, for Bjorn, his faith in traditional Scandinavian belief represented the only constant in his life that he may have felt remained to him, for not only had he lost his homeland and position, by the time he arrived in the Hebrides his father had died as well. In choosing not to convert he demonstrated Starke and Finke’s proposition that “[i]n making religious choices, people will attempt to conserve their religious capital,” where “[r]eligious capital consists of the degree of mastery of, and attachment to, a particular religious culture.”²³ The further loss of his traditional religion may have been more than he could bear, as it was the only constant which remained of his old life. Within two years, Bjorn left the Hebrides on his way to Iceland to establish a new life for himself, perhaps away from the family who had caused him such difficulty.²⁴

²² Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 119.

²³ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 120-121.

²⁴ See *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 31 and *Landnámabók*, 44. Bjorn is recorded as arriving in Iceland at least before his sister Aud, whom he cordially welcomed to the island, but it is unknown if he arrived before the other members of his family. (See *Landnámabók*, 52.) *Eyrbyggja saga* records that he spent the winter with Aud after arriving in the Hebrides, so it appears that he maintained good relations with at least one of his siblings.

Despite Bjorn's anti-Christian stance, the remainder of Ketil's family immigrated to Iceland and formed the core of a small Christian community on the islands who continued to be well-remembered up until the time of the composition of *Landnámabók*.

According to well-informed people some of the settlers of Iceland were baptized, mostly those who came from the British Isles. These are specially mentioned: Helgi the Lean, Orlyg the Old, Helgi Bjolan, Jorund the Christian, Aud the Deep-Minded, Ketil the Foolish, and a number of others who came from the west. Some of them kept up their faith till they died, but in most families this didn't last, for the sons of some built temples and made sacrifices, and Iceland was completely pagan for about 120 years.²⁵

Some family lines did abandon Christianity after their arrival in Iceland, but not all. In fact, the descendants of Jorunn Wisdom-Slope and individuals attached to Aud's household maintained an uninterrupted devotion to Christianity and these descendants became connected to the more famous Christianization efforts of 999/1000. These particular lines will be discussed in more detail below in Chapter 3. However, Christian Scandinavians were not the only individuals opposed to traditional pagan practices. As strange as it seems, atheists also existed in pagan Scandinavia and stood in opposition to the teachings and rites of the traditional religion just as modern atheists oppose the concepts of religion. One such familial group became associated with the descendents of Hrapp.

Merging Families in Iceland

In addition to Orlyg, Hrapp is known to have sired at least one other son by the name of Thord Skeggi who also immigrated to Iceland and settled there; however, it is unknown if he

²⁵ *Landnámabók*, 147. This is an interesting list given in *Landnámabók*. Helgi the Lean, Orlyg, Helgi Bjolan, Aud, and Ketil the Foolish, the son of Jorunn Wisdom-Slope, are all clearly members of Ketil and Hrapp's family. This leaves 'Jorund the Christian' the only member of the list not a confirmed member of the clan. Jorund is a male name, but the closeness to either of the female names Thorunn or Jorunn, both daughters of Ketil, makes a possible argument for the author making a mistake in his record.

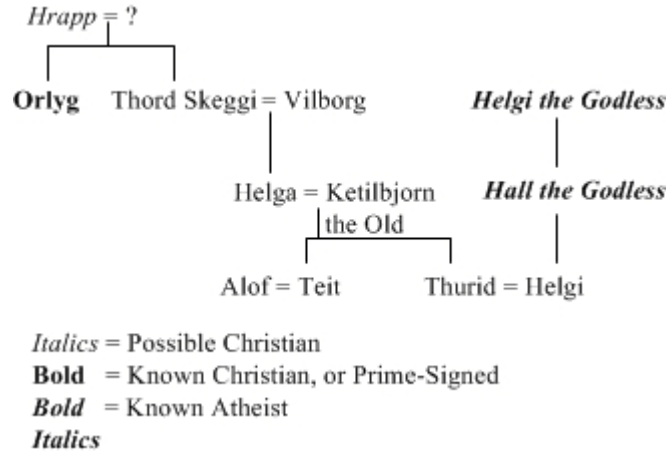


Figure 2
The Descendants of Hrapp

converted to Christianity as Orlyg had.²⁶ (See Figure 2.) He married Vilborg, the daughter of Osvald, and together they presumably had only one daughter, Helga. The family settled between the Ulfars River and Leiru Creek.²⁷ Their neighbor, who had settled between Leiru Creek and the Mogils River to the north, was an atheist, Hall the Godless, son of Helgi the Godless. “Father and son believed in their own strength and refused to hold sacrifices.”²⁸

Meanwhile, Orlyg settled on the north side of Hall between the Mogils River and Osvifs Brook, where he constructed a church dedicated to St. Columba.²⁹ In addition, Orlyg’s cousin, Helgi Bjolan, also a Christian, settled to the north-east of Orlyg between the Mogils and Mydale Rivers.³⁰

²⁶ *Landnámabók*, 22.

²⁷ *Landnámabók*, 22. The locations of settlement of Thord, Hall, and Helgi are located to the east/north-east of present-day Reykjavík.

²⁸ *Landnámabók*, 22.

²⁹ *Landnámabók*, 24.

³⁰ *Landnámabók*, 23.

Helga married Ketilbjorn, known as the Old, and had a large family. Among the children was a daughter, Thurid. Thurid married Helgi, Hall the Godless' son. Thus two groups, one with family traditions of Christianity and one with family traditions of atheism combined in the face of paganism. Just as with the family of Ketil Flat-Nose, a brief analysis of the family of Thord Skeggi and Hall the Godless is beneficial.

Thord, Orlyg, and Helgi Bjolan all settled close to each other, thus creating a social network between the three relatives. Orlyg and Helgi were definite Christians who had access to an organized meeting place under Orlyg's control. As such, they can fall under Starke and Finke's rule that "[t]he greater their religious capital, the less likely people are either to reaffiliate or to convert."³¹ Their experiences in the Hebrides, close contact with family, and access to a sanctified worship site provided them with a good store of religious and social capital.

Their neighbor Hall, while also opposed to paganism, had less social capital as he was a stranger. Furthermore, his religious capital was low, as he sided with neither his Christian neighbors, nor the wider pagan community. However, his family gained definite social capital, and potential religious capital, through the marriage of his son Helgi to Thurid, the granddaughter of Thord Skeggi. This illustrates an inverse to the above principle of Starke and Finke. "To the extent that people have or develop stronger attachments to those committed to a different version of their traditional religion, they will reaffiliate."³² In this instance, the reaffiliation possible represents the choice to unite to another minority family instead of a 'conversion' by uniting to one of the majority, fully pagan families. A 'pagan atheist' might have viewed Christianity as potentially more akin to his own line of thinking, namely being rewarded or

³¹ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 121

³² Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 119.

punished based on the strength and validity of his own actions, than the sacrifices required to placate or win the favor of variable gods.

The family of Ketil and Hrapp were not the only Icelandic settlers to be affected by the diffusion of Christianity through kinship and social networks. *Kristni saga*, a mid-twelfth century Icelandic record, records two late tenth-century attempts to introduce Christianity to the island; one case was apparently mildly successful, while the other ended in quiet failure.³³

Christianization Efforts in the 980s

The mildly successful venture began with the figure of Thorvald Kodransson who participated in Viking raids across Europe. In the course of his travels he became well-known for his generosity as he “...used the booty he got for the release of men taken captive in battle...Because of this, he became famous and well loved.”³⁴ His movements took him as far south as Saxony where he came in contact with a bishop by the name of Fridrek at whose hand he accepted Christianity.³⁵ This is probably the same bishop Fridrek that Ari Thorgilsson mentions in his *Íslendingabók* who “... came here [to Iceland] during the heathen period...”³⁶ Thorvald convinced the bishop to return with him to Iceland in an effort to “...baptize his father and mother and others of his relatives who were willing to follow his advice. The bishop granted

³³ *Kristni saga* in *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006).

³⁴ *Kristni saga*, 35.

³⁵ *Kristni saga*, 35.

³⁶ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 10.

him this.”³⁷ They arrived in Iceland “the summer that the land had been inhabited for one hundred and seven years,” or approximately 981-982 C.E.³⁸

In addition to Thorvald’s family, a small group of converts, including some prominent individuals, are listed as accepting the proffered message. Among them were “Önundr the Christian,...Hlenni the Old,... Phorvarðr Spak-Böðvarsson,...and Eyjolfr Válgerðarson [who] had himself prime-signed.”³⁹ A further peripheral adherent, Thorkell Krafla, was also prime-signed following a miraculous confrontation between two armed berserkers and Bishop Fridrek.⁴⁰ The details of Kodran’s conversion, Thorvald’s father, as well as the relationships between those who accepted Thorvald and Fridrek’s preaching are further illustrative of Starke and Finke’s conversion principles.

Kodran’s conversion story reveals one possible mode of thought which occurred to pagans offered the choice of conversion to Christianity:

Phorvarðr asked his father to be baptised, but he was slow to respond. At Giljá there stood a stone to which he and his kinsmen used to sacrifice, and they claimed that their guardian spirit lived in it. Koðrán said that he would not have himself baptised until he knew who was more powerful, the bishop or the spirit in the stone. After that, the bishop went to the stone and chanted over it until the stone broke apart. Then Koðrán thought he understood that the spirit had been overcome. Koðrán then had himself and his whole household baptised, except that his son Ormr did not wish to accept the faith.⁴¹

³⁷ *Kristni saga*, 35.

³⁸ *Kristni saga*, 35. See *Kristni saga*, 57, note 5 for a discussion of various dating arguments.

³⁹ *Kristni saga*, 35.

⁴⁰ *Kristni saga*, 36.

⁴¹ *Kristni saga*, 35-36.

At first glance the anecdote of Kodran's refusal based on the presence of a protective spirit who is overcome by the force of Bishop Fridrek's faith appears to be nothing more than a conversion myth. On deeper inspection the story reveals anxieties and difficulties associated with conversion.

Stark and Finke's primary conversion propositions state that "[i]n making religious choices, people will attempt to conserve their social capital" and "[s]ocial capital consists of interpersonal attachments."⁴² For Kodran, his primary social capital involved the relationship with his family; however, the typical balance of social capital as expressed in a father/son relationship was altered by his son Thorvald, and his growing social capital. This is illustrated, first by Thorvald's increased fame due to his generosity exhibited towards war captives, and yet tempered by his conversion to an outside religious faith. In order to fully tap into Thorvald's new-found reserves of potential social capital, Kodran might have felt pressure to convert to his son's new faith. However, such a move placed him in the necessity of weighing the resulting loss of social capital from the other, more traditional social networks in his life. In breaking the stone, Bishop Fridrek represents the triumph of the new social capital represented by Thorvald and Christianity vs. the old social capital represented by the spirit and the unnamed pagan kinsman who had worshiped the stone. The one member of the family who does not accept the new social capital, Orm, severed his ties with his family, his primary social network, moved to a new area, and formed new social networks based on traditional ideas with which he was more comfortable.

Specific details of the conversion of the other five Icelanders contacted by Thorvald and Bishop Fridrek are not mentioned. However, genealogical details from *Landnámabók* indicate the genealogical relationship, albeit sometimes distant, between four of the men and Thorvald,

⁴² Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 118-119.

and reveal a potential association with the fifth. The closest, and most direct connection, is with Eyjolf Valgerdaron. (See Figure 3.)

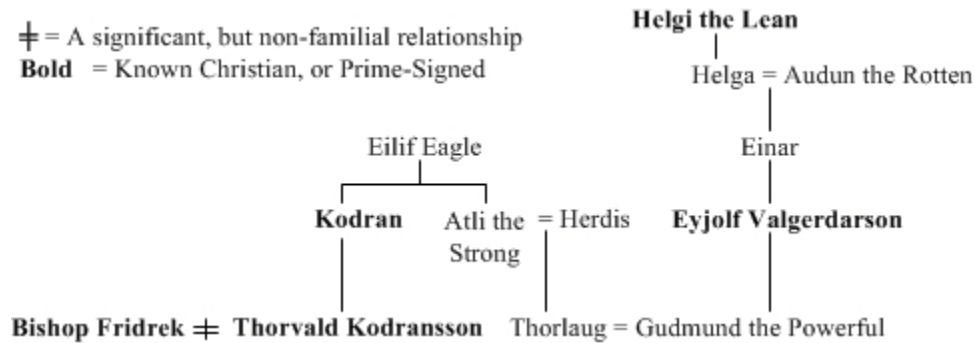


Figure 3
From Thorvald to Eyjolf

Eyjolf Valgerdaron was the father-in-law to Thorvald’s first cousin Thorlaug. In addition, Eyjolf was a direct descendant of Helgi the Lean, so Christianity at one time had been a part of his family tradition.⁴³ He also represents the phenomenon of prime-signing which often occurred in religious interactions between Scandinavians and early Christians. Eyjolf was among the leading men in Iceland and was one of the recognized chieftains from the northern section of the island.⁴⁴ Thus he was able to benefit from increased social capital on the part of Christians, but without formally alienating himself from his traditional social circle. This option was also chosen by Thorkel Krafla.

Thorvald’s connection to Thorkel proceeds through another of his first cousins, Thorarin. (See Figure 4.) Thorarin’s wife Halla was a first cousin, twice removed from Thorkel Krafla.⁴⁵ As with Eyjolf, Thorkel only chose prime-signing rather than full baptism. His acceptance of

⁴³ For the connection between Thorvald and Eyjolf see *Landnámabók*, 88, 101-102 and *Njal’s Saga*, trans. and with an introduction and notes by Robert Cook (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 190.

⁴⁴ *Kristni saga*, 35.

⁴⁵ See *Landnámabók*, 88, 83-86.

Christianity came as the result of a confrontation between two berserks on the one hand, and Thorvald and Bishop Fridrek on the other, at an autumn festival.

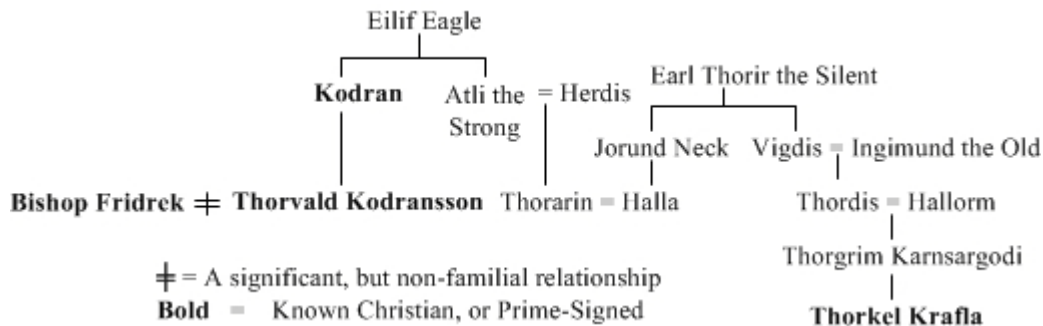


Figure 4
From Thorvald to Thorkel

The berserks disrupted the festival, and were confronted by the bishop, apparently at the request of the other guests, and when the troublesome duo attempted to pass through a fire blessed by the cleric they suffered terrible burns. The miracle so gripped the crowd that “...Thorkel krafla had himself prime-signed, but many who had been present at this event were baptised.”⁴⁶

Thorkel’s decision to be prime-signed and reluctance to accept full entry into Christianity through baptism appears in contradiction to others who observed this same event. However, the matter becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of Thorkel’s political state. Like Eyjolf, Thorkel was a chieftain from the northern quarter, and full conversion at this time would have upset the political balance he needed to support his position.⁴⁷ However, accepting the ritual of prime-signing would play to Christian ideals while not fully alienating pagans, especially given the reported display of Christian super-natural power seen in the defeat of the berserkers.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Kristni saga*, 36.

⁴⁷ *Kristni saga*, 35.

Another of Thorvald and Fridrek’s converts, Thorvard Spak-Bodvarsson, was also a chieftain of the northern quarter, but he accepted Christianity fully, underwent baptism and built a church. However, the violent reaction to his conversion indicates why his fellow leaders Eyjolf and Thorkel probably opted for the lesser connection to Christianity of prime-signing in lieu of full conversion. Thorvard was from the same generation as Thorvald, but their connection was much further removed than those of Eyjolf and Thorkel, only coming through marriage.⁴⁹ (See Figure 5.)

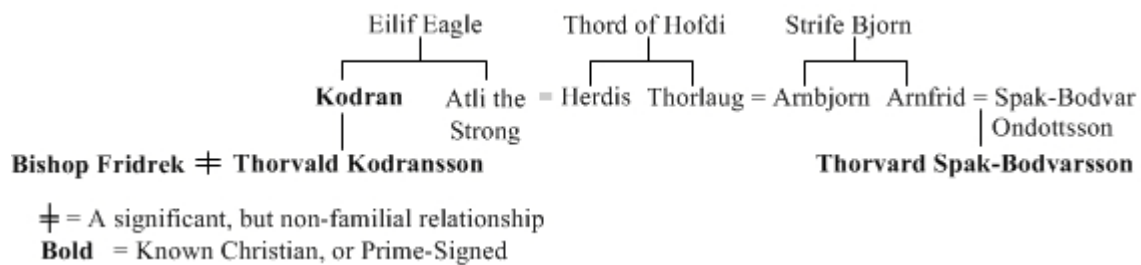


Figure 5
From Thorvald to Thorvard

Thorvard faced opposition to his conversion from Klaufi Thorvaldsson, a lesser chieftain from the area, who plotted with Arngeir, Thorvard’s brother, to “...either burn down the church or kill the priest the bishop had provided for it.”⁵⁰ When asked his opinion of the plan Arngeir said he was “...against any of [his] friends harming the priest, because [his] brother [had]

⁴⁸ Since the ritual of prime-signing involved the priest making the sign of the cross over the recipient, Thorkel may have responded to pagan critics in a manner similar to Earl Sigurth of Norway in defense of King Hakon the Good of Norway when the latter was confronted with the propriety of making the sign of the cross during a pagan ritual. (See Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar saga góða* in *Heimskringla*, trans. Lee M. Hollander [Austin: University of Texas Press, Austin, 1964], 110-111.) Hakon was the first Christian monarch of Norway and attempted to introduce the religion there with limited success. During one instance his audience refused the message and forced him to take part in a traditional toast to Odin. The king made the sign of the cross over the cup before drinking. When confronted about this blasphemous conduct the king’s quick thinking advisor, Earl Sigurth, stepped in and claimed he had made the sign of Thor’s hammer. The crowd accepted the explanation. The statement is a definite twisting of the truth of the matter, but represents a grasp of *realpolitik* which early Christian Scandinavians would have had to employ to maintain and further the spread of Christianity.

⁴⁹ See *Landnámabók*, 88, 92.

⁵⁰ *Kristni saga*, 37.

ruthlessly avenged lesser wrongs. But [he thought] it a good plan to burn down the church, although [he wanted] nothing to do with it.”⁵¹ Arngeir’s response shows that Thorvard’s social capital, although diminished in light of his conversion to Christianity, was still significant. He retained enough capital that his overall societal position was not so diminished that he would have been unable to respond legally to the death of someone connected to him, a feature of Scandinavian law. Furthermore, within his immediate family Arngeir did not want to directly participate in actions against his brother who, as chieftain, was the titular head of the family.⁵²

Bishop Fridrek and Thorvald are credited with the conversion of at least two more individuals, Hlenni the Old and Onund the Christian. The most direct connection of these two individuals to the social-kinship network of Christians established by Thorvald is through the personage of Eyjolf Valgerdason. For Hlenni, the connection is certain; for Onund, less so.

In the case of Hlenni the relationship, although distant, is clear. Hlenni was the nephew of Gaudlaug, Eyjolf’s first cousin, once removed.⁵³ (See Figure 6.) The relationship between Eyjolf and Onund is less certain, although circumstantial evidence points to a possible, albeit tenuous familial connection.

⁵¹ *Kristni saga*, 37.

⁵² Although he was able to survive diminished social capital the question remains, why did Thorvard Spak-Bodvarsson choose full conversion as opposed to prime-signing? A clue may lie in the fact that not only did Thorvard build a church, but he had a priest to man it. *Kristni saga* states that the bishop provided the priest who officiated at Thorvard’s church. The logical assumption is that the bishop in question is Fridrek. However, the account does not indicate that this clergyman either came with Bishop Fridrek as part of a missionary force, nor does it state that he was a local convert who was consecrated to officiate in the ecclesiastical office. However, a third possibility is that this unnamed cleric was a native Icelandic Christian who Fridrek contacted to officiate in Thorvard’s church. The possible presence of a Christian community in the vicinity of Áss, the location of Thorvard’s farm, might indicate a further incentive for him to accept Christianity in the face of otherwise diminished social capital.

⁵³ On Eyjolf’s descent from Helgi see *Landnámabók*, 101-102. On Hlenni’s relation to Gudlaug, see *Landnámabók*, 102-103.

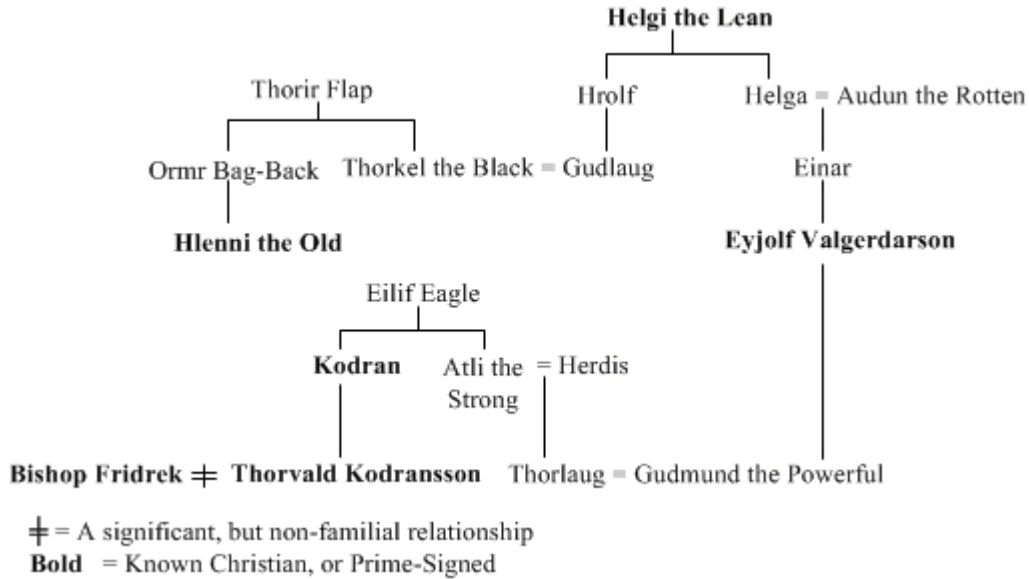


Figure 6
From Thorvald to Eyjolf, then Hlenni

According to *Landnámabók*, Eyjolf’s wife Hallbera had an uncle named Geirmund. His wife was Thorgerd, the daughter of Gimlet-Helgi.⁵⁴ Onund the Christian is recorded in *Kristni saga* to be the son of Thorgils Grenjadarson from Reykjardal.⁵⁵ Thorgils is noted in *Landnámabók* as being both the father of Onund, and the son of Grenjad Hrapsson, who “...married Thorgerd, daughter of Helgi Horse.”⁵⁶ If Gimlet-Helgi and Helgi Horse are, in fact, the same individual then Thorgerd is the same woman in both pedigrees who had married twice. Unfortunately, there appears to be no substantial proof either way to test this hypothesis. Without further documentary evidence, proof of Onund’s familial connection to Eyjolf remains only a possibility. (See Figure 7.)

⁵⁴ *Landnámabók*, 88, 94-95.

⁵⁵ *Kristni saga*, 35.

⁵⁶ *Landnámabók*, 106. Note that this English translation of *Landnámabók*, renders Thorgils name as ‘Thorgeir.’ A cross reference to an Icelandic edition of *Landnámabók* renders his name as the more traditional ‘Torgils.’ See *Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson. Íslenzk fornrit, 1.2 (Reykjavik: Hid Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968), 278-279.

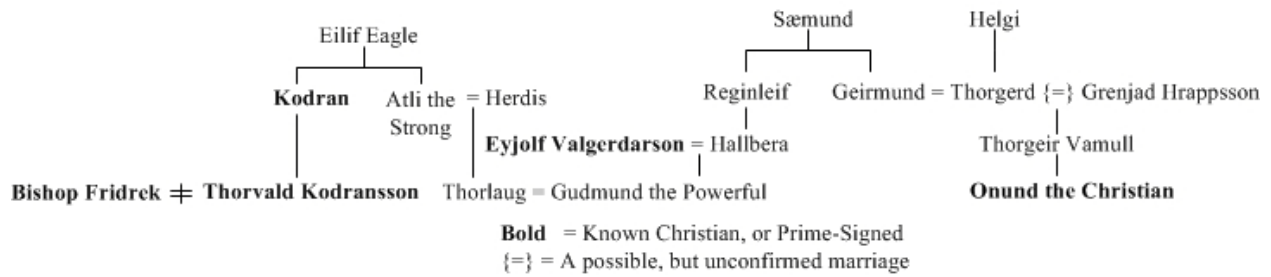


Figure 7
From Thorvald to Eyjolf; possible connection to Onund

While ties of kinship, even distant kinship, certainly bound Thorvald to five, if not all six of his named converts, social network bonds further united three of the men. Thorvard Spak-Bodvarsson, Eyjolf Valgerdason, and Thorkel Krafla were all considered among “the greatest chieftains” of Iceland in the year Thorvald and Bishop Fridrek arrived on the island.⁵⁷ Also numbered among the prominent Chieftains were Gizurr the White, Hjalti Skeggjason, and Sidu-Hall, important figures in the conversion efforts of 995-1000, more of which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Therefore, in the early conversion efforts of Thorvald and Fridrek, familial and social connections were clearly in place and operating among the converts to Christianity. Furthermore, some of these individuals were particularly prominent in their community and their conversion would have resulted in an increasing exposure of Christianity and discussion within Icelandic society and within their peer groups which included later Christian adherents. However, before discussing that most well-known incident of Icelandic conversion, a lesser-known, and indeed ineffectual effort, deserves investigation.

⁵⁷ *Kristni saga*, 35. Of the three remaining converts, Kodran was Thorvald’s father, Hlenni the Old was most directly connected to Eyjolf Valgerdason, and Onund the Christian may have been connected to Eyjolf.

Failed Conversion Efforts in the Face of Familial Opposition

Kristni saga briefly records a failed conversion effort shortly before the successful, and most well-known conversion account recorded in *Íslendingabók* around the years 995-1000. The failed effort was undertaken by one Stefnir, an Icelander living in either Ireland or Norway, and in the company of the new king of Norway, Olaf Tryggvason.⁵⁸ Following the latter's successful seizure of the Norwegian throne, Stefnir was dispatched to his homeland to preach Christianity to Iceland. Although unsuccessful, the details of his failed missionary efforts give further clues to the familial and social dimensions involved in the conversion. The record states;

But when he got to Iceland, then people received him badly, and his kinsmen worst of all, because all people were then heathen in this country. And he travelled boldly north and south, and taught people the true faith, but they were not much moved by his teaching. And when he saw that it was not making headway, then he began to destroy temples and places of worship and to break up idols. Then the heathens assembled a company of men and he then escaped with difficulty to Kjalarnes and stayed there with his kinsmen...

That summer at the Althing, it was made law that kinsmen of Christians who were closer than fourth and more distantly related than second cousins must prosecute them for blasphemy. That summer Stefnir was prosecuted for being a Christian. His kinsmen conducted the suit, because Christianity was then called a disgrace to one's family. The sons of Ósvífr the Wise, Þórólfr and Áskell, Vandráðr and Torráðr, prosecuted him, but Óspakr wanted no part in it...

Stefnir went abroad in the summer and King Óláfr received him well.⁵⁹

Several clues from the text are evident concerning Stefnir's access to, and use of, the power in social relationships. Unlike Thorvald Kodransson, who had become well known and socially influential due to his ransoming of battle captives, Stefnir does not appear to have any

⁵⁸ *Kristni saga*, 39.

⁵⁹ *Kristni saga*, 39-40.

significant social position beyond being commissioned by Olaf Tryggvason of Norway to preach in Iceland. Furthermore, although Stefnir is called by the king to preach it is unclear if he is a priest and therefore has the ecclesiastical authority to baptize potential converts. It is possible that he was accompanied by a group which included a priest and he was tasked by the king as the leader of the expedition. Indirect evidence in the form of the destruction of idols and temples in Iceland gives some weight to this theory, as it would be easier for a small group to do significant damage to religious shrines than a single individual working alone with no support base at all. Regardless of the particulars, Stefnir seems to have been unable to capitalize on any degree of social bonds by which to influence the Icelanders towards Christianity.

Having failed to use social connections, Stefnir's familial connections must be closer examined. *Kristni Saga* states that "...people received him badly, and his kinsmen worst of all..." and that they later brought a legal suit against him.⁶⁰ Yet he was not totally without family support. When he fled a group of angry Icelanders after the destruction of their idols and temples, Stefnir "...escaped with difficulty to Kjalrnes and stayed there with his kinsmen."⁶¹ Clearly, some family members actively opposed his missionary efforts, and others, while not supportive of his religious deeds, were at least willing to offer him temporary sanctuary within the familial unit. Details within the account reveal the composition of this division.

Stefnir's pedigree as stated in *Kristni saga* reveals a direct connection to the family branch in Kjalrnes which harbored him for a short time. He is described as being the son of Torgils, who in turn descended from Eilifr, son of Helgi Bjolan, the noted early Icelandic

⁶⁰ *Kristni saga*, 39-40.

⁶¹ *Kristni saga*, 40.

Christian and settler of Kjalrnes.⁶² There does not appear to be any direct link between Stefmir's Christian belief and that of his great-grandfather; however, the fact that Helgi was a known Christian may have influenced the family to accept Stefmir into the family and offer him temporary sanctuary. This good-will ceased, however, once the Althing changed the law during the summer assembly and Stefmir was prosecuted.

The missionary's prosecutors are more easily established in the archival records. *Kristni saga* lists his accusers as a group of four brothers, all sons of Osvif the Wise: Thorolf, Askel, Vandrad, and Torrad. A fifth brother, Ospak, is noted as declining to take part in the suit.⁶³ Osvif and his sons are confirmed descendents of Helgi Bjolan's brother, Bjorn the Easterner; specifically the line consisted of Bjorn, Ottar, Helgi, and then Osvif and his sons.⁶⁴ Bjorn the Easterner, it should be remembered, was the only one of his siblings not to accept Christianity. (See Figure 8.) Therefore, in the case of Stefmir, two branches of the same family, one with links to a Christian past, one with links to an anti-Christian past, came together in a familial/social power struggle which extended to a legal shift in Icelandic law.

⁶² *Kristni saga*, 39, *Landnámabók*, 23. *Landnámabók* does not record Helgi Bjolan as having a son Eilifr, instead only listing Killer-Hrapp and Kollsvein as sons. It does, however, confirm his settling of the area of Kjalrnes. Eilifr's absence from *Landnámabók* is somewhat distressing, but does not constitute irrefutable proof of an error in the genealogy presented in *Kristni saga*. *Kjalnesinga saga* (The saga of the people of Kjalnes), ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, Íslensk fornrit , 14 (Reykjavík: Híð íslenska fornritafélag , 1954), 3, offers a different take than *Landnámabók*. *Kjalnesinga saga* agrees that Helgi settled in Kjalrnes and had two sons. However, they are named as Þorgrímur and Arngrímur. An Eilifr is numbered among the crew of Helgi's vessel and is given land nearby, but he is not named as a son or other relation of Helgi. When comparing the three sources, we see that Helgi arrived in Kjalrnes, and had at least two, perhaps three sons. Given the mention of only two sons in two out of the three sources, perhaps Eilifr was an illegitimate son, where the other pair were considered the legitimate heirs.

⁶³ *Kristni saga*, 40.

⁶⁴ *Landnámabók*, 44-45 lists Osvif's children as sons Ospak, Thorolf, Thorrad, Einar, Thorbjorn, and Thorkel, and a daughter Gudrun. Of the sons, Ospak, Thorolf, and Thorrad correspond exactly between the accounts, while Askel, Vandrad, Einar, Thorbjorn, and Thorkel do not.



Figure 8
Christian and Pagan descendants of Ketil Flat-Nose

The legal definitions of the law are telling. Christianity was defined as “a disgrace to one’s family.”⁶⁵ Yet the new law noted an interesting caveat for individuals desirous to purge the disgrace of Christianity from their family tree. It was that only those relatives “...who were closer than fourth and more distantly related than second cousins must prosecute [Christians] for blasphemy.”⁶⁶ Sián Grønlie puts this situation down to the kinship system in Iceland and the legal requirements of law: “Brothers and first cousins were too close to prosecute family members, but prosecution by those more distantly related than fourth cousins would lead to wealth and property passing outside the family.”⁶⁷ Another reason is that brothers and first cousins of Christians would have been among those a missionary would have first sought out in an attempt to garner followers. Close family members would have already been ‘tainted’ and, therefore, unreliable legal witnesses for a prosecution; in fact, they may have already become

⁶⁵ *Kristni saga*, 40.

⁶⁶ *Kristni saga*, 40.

⁶⁷ *Kristni saga*, 63, n39.

Christians themselves; unfortunately, there are no reliable figures for either the estimated Christian population of Iceland at this time, or the total population of the island. This new law on the part of the Icelanders resulted in Stefnir's family in Kjalrnes eventually abandoning him as far as protection was concerned. As a result, he fled the island and returned to the court of King Olaf Tryggvason in Norway. With his departure, what can be termed the initial phase of Christian activity in Iceland drew to a close. However, the initial efforts had established a precedence of a Christian presence on the island. Furthermore, the groundwork had been laid for the second phase of the conversion, which efforts began in 995, and culminated in the radical conversion of 999/1000 C.E. These efforts, along with the conversion of Greenland, will be detailed in chapter three.

CHAPTER 3

LATER ICELANDIC AND GREENLAND CHRISTIANS

By the last decade of the tenth century Christianity had already been introduced to, and become a part of, Icelandic culture in the form of Christian settlers, and a handful of proselytizing efforts on the part of both natives and outsiders; however, Christianity's most energetic attempt to become part of the cultural landscape of the island began with the arrival of yet another missionary in approximately the year 995 C.E.

This attempt, which would turn out to be a major victory for the progress of Christianity on the island, figures prominently in the account *Íslendingabók*, or Book of the Icelanders, written by the historian Ari Thorgilsson in the first quarter of the twelfth century.¹ Although his account is brief, it provides a solid foundation for establishing some of the important characters, chronology, and overall framework for understanding the events leading up to, and including the acceptance of Christianity by the Icelandic population.

Nevertheless, Ari's important work only remains a skeleton on which other works can give further insight and depth, especially concerning greater insight into the familial and social nature of the conversion process. Among these supporting documents are Oddr Snorrason's saga concerning King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway, and *Njáls saga*.² Also, the family genealogies of *Landnámabók*, and some details noted in *Kristni saga* will continue to guide the investigation.³

¹ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók* in *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006).

² Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, trans. Theodore M. Andersson. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); *Njal's Saga*, trans. with an introduction and notes by Robert Cook (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

³ *Landnámabók- The Book of Settlements*, trans. and with an introduction and notes by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972); *Kristni Saga* in *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga*:

The Mission of Thangbrand

The first important detail noted by Ari is that King Olaf once again actively supported the preaching of Christianity in Iceland by dispatching another priest, this time a Saxon by the name of Thangbrand, but that the king himself had only indirect influence on the situation.⁴ Olaf specifically tasked Thangbrand to preach Christianity to the Icelanders and hopefully convert a significant number. What is unclear is the exact extent of Olaf's patronage and support of the missionizing efforts of Thangbrand. Neither Ari nor Oddr give any insight into the details of the planning, makeup, size, or precise goals of Thangbrand's mission, beyond the injunction to preach Christianity, and the knowledge that Olaf instigated the venture.⁵ *Kristni saga* and *Njáls saga* do, however, report that Thangbrand was accompanied by others in his mission, although exact numbers are not given⁶.

It is clear from this and previous conversion missions that the king was eager that Iceland should accept baptism, and he most likely wished for his name to be attached to this expedition, but nowhere is it overtly stated that King Olaf urged Thangbrand to encourage either an alliance between the Icelanders and Olaf as part of a political or economic incentive in return for the Icelanders conceding on the question of accepting Christianity. However, as will be shown later,

The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006).

⁴ Thangbrand's identification as a Saxon comes from *Njal's Saga*, 173 and from *Kristni saga*, 38, where he is identified as the son of Count Vilbald of Bremen.

⁵ *Kristni Saga* adds the interesting detail that Thangbrand had served Olaf as the king's chaplain, but became involved in some outlandish behavior, including a death duel over the ownership of an Irish slave girl. As penance for his crimes, and in an effort to regain the king's good graces, Thangbrand was assigned the task of attempting to convert the Icelanders following the failed attempt and return of the Icelander Stefnir. See *Kristni saga*, 38-41.

⁶ See *Kristni saga*, 41, and *Njal's Saga*, 173. *Njáls saga* gives the name of at least one companion- Gudleif: "...a great warrior and very brave, tough in every way." The specific naming of Gudleif and his personality may indicate he was acting as Thangbrand's bodyguard.

evidence exists that such ties may have played a part, at least on a personal, and perhaps at an official level. Ari and Oddr record that Olaf did employ more overt pressure in the form of threatened physical violence towards Icelanders living in Norway in subsequent dealings with the reluctant potential converts, but a conservative reading of the sources for the initial contact reveals no such blatant attempts early on. Rather, subtler means were attempted. What can be definitively stated is that Thangbrand left to preach Christianity and Olaf was aware of the effort and gave his blessing on the project.

Regardless of the extent of possible political maneuverings, Thangbrand arrived in Iceland and the missionary enjoyed some success. He “baptized all those who accepted the faith.”⁷ Ari briefly lists converts: Hall Thorsteinsson of Sida, Hjalti Skeggjason, and Gizur the White along with “many other chieftains; but those who spoke against Christianity and rejected it were, even so, in the majority.”⁸ *Íslendingabók* then quickly moves on to recount that after a stay of one or two years, Thangbrand left the island. However, *Kristni saga* and *Njáls saga* show a much more detailed account of the events relating to Thangbrand’s arrival, as well as revealing the identity of some of the “other chieftains” and what led to their conversion.

Both *Kristni saga* and *Njáls saga* report that the Icelanders who initially encountered Thangbrand’s party, upon discovering that the priest and his men were Christians, refused to speak to them or help them in any way.⁹ At this point the accounts diverge slightly. *Njáls saga* reports that Thangbrand was sought out by the chieftain Hall of Sida, or Sidu-Hall, who had heard there were merchants in the area; on the other hand, *Kristni saga* claims that it was

⁷ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 7.

⁸ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 7.

⁹ See *Kristni saga*, 41, and *Njal’s Saga*, 173.

Thangbrand who sought out Sidu-Hall saying “...that King Olaf had directed him to Hallr, if he [Thangbrand] landed in the Eastern Fjords...”¹⁰ Why would Olaf suggest Sidu-Hall as a potentially receptive first contact for a missionary party? Two answers present themselves: the first is a surprisingly personal social connection between the families of Olaf and Hall, while the second is a more practical economic inducement. Both reasons reflect aspects of Stark and Finke’s model of conversion based on the increase of familial/social capital.

At first glance, the social connection between Olaf and Hall seem obscure, but between the two men the connection would have appeared not only clear, but also influential. Hall was the great-grandson of one Hrollaug, through his mother Thordis, and her father Ozur Keiliselg.¹¹ Hrollaug, in turn, was originally a friend and companion to King Harald Fair-hair and had received gifts in Iceland from that monarch after having gone to the islands with the king’s approval; Harald was in his turn the great-grandfather of King Olaf Tryggvasson. The latter descended from Harald through Olaf Haraldsson and Tryggvi Olafsson.¹² (See Figure 9.)

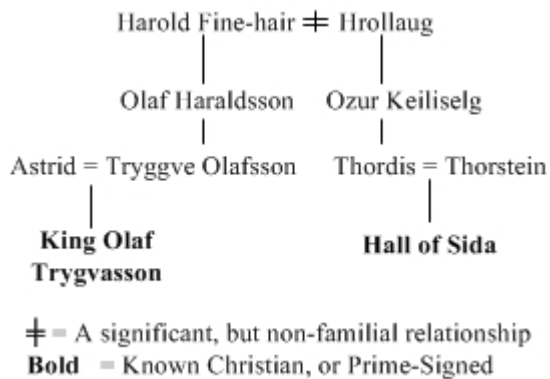


Figure 9
Familial links of Olaf and Hall

¹⁰ *Kristni saga*, 41.

¹¹ *Landnámabók*, 119-121.

¹² Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 7.

Olaf and Hall were equal generationally to each other, and the common link between the two was a significant social relationship between their respective great-grandfathers. The fact that Hrollaug received gifts from Harald Fair-hair is paralleled in the interactions between Olaf and Hall, through the former's representative Thangbrand; this parallel also introduces the second answer as to why Thangbrand was ordered to seek out Hall, namely the offer of a significant relationship based on trade.

Kristni saga relates the detail that when Hall heard of the arrival of Thangbrand and his subsequent rejection by the first Icelanders the missionary encountered, Hall arranged for the missionary company to move their ship near his residence and "...moved the cargo to his infield and put up a tent there in which Thangbrand and his men stayed."¹³ *Njáls saga* relates slightly more detail as well as assigning a motive to Hall's assistance of the cleric.

Hall of Sida learned of [Thangbrand's arrival]; he lived at Thvotta in Alftafjord. He rode to the ship with thirty men and went straight to Thangbrand and said, 'There's not much trading, is there?'

Thangbrand said that this was true.

'Then I want to tell you why I have come,' said Hall. 'I want to invite all of you to stay with me, and I will see if I can find a market for your goods.'

Thangbrand thanked him and went to Thvotta.¹⁴

In his offer to act as a local broker for the distribution of trade goods, Hall was in effect entering into a business relationship with not only Thangbrand, but by extension King Olaf as well. As trade goods from the mainland would be welcome in the isolated Icelandic economy and therefore fetch a tidy profit, provided there were willing buyers, this pivotal relationship would increase Hall's potential social capital both at home and abroad. This relationship

¹³ *Kristni saga*, 41.

¹⁴ *Njal's Saga*, 173.

demonstrates the basis of two of Stark and Finke's propositions: "In making religious choices, people will attempt to conserve their social capital" where "[s]ocial capital consists of interpersonal attachments," and "[t]o the extent that people have or develop stronger attachments to those committed to a religion in a different tradition, they will convert."¹⁵

In addition to the obvious economic meaning of Hall's words to Thangbrand, there is a note of double entendre in his statement that "...I will see if I can find a market for your goods." As a cleric, sent to convert Icelanders, Thangbrand's goods consisted of more than the cargo contained in the hold of the ship he arrived in. Thangbrand also brought religious instruction, which was his primary mission in coming to Iceland. Hall's words point to the desire to assist in the conversion effort and the resulting list of successful converts with ties to Sidu-Hall indicates the successful fulfillment of his desire. Before continuing, however, a brief mention should be made of the manner in which Hall himself accepted Christian baptism and the manner in which he interpreted his relationship to his new religion.

Again, both *Kristni saga* and *Njáls saga* agree on the basics of what led Hall to be interested in Christianity. Thangbrand and his men were either preparing for, or in the act of celebrating the feast of St. Michael; impressed with the ceremony Hall asked specific questions of Thangbrand, and after receiving an apparently impressive reply indicated interest in accepting Christianity.¹⁶ He was particularly impressed with the figure of St. Michael:

Hall said, 'I would like to have him for my friend.'

'That you may,' said Thangbrand; 'give yourself to him today, in the name of God.'

'I'll do it on this condition,' said Hall: 'that you promise, on his behalf, that he shall be my guardian angel.'

¹⁵ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000), 118-119.

¹⁶ See *Kristni saga*, 41, and *Njal's Saga*, 173-174.

‘I promise,’ said Thangbrand.
Hall and all his household were then baptized.¹⁷

Hall viewed the acceptance of Christianity, and in particular the archangel Michael as his personal saint, in terms of establishing a strong social relationship. The use of the word ‘friend’ and the expectation that Michael will act as a personal guardian indicate the expectation of a mutually beneficial social relationship. Furthermore, Hall acknowledged Thangbrand as a legitimate proxy for Michael, accepting his word in the place of the absent archangel. This parallels Thangbrand’s position as a designated representative of King Olaf. In Hall’s view, just as he first desires for, and then enters a significant social relationship with Michael through the offices of Thangbrand in pursuit of rewards, so too he expects a similar relationship with Olaf along with similar payoffs.

Hall and Thangbrand’s Missionary Efforts.

Following his conversion, Hall accompanied Thangbrand in the latter’s successful missionary efforts. All told, the sources recall ten individuals by name who converted wholly or in part to Christianity as a result of this effort and one person who was already Christian due to family influence and tradition; of these individuals, only one does not show any familial or social links to either Hall, King Olaf, or previous family ties to Christianity through the sons of Bjorn Buna.¹⁸ The named converts include Hildir the Old, Kol Thorsteinsson, Ozur Hroaldsson, Flosi

¹⁷ *Njal’s Saga*, 174.

¹⁸ The sources also recount at least five persons, named or unnamed, who were vocally or physically opposed to Thangbrand and Hall’s Christian mission, and who were killed by members of the clerical party. Although the sources indicate they were only silenced after exhibiting strong opposition to the movement, it could be argued that their removal was an act of seizing social superiority through the violent elimination of opposition similar to the idea of enforced Christianity on the part of kings in mainland Scandinavia. This viewpoint is arguable and not without some merit. However, as the purpose of this investigation is to note the manner in which

Thordarson, Njal Thorgeirsson (the eponymous Njal of *Njáls saga*), Gest Oddleifsson, Hall of Haukadal, Gizur the White, Hjalti Skeggjason, and Ingjald Thorkelsson; the already Christian Surt Thorsteinsson and his devout family are also encountered.

Of all these individuals, only Ingjald, son of Thorkel Haeyjar-Tyrdil who lived at Dyrholmar, cannot be definitively connected through familial or social connections to any other individual or group involved in the conversion. The closest connection is tenuous at best, namely that one Kari Solmundarson owned a farm at Dyrholmar and this Kari was a son-in-law of Njal Thorgeirsson who converted to Christianity.¹⁹ However, there is no evidence definitively tying Ingjald to Kari's farm; furthermore, according to the conversion chronology established in *Njáls saga*, the party of Hall and Thangbrand moved from east to west across the island, preaching as they went. Dyrholmar is located to the east of Njal's home at Bergthorshvol, and Ingjald is consequently portrayed as accepting the faith before Njal. A wider search of Icelandic records does not reveal further information on Ingjald, or his family; he remains the sole anomaly in this study.

Another individual, and the first convert after Hall according to *Njál's saga*, was Hildir the Old. However, differing manuscript readings and translations may or may not, indicate direct familial connection to the subsequent Christian adherents, although at the very least a direct social connection appears evident. The difficulty comes in establishing the genealogy of Hildir the Old as related in the surviving transcripts of *Njál's saga*, nearly twenty from the medieval period and dozens of other subsequent transcriptions.

Christianity spread through familial and social ties, this particular argument will be left aside as a parallel feature of the complex events leading to conversion.

¹⁹ *Njal's Saga*, 153.

Hildir's potential genealogy is related in a section of *Njáls saga* following the conversion of Iceland, and relating to a legal case being pressed by Flosi, the son-in-law of Sidu-Hall, of whose conversion more will be said shortly. In this specific case Flosi was sending word to his friends to support him in a legal case against Njal. One of the individuals he contacted was Glum, the son of Hildir the Old. However, depending on which surviving manuscript version is consulted, as well as the preference of the translator, the line can be rendered several ways. The first is:

“Flosi sent word to Kol Thorstein's son, and Glum the son of Hildir the Old, the son of Geirleif, the son of Aunund [sic] Wallet-back, and to Modolf Kettle's son...”²⁰

This translation indicates a familial relationship between Glum, Hildir, Gerleif, and Aunund. However, another equally possible rendering is as follows:

“Flosi sent word to Kol Thorsteinsson; to Glum, the son of Hildir the Old; to Geirleif, the son of Onund Box-back; and to Modolf Ketilsson...”²¹

This translation choice, based upon differing manuscript readings, indicates a relationship between Glum/Hildir, and Geirleif/Onund, but not between Hildir/Geirleif.²²

²⁰ *The Story of Burnt Njal*, trans. George Webbe Dasent (London : J.M. Dent and Sons, 1911; reprint, 1949), 206.

²¹ *Njal's Saga*, 192.

²² Appeals to other editions and translations reveal the same phenomenon. *Njála : Udgivet efter gamle Håndskrifter af Det kongelige nordiske oldskrift selskab*, ed. Konráð Gíslason and Eiríkur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1875), 586, renders the text thus: “flosi sendi orð kol þórsteinssyni ok glúmi syni hildis hins gamla, geirleifi syni önundar töskubaks ok móðólfi ketilssyni,” indicating there is no relationship between Hildir and Geirleif; however, Note 14 on the same page indicates that other original manuscript readings indicate there is a relationship. *Brennu-Njálssaga*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek, 13 (Halle: n.p., 1908), 261, links the men, while *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit, 12 (Reykjavík : Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), 287-288, renders the men as unrelated, though the editor shows and addresses the ms. variants.

The exact nature of the relationship becomes crucial when compared to evidence included in *Landnámabók*. That volume gives details relating to the relationship between Onund and Flosi, specifically through Flosi’s step-mother Thraslaug. *Landnámabók* relates that Thraslaug was the daughter of Thorstein and that Onund “...was related to Thorstein’s children...”²³ As Onund was related to Thorstein’s children, but not Thorstein himself, this indicates the relationship was through Thorstein’s unnamed wife, the mother of Thraslaug. If, then, the genealogy from *Njáls saga* indicating that Hildir was the son of Geirleif, who was the son of Onund is correct, then that family is related, however distantly to Sidu-Hall; if the genealogy in *Njáls saga* is not correct, then there is no familial connection. (See Figure 10.)

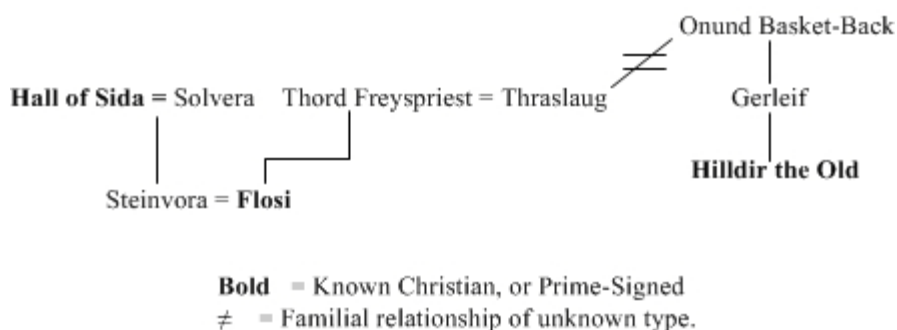


Figure 10
Possible connection of Hall and Hildir

However, the possibility of a social connection remains. Remember that Flosi called on Glum, Hildir’s son, to support him in a lawsuit, and this action indicates the clear existence of a strong social connection. Therefore, Hall and Thangbrand arrived and spoke with Hildir, one of two possible scenarios might have been in play: 1) Hall was speaking to a distant cousin of his son-in-law, or 2) He was speaking to a family with close societal connections to his son-in-law.

²³ *Landnámabók*, 124.

Either scenario indicates the probability of a strong social connection susceptible to the sociological rules of conversion.

All the remaining individuals exhibit close familial or social relationships to one-another. Three in particular, Kol Thorsteinsson, Flosi Thordarson, and Ozur Hroaldsson, have direct connections to Sidu-Hall himself. Of these men, Kol has his relationship to Hall defined within the conversion narrative, as nephew.²⁴ Earlier in the narrative of *Njáls saga*, the specifics of this connection are revealed: Kol is the son of Thorstein, Hall's brother.²⁵ (See Figure 11.) This section of the historical narrative also reveals the connection of Flosi as son-in-law to Hall through his illegitimate daughter Steinvora.²⁶

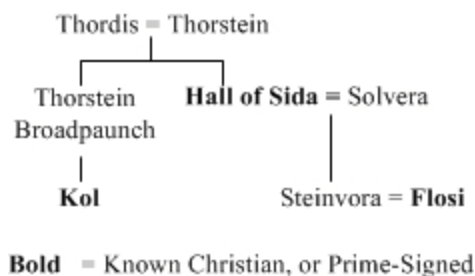


Figure 11
Hall's Family

However, Kol and Flosi appear to have agreed to different levels of the acceptance of Christianity. In the case of Kol, it is noted that "...he and all his household took the faith," implying full acceptance of Christianity through baptism; Flosi, on the other hand, opted to only

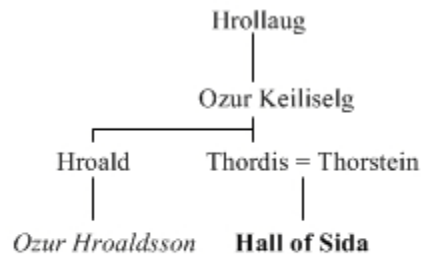
²⁴ *Njal's Saga*, 174.

²⁵ *Njal's Saga*, 163.

²⁶ *Njal's Saga*, 162-163. Flosi also appears in the more traditionally accepted historical work of *Landnámabók*, although he and his brother are mentioned for killing a man at an assembly rather than as part of a religious conversion. See *Landnámabók*, 126.

“...[take] the sign of the cross and promised to support them at the Althing.”²⁷ Hall’s son-in-law apparently was not ready to commit to Christianity fully, but did accept the partial step of prime-signing and was willing to support his father-in-law and the Christian cause at the Althing.

The third member of Hall’s family named as a Christian adherent was Ozur Hroaldsson. Like Flosi, he selected the lesser step of prime-signing.²⁸ What is less sure is his exact relationship to Hall. *Njáls saga* does not provide any details or clues to the specific nature of his relationship. However, records in *Landnámabók* concerning the genealogy of Hrollaug, great-grandfather of Sidu-Hall, point to the strong possibility that Ozur was in fact Hall’s maternal first cousin. Hrollaug fathered Ozur Keiliselg, who in turn had at least two children, Thordis the mother of Hall, and a son by the name of Hroald.²⁹ Given Scandinavian patronymic naming conventions and the tendency to bestow one male child with the name of the grandfather, it is highly probable that Ozur Hroaldsson was as close as a first cousin to Hall, although a more distant relationship cannot be fully discounted. (See Figure 12.)



Bold = Known Christian, or Prime-Signed
Italic = Likely, but unconfirmed child

Figure 12
Ozur’s Potential Relationship to Hall

²⁷ *Njal’s Saga*, 174.

²⁸ *Njal’s Saga*, 174.

²⁹ *Landnámabók* 121.

Following the conversion of some of Hall’s nearest kinsman, the party continued west and encountered a community of Icelandic Christians who had a continuous tradition of Christianity stretching over five generations to the time of the late 800s and the settlement of the family of Ketil Flat-Nose on the island. *Njáls saga* reports that the party “...went west to the Skogar district and were given hospitality at Kirkjubæur. Surt lived there, the son of Asbjorn, the son of Thorstein, the son of Ketil the Foolish. All these men, fathers and sons, had already become Christians.”³⁰ *Landnámabók* substantiates this claim, although it gives the genealogy as Surt, Thorstein, Asbjorn, Ketil, Jorunn Wisdomslope, and Ketil Flat-Nose.³¹ (See Figure 13.)



Figure 13
The Family of Surt

Landnámabók also gives clues as to why Surt’s family remained Christian following the landing of their ancestor Ketil despite the overwhelming social and religious majority being against them as religious minorities in Iceland; the text notes that “[Ketil] was a Christian...[He]

³⁰ *Njal’s Saga*, 174.

³¹ *Landnámabók*, 123. I have chosen to follow *Landnámabók’s* genealogy of the father of Surt being Thorstein based on further consistent internal evidence in that same volume concerning the family of Gest Oddleifsson. See pg 77-79 below.

made his home at Kirkby [Kirkjubaer], where the Papar had been living before and where no heathen was allowed to stay.”³² Enforced isolation on the part of the family might have been one reason why the family was successful in maintaining their religion.

However, *Landnámabók* presents further reasons why Ketil’s family may have enjoyed an unbroken chain of Christianity in the opening lines of the manuscript.

But before Iceland was settled from Norway there were other people there, called *Papar* by the Norwegians. They were Christians and were thought to have come overseas from the west, because people found Irish books, bells, crosiers, and lots of other things, so it was clear they must have been Irish. Besides, English sources tell us that sailings were made between these countries at the time.³³

The remnants of Irish Christianity on Iceland point at the very least to material culture that could have sustained a small, but zealous community of Christians. Also, the name of Ketil’s chosen settlement, Kirkjubaer, is interesting. A literal meaning of the word is “church settlement.” The area might have earned that reputation given the vigorous faith of the Ketil family in maintaining their Christian faith. However, it may also signify the presence of a Christian community other than the family, perhaps a small monastery or other outpost established by Irish monks which Ketil and his family sought out and joined when they came to Iceland and in the long term became the protectors of the community in return for religious leadership. The fact that no heathen was allowed to stay there can be generously interpreted as perhaps the possible continued presence of some sort of religious community. However, in the face of a lack of clear archeological evidence, and only scant hints in the historical record, such theories remain at this juncture speculation.

³² *Landnámabók*, 123.

³³ *Landnámabók*, 15. Ari Thorgilsson in *Íslendingabók* makes a similar claim. See Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 4.

Regardless of the possible presence or non-presence of a larger Christian community at Kirkjubaer, the missionary party under Hall and Thangbrand continued westward, encountering both opposition and ecclesiastical success. Chronologically, according to *Njáls saga*, their next successful convert was Ingjald, who has already been discussed. The next confirmed convert was Njal himself.³⁴ In addition to his saga, which has traditionally been viewed as a fictionalized family saga, Njal appears in the historical record in *Landnámabók*.³⁵ According to his own saga, Njal was already in a positive frame of mind before the missionary party arrived:

Many people were saying, and Njal heard them, that it was absurd to reject the old faith. Then Njal said, ‘It seems to me that this new faith is much better, and that he who accepts it will be happy. If the men who preach this religion come out here, I will speak in favour of it.’

He said this often.³⁶

Nevertheless, in addition to Njal’s positive mind-set towards Christianity, he also exhibited close familial and social links to a previous Christian adherent, in this case Flosi, Sidu-Hall’s son-in-law. Njal’s first connection to Flosi came through the latter’s half-neice Thraslauga. Her sister-in-law was Hrodny, with whom Njal had an illegitimate son.³⁷ (See Figure 14.) However, there was an even closer familial relationship which the two men shared.

Both Njal and Flosi had become foster-fathers, a traditional practice of Scandinavian society of the time period. Often, the foster-child was the offspring of a dead relative, or a close friend. In this case, Njal and Flosi became foster-parents to, respectively, a young man by the

³⁴ *Njal’s Saga*, 175.

³⁵ *Landnámabók*, 129.

³⁶ *Njal’s Saga*, 172-173.

³⁷ See *Njal’s Saga*, 44, 162-163, and 195. Flosi and his half-brother Egil shared the same father, Thord Freyspriest, but had different mothers.

name of Hoskuld, and a young woman by the name of Hildigunn; in the case of Hildigunn, she was the daughter of Flosi’s half-brother Starkad.³⁸

Once Hoskuld came of marriageable age Njal sought out Flosi, acting in the role of adoptive father, to ask for the hand of Hildigunn. Particularities relating to the marriage contract took some time to iron out, but eventually the couple was married.³⁹ (See Figure 14.) The newly married couple settled close to Njal, and were therefore a connection point when the missionary party, containing Flosi’s own father-in-law Hall, moved west looking for converts.

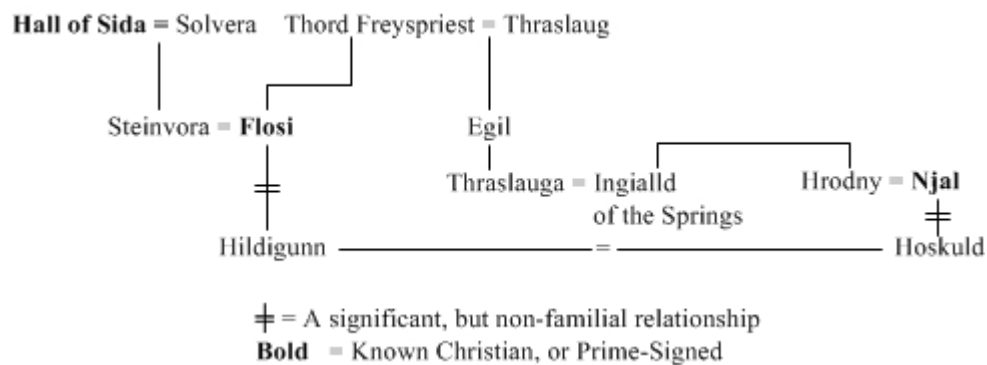


Figure 14
The Relationship of Flosi and Njal

Following the successful conversion of Njal and his family, the missionaries departed Njal’s farm at Bergthorshvol. The party “... went west from there across the rivers and came to Haukadal and baptized [Hall], who was then three years old.”⁴⁰ However, it is at this point that *Njáls saga* not only leaves out an important pair of conversions, but it also fails to give a clear indication as to the relationship of the boy Hall to any other convert. Fortunately, other sources reveal not only this connection, but also indicate who the important missing converts were. Due

³⁸ *Njal’s Saga*, 161-163.

³⁹ *Njal’s Saga*, 164-167.

⁴⁰ *Njal’s Saga*, 175.

to their prominence in the conversion of Iceland, a short detour from the conversion journey highlighted in *Njáls saga* is therefore necessary.

Ari Thorgilsson in *Íslendingabók* specifically names two other chieftains in addition to Hall of Sida as accepting baptism at Thangbrand's hand: Hjalti Skeggjason from Thjorsardal, and his father-in-law Gizur the White from Mosfell.⁴¹ *Kristni saga* groups Gizur, Hall, and Hjalti together as converts following Thangbrand's departure from Kirkjubaer.⁴² This grouping is logical considering the close geographical grouping of the locations Mosfell, Haukadal, and Thjorsardal in south-western Iceland, but that particular account does not reveal the connections of these three men to each other, to any of the missionary party, or to previous converts.

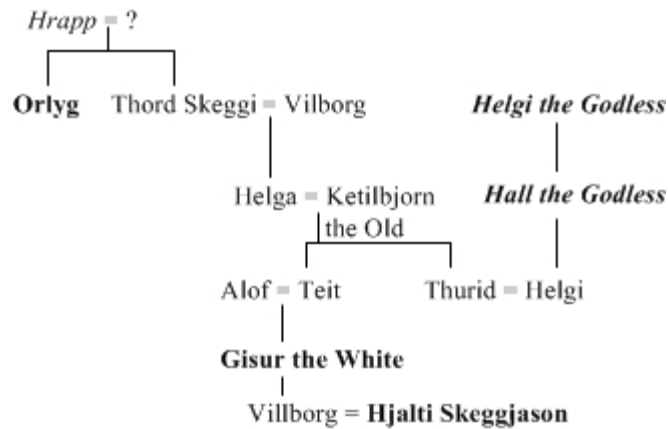
Gizur the White is the pivotal individual in forming connections to other Icelandic Christians, and also with Christian elements in Norway. Gizur himself was the grandson of Helga and Ketilbjorn the Old; Helga was a niece of Orlyg the Christian. Also, Gizur's uncle was Helgi, whose own father and grandfather were known in Iceland for denying the existence of the pagan deities. Therefore, within his own immediate family tradition, Gizur possessed traditional elements both favorable to Christianity, and opposed to traditional pagan practices. Also, Gizur was Hjalti's father-in-law through the latter's marriage to Vilborg.⁴³ (See Figure 15.) Through Hjalti comes a distant connection to the young Hall of Haukadal. These men were first cousins at the fourth remove descending, respectively, from the brothers and Icelandic colonizers Mar and Brandolf.⁴⁴ (See Figure 16.)

⁴¹ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 7.

⁴² *Kristni saga*, 42.

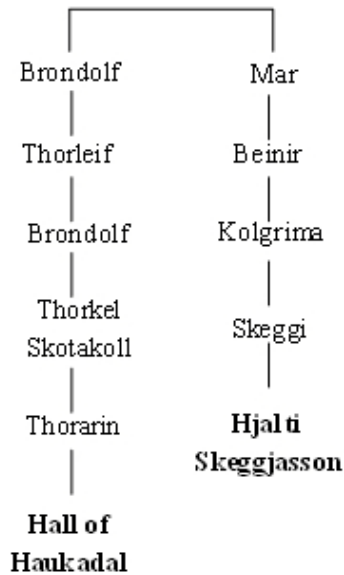
⁴³ *Landnámabók*, 31

⁴⁴ *Landnámabók*, 142-143



Italics = Possible Christian
Bold = Known Christian, or Prime-Signed
Bold = Known Atheist
Italics

Figure 15
Gizur the White and Hjalti Skeggjason



Bold = Know Christian or Prime-Signed

Figure 16
Hall and Hjalti

Gizur and Hjalti also possessed social connections in their role as prominent chieftains to others who had accepted Christianity in Iceland; most recent of course was Sidu-Hall, but they also would have known and interacted with other chieftains such as Thorvard Spak-Bodvarsson, Eyjolf Valgerdason, and Thorkell Krafla who according to *Kristni saga* had also encountered and accepted, in whole or in part, aspects of Christianity. In fact, in that volume all these men are listed as contemporaries and "...the greatest chieftains in the country."⁴⁵ Therefore, they would have encountered each other at least on a yearly basis during the annual *thing* meetings, if not at more frequent occasions. Another of their contemporary chieftains, Gest the Wise, would also accept Christianity, and his story will be introduced shortly.

Finally, in addition to social connections to other Icelandic adherents to Christianity, either recent or somewhat more lengthy, Gizur was personally connected to Christian influences in Norway. Specifically, he was closely related to King Olaf Tryggvason, the very man who had dispatched the missionary expedition under Thangbrand which succeeded in converting Gizur. In fact, both Gizur and the king shared a great-grandfather, one Vikinga-Kari: Gizur, through the line of his mother Alof, her father Bodvar, and then Vikinga-Kari, and the king through his mother Astrid, her father Eirik, and then Vikinga-Kari.⁴⁶ (See Figure 17.) This close relationship made them first cousins, once removed. This near relationship is possible explanation of subsequent events that led the two men to undertake a diplomatic voyage to Norway. Following Thangbrand's return to Iceland, his subsequent disappointing report of the general rejection of Christianity, and the resulting seizure of Icelanders in Norway by the king for said general failure by the populace to accept Christianity in large numbers, it was Gizur and Hjalti, close kinsmen to

⁴⁵ *Kristni saga*, 35.

⁴⁶ *Landnámabók*, 144, *Kristni saga*, 46.

the king and recent Christian converts, who were dispatched as ambassadors to mollify the insulted Olaf.⁴⁷

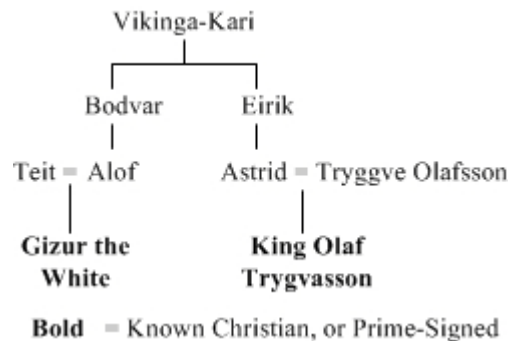


Figure 17
Gizur the White and Olaf Trygvasson

Before departing for Norway to report only limited success, however, Thangbrand succeeded in making perhaps his most dramatic conversion, the recently mentioned Gest the Wise and his household. According to both *Kristni saga* and *Njáls saga* when Thangbrand arrived at or near Gest's home, the missionary was challenged to a duel by a local berserk. The heathen champion claimed that he could walk through fire unscathed. At this point, Thangbrand blessed a fire and the berserk, failing to cross the consecrated conflagration, was killed. After witnessing the power of Thangbrand and his god, Gest, known as the Wise, and reportedly able to see men's futures, accepted Christianity.⁴⁸

The stated reason for Gest's conversion, the miraculous defeat of the berserker, resembles in many respects the conversion of Kodran, the father of Thorvald, and the former's conversion following the destruction of the family spirit stone at the hands of Bishop Fridrek. Both stories

⁴⁷ See *Kristni saga*, 46-47, and Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 7-8

⁴⁸ *Kristni saga*, 44, *Njal's Saga*, 178-179. *Kristni saga* records that Gest only accepted prime-signing along with some of his friends, while *Njal's saga* indicates that Gest chose the full right of baptism and that it was all of his household along with "many others" who joined him. However, both accounts do agree on the rather flashy method in which Thangbrand convinced them accept Christianity.

highlight Stark and Finke’s principle of individuals seeking to conserve, or even increase, their social capital through beneficial social attachments.⁴⁹ In the case of Gest, not only was the berserker’s defeat by Thangbrand an indication of the latter’s religious superiority, but the priest’s victory was also brought relief to the community from a social problem. “Many good men were delighted [at the death of the berserker], even though they were heathen.”⁵⁰ Allying with an individual who had just rid the community of a social nuisance increased Gest’s social capital on a variety of levels.

However, the opportunity to unexpectedly increase in social standing with his neighbors was not the only inducement for Gest to align himself with Christianity. Like so many of the other Icelanders who accepted Thangbrand’s message, Gest was linked genealogically to other Christian adherents, although in his case it was with the staunchly faithful family of Surt Thorsteinsson. Gest’s first cousin was Thordis, who married Thorstein and was the mother of Surt.⁵¹ (See Figure 18.)



Figure 18
The Family of Surt the Christian and Gest the Wise

⁴⁹ Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 118-119.

⁵⁰ *Kristni saga*, 44.

⁵¹ *Landnámabók*, 64

Endgame in Iceland

Unfortunately for further conversion efforts, Thangbrand soon left the country and his new flock, although this appears to be as a result of consultation with local Icelanders who predicted no further success in conversion efforts. Despite his role as a Christian missionary, he was not deterred in facing detractors, even those who offered him violence. He had vigorously defended his name against detractors in a very viking-like manner and "...killed two or three men...who had libeled him."⁵² He quickly returned to Norway and reported to his sponsor that the situation in Iceland was hopeless. This news did not sit well with Olaf who "...became very angry at this, and determined to have those [Icelanders] who were there in [Norway] maimed or killed..."⁵³ Oddr Snorrason in his saga of King Olaf renders this description thus: "The king became very angry when he heard this and had the Icelanders seized. Some he plundered, some he killed, and some he maimed."⁵⁴ The distinction between the two accounts is small, but crucial. According to Ari's account it can be interpreted that Olaf apparently ordered the seizure of all the Icelanders in Norway while Oddr only indicates an indeterminate number. Realistically, it was probably the latter course which took place with Olaf ordering the seizure of all known Icelanders closest to his immediate location.

Regardless, the Icelanders became aware of the arrests and sent emissaries to Olaf in the form of Hjalti and Gizur, his close kinsmen and recent Christian converts; they convinced the king to send another missionary delegation. They returned to Iceland accompanied by a new

⁵² Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 7.

⁵³ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 8.

⁵⁴ Oddr Snorrason, *Saga of Olaf*, 90.

priest, Thormod, with the mandate of convincing the Icelanders to convert.⁵⁵ After reaching the island they proceeded to the Althing, after calling all their supporters together. Reinforcements were necessary because the Christians feared their pagan neighbors would oppose them by force of arms. They were in fact confronted shortly before they reached the Althing “...and it came so close to them fighting that no one could foresee which way it would go.”⁵⁶

The imminent danger of hostilities between the two factions has several interesting implications. The first is that, from the perspective of traditional Icelanders, the Christians represented a significant threat and not an inconsequential minority of opinion. In fact, Ari mentions that the conservative Icelanders “...thronged together *fully armed*...”⁵⁷ Not only were the Christians opposed, they were opposed by an organized group equipped with weapons, and probably armor.

This was not a situation where social pressure or mere verbal threats could keep a small minority in check. Neither was it a situation where the conservative Icelanders could keep trouble at bay with what could be termed limited policing powers. The Christian position had grown sufficiently strong and numerous that conservatives would be unable to employ limited violence, such as a troop of men armed with fists and axe handles, to cow the radicals into submission or flight. Rather, both sides were armed and in sufficient numbers to threaten an episode of major violence.

The second implication of these events relates to the Christians’ relative strength of numbers. Although faced with superior numbers of armed men in a hostile environment the

⁵⁵ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 8.

⁵⁶ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 8.

⁵⁷ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 8, emphasis added.

Christians were not attacked. They received enough support from “kinsman and friends” that both sides held back.⁵⁸ This indicates that the Christians’ relative combined numbers, at least at the Althing, were great enough to deter the conservatives from engaging in conflict, but that they were not so numerous as to embolden the Christians to attempt an armed takeover of the country.

Undoubtedly the Christians turned out as many members of the faith and their supporters as they could find. Given the fact that not all Icelanders attended the Althing, it is even not outside the realm of probability that the Christians might have enjoyed a temporary numerical superiority at the meeting itself, if they managed to muster enough supporters; at the very least their numbers granted they were not dismissed out of hand. Regardless of the potential number of combatants, physical violence did not immediately break out. The risks for both sides were too high, and armed conflict was not the primary goal of either party.

Yet the situation was still so charged that open conflict remained a real possibility for which both sides had to be prepared. Undoubtedly, part of the Icelanders’ anger came from the treatment of their fellows at the hands of Olaf, but it cannot be discounted that some were upset merely over the presence of the Christians. The summer before this meeting Hjalti had been banished for blasphemy towards the heathen gods, yet he chose to return to support the cause.⁵⁹ Fortunately cooler heads prevailed amongst both parties. The Christians agreed amongst themselves to appeal to traditional standards of law, while the pagan Icelanders, no doubt confident in the strength of their traditional position, agreed. Thorgeir, the pagan lawspeaker, was selected by both parties to mediate the conflict.

⁵⁸ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 8.

⁵⁹ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 8.

Ari records that the Christians “...agreed with the lawspeaker Þorgeirr, that he should speak it [i.e. the law], although he was still heathen at the time.”⁶⁰ Oddr makes a more interesting comment claiming that they “induc[ed] the lawspeaker [Thorgeir], in return for half a mark of silver, to make the announcement.”⁶¹ Earlier in his account Oddr notes that when the ambassadors left Norway, this time Olaf provided them “with a great deal of money so that they could establish friendly relations with the chieftains.”⁶² On this occasion, Olaf hoped to stack the deck in favor of Christianity. As the historian Dag Strömbäck has pointed out this payment was not a fee for law services rendered but was undoubtedly a bribe.⁶³

Although the process of mediation was compromised through the bribery of Thorgeir by the Christian faction, it is fascinating how the matter played out and how the supporters of traditional paganism reacted to the announcement. Thorgeir withdrew to contemplate the matter and the next day called the parties together to declare his solution. He began by stating that in Iceland they had always lived under one law, not separate laws for different parties. “And now it seems advisable to me...that we do not let those who most wish to oppose each other prevail, and let us arbitrate between them, so that each side has its own way in something, and let us all have the same law and the same religion. It will prove true that if we tear apart the law, we will also tear apart the peace.”⁶⁴ He then convinced both parties to agree to abide by his decision, though neither was confident of what he would say.

⁶⁰ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 9.

⁶¹ Oddr Snorrason, *Saga of Olaf*, 91.

⁶² Oddr Snorrason, *Saga of Olaf*, 90.

⁶³ Dag Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland: A Survey* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College, London, 1975), 30-31.

⁶⁴ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, 9.

He concluded that all Icelanders should accept Christian baptism, but he allowed certain concessions to pagan customs to continue for the immediate future. In effect a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy was enacted. What is incredible is that the Icelanders accepted the decision with no apparent argument. Also interesting is the manner in which the decision was reached, as a matter of law and not as a response to an immediate outside threat. The mention of Olaf’s treatment of Icelanders in Norway apparently was not factored into the equation.

When closely investigated, Thorgeir was probably influenced by more than either a desire to maintain the peace, or a hefty monetary bribe. As lawspeaker, he would have had close social connections to the major chieftains of Iceland; at least five of these men had converted to Christianity, and were in attendance at the Althing: Gizur the White, Hjalti Skeggjason, Sidu-Hall, Gest the Wise, and Thorvard Spak-Bodvarsson.⁶⁵ The true extent of Thorgeir’s connection to Christianity runs much deeper, however, and was the work of the earlier missionary, Thorvald Kodransson.

As mentioned earlier, Thorvald was instrumental in the acceptance of Christianity by the chieftain Eyjolf Valgerdason, great-grandson of Helgi the Lean, a Christian settler of Iceland. Eyjolf’s first cousin, once removed, was Gudlaug, Helgi the Lean’s granddaughter; Gudlaug was in her turn, the aunt of Hlenni the Old, another Christian convert of Thorvald. (See pp. 52-53) However, Gudlaug was also the mother of Gudrid, the wife of Thorgeir the Lawspeaker.⁶⁶ (See Figure 19.) Thorgeir’s wife was therefore the great-granddaughter of a Christian settler of Iceland, the first cousin of a convert, and the first cousin, once removed of another. Furthermore, the conversion of the last two connections happened some years before Thorgeir’s decision at the

⁶⁵ *Kristni saga*, 49.

⁶⁶ *Landnámabók*, 103.

traditional pagan ways. The Althing had spoken, and with that decision the people had chosen for themselves to accept its wisdom and the consequent shift in social connections.

The Conversion of Greenland ca. 999

Iceland was not the only Scandinavian population to accept Christianity without direct royal involvement. Greenland also was an isolated community of Scandinavians, and, like Iceland, when a deeper investigation of Christian converts' social and familial ties is undertaken, a similar pattern of inter-linked social/familial bonds comes to light. Although not as extensive as the links highlighted above, the abbreviated example of Greenland corroborates the pattern in Iceland.

The standard interpretation of the coming of Christianity to Greenland proceeds much the same as the heretofore customary explanation of the introduction of Christianity to Iceland. Not surprisingly, the credit often rests with the efforts of the missionary king, Olaf Tryggvason of Norway, who, as in Iceland, dispatched a native of the island to convert his fellow countrymen. In the case of Greenland, the chosen representative was Leif Eirikson. Following an adventure in the Hebrides, Leif Eirikson stopped in Norway on his way home to Greenland. While there he stayed in the court of Olaf Tryggvason who convinced Leif to preach Christianity in his homeland, and Leif departed Norway to fulfill the king's request.⁶⁷

Leif reached land in Eiriksfiord [in Greenland] and then went home to Brattahlid, where they all welcomed him with open arms. He soon preached Christianity and the universal faith throughout the country, revealing to men the message of king Olaf Tryggvason, and telling how many noble deeds and what great glory accompanied this religion. Eirik was slow to abandon his faith, but Thjodhild [his wife] accepted at once and had a church built, though not too near their house. This church was called Thjodhild's Church, and it was there that she

⁶⁷ "Eirik the Red" in *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, trans. Gwyn Jones (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 139.

offered up her prayers, together with those men who adopted Christianity. Thjodhild would not live together with Eirik once she had taken the faith, a circumstance which grieved him very much.⁶⁸

Several interesting points are immediately evident in this brief account. The first is that Leif Eirikson brought some sort of message from Olaf Tryggvason in addition to the message of Christianity. It is unclear what the specifics of this message were; it may have offered enticements for conversion, spiritual encouragement to listen to the message, threats against those unwilling to listen, or a combination of all three. Regardless, the knowledge that an important, though distant, figure was interested in the question of conversion may have influenced some of the Greenlanders who might have seen the opportunity to convert as a chance to increase their social connections to a powerful individual.

A second point involves the reception and rejection of the message itself. Leif's family, the most prominent in the colony, was itself split over the question of Christianity. His father Eirik rejected the message and chose to remain a pagan. However, his wife Thjodhild enthusiastically embraced the religion to the point of constructing a church. Furthermore, the resulting domestic situation resulted in a separation from her husband, a situation which distressed Eirik.

The third point is that Leif's preaching affected more than his own family. There was enough interest in Christianity that multiple individuals joined in worshipping at the church that Thjodhild built. There are further clues in the manuscript dealing with at least the extent to which the new religion reached into Greenland's culture.

It had been the custom in Greenland, ever since the coming of Christianity, that men were buried on the farms where they died, in unconsecrated ground. A stake would be set up from the breast of the dead, and in due course, when clerks

⁶⁸ "Eirik the Red," 139-140.

came that way, the stakes would be pulled up and holy water poured into the place, and a service sung over them, even though this might be a good while later.⁶⁹

This evidence indicates that sufficient Greenlanders embraced Christianity to require a number of traveling priests in the island to administer to the needs of outlying settlements. Furthermore, burial practices were altered in order to conform to the teachings of the new religion. The claims of the writer that Christian burial was a universal custom of Greenland are no doubt exaggerated, but the argument that they gradually increased in popularity is very reasonable. An exact number of faithful Christians is not given, but enough interest in the new religion allowed for a small, core congregation centered on Thjodhild's church to exist and to leave enough of an impact to be recorded later.

In examining the standard story of the conversion of Greenland, several facts relating to the use of social and familial connections emerge. Leif, as the stated main instrument of conversion formed an important social connection with King Olaf; the latter "...paid [Leif] many honours, feeling certain he would be a man of parts."⁷⁰ Once back in Greenland, Leif used his position both as a son, and as a prominent member of the community, to influence his mother and other members of the Greenland settlers to spread the teachings of Christianity.

However, one fact seems out of place; namely, the reaction of Eirik. He chose not to accept the message and remained pagan. As the discoverer and founder of the colony he played a de facto role as a community leader and, given his objections to the new faith, could have raised serious objections to his son's activities. For a man famous for his exile from Iceland due to his violent, even murderous temper, familial attachment, even the enforced separation of living away from his wife, seems an inadequate answer to why he tolerated first the preaching, and then the

⁶⁹ "Eirik the Red," 143-144.

⁷⁰ "Eirik the Red," 138.

good family who had been taken prisoner over the western sea...”⁷³ The western sea referred to here indicates the North Sea, as that body of water lies to the west of the Scandinavian homeland, and the land located in that direction indicates the British Isles. As Vifil was reportedly of a good family, and most of the inhabitants of the British Isles by this time were Christian, it is highly probable that he was born and raised a Christian. Further evidence concerning the manner of his release from slavery supports this assumption.

Aud thought well enough of Vifil to give him his freedom, a land grant, and “...thought him a man of quality...”⁷⁴ As she was a staunch Christian herself, seeing that same quality in a slave might motivate her to step outside the bounds of normal practice and elevate that slave to a significantly higher social position. However, this reasoning is still based on inferred evidence. Stronger evidence of Vifil’s ties to Christianity emerges in the actions of his son and granddaughter.

Vifil’s son Thorbjorn manifested clearly Christian tendencies, both in his own life and particularly in the raising of his daughter Gudrid. On one occasion after Gudrid had grown to marriageable age, she was pressured to take part in a heathen prophetic ritual. She admitted being familiar with the ritual due to training from her foster-mother with whom Gudrid had been raised for a time, but she declined to take part in the ritual. “‘This is a kind of proceeding I feel I can play no part in,’ said Gudrid, ‘for I am a Christian woman.’”⁷⁵ During the same ritual, Thorbjorn had refused to be present “...for he would not stay in the house while such

⁷³ “Eirik the Red,” 127.

⁷⁴ *Landnámabók*, 53.

⁷⁵ “Eirik the Red,” 136.

heathendom was practiced.”⁷⁶ Thorbjorn’s reported actions, as well as the sentiments expressed by his daughter indicate that both were faithful Christian’s. The logical assumption as to where they received this background of belief in Iceland is from Vifil.

In addition to having a strong Christian background, Thorjorn also had a strong personal connection to Eirik the Red. *Landnámabók* records that when Eirik was faced with outlawry from Iceland for the killing of a neighbor, Thorbjorn Vifilsson was one of his friends and defenders at the Thorsness Assembly; Eirik was outlawed at that meeting, and so he decided to sail to the west following rumors of land there.⁷⁷ He promised that if he found land, he would return and let his friends, Thorbjorn included, know of his discovery and indicated that “... they should receive just such help themselves [that they had given him] if it lay in his power to provide it and he knew that they had need of him.”⁷⁸ Later, when economic troubles befell Thorbjorn in Iceland, he decided to move his family to Greenland “...to take advantage of the promise of my friend Eirik the Red...”⁷⁹

Eirik, therefore, had been friends with, and closely supported by a man with deep Christian ties. The record further indicates that Eirik was pleased to see his friend, gave him land, and that this interaction appears to have occurred before the return of Leif from Norway.⁸⁰ Following the missionary activities of Leif, the families became officially united with the marriage of Gudrid, and Thorstein, Eirik’s son. Thorstein’s “...proposal found favour both with

⁷⁶ “Eirik the Red,” 137.

⁷⁷ *Landnámabók*, 48-49.

⁷⁸ “Eirik the Red,” 128.

⁷⁹ “Eirik the Red,” 132-133.

⁸⁰ “Eirik the Red,” 137.

[Gudrid] and her father.”⁸¹ Also of note is that the wedding took place at Brattahlid in Eiriksfiord, the location of Thjodhild’s Church, although it does not say specifically that the church was the location of their marriage.⁸²

However, given Gudrid and Thorbjorn’s strong Christian convictions, the recent Christianization efforts of Leif, and the availability of a Christian sanctuary in which a marriage could take place, it is probable that not only was that the location of the marriage, but that Thorstein had become a Christian himself. This theory is further strengthened by the fact that following his unexpected death a short time later, his body was “...borne to the church at Eiriksfiord and services sung...by clerks.”⁸³

There is even the slightest indication that Eirik himself may have accepted Christianity. His saga indicates that he was only “...slow to abandon his [pagan] faith...” not that he never abandoned it.⁸⁴ However, it does not ever specifically state that he accepted Christianity. What is clear is that he was surrounded by a group of Christians with close social and familial ties to one another, and that it was these close ties which influenced the spread of the new faith, just as it had in Iceland, far more so than the activities of a distant Norwegian monarch. Undoubtedly, King Olaf played a part in instigating the preaching of the message, but it was the close social and familial bonds among the adherents that facilitated its’ spread among the Icelanders and Greenlanders.

⁸¹ “Eirik the Red,” 141.

⁸² “Eirik the Red,” 141.

⁸³ “Eirik the Red,” 144.

⁸⁴ “Eirik the Red,” 139.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Integrating principles of sociology into the study of the conversion of Iceland and Greenland has resulted in the emergence of a heretofore undiscovered pattern. Namely, that individuals who accepted the message of Christianity were not just influenced by the threats or power of distant kings, or by the preaching of charismatic missionaries. Rather, they appear heavily influenced by their social and familial connections in choosing reaffiliation and conversion. Also, these converts were not breaking new theological ground. Many had long-standing familial traditions grounded in the acceptance of Christianity, some of which survived from the founding of Iceland until the coming of more concerted missionary efforts.

The sheer number of familial relations among the Christian converts named in the historical record speaks for itself. Of the thirty-five individuals highlighted in this study as having accepted Christianity either through prime-signing or baptism, only one, Ingjald Thorkelsson, cannot be connected socially or genealogically to any other individual, while two, Onund the Christian and Hlenni the Old, can be listed only as possible connections genealogically.¹ The remaining thirty-two individuals exhibit at least strong social connections, such as the bond between Aud the Deepminded and her freeman Vifil, if not outright close familial connections. Clearly, Christianity spread along bonds of family and social structures.

Using Stark and Finke's propositions as a base, there are also several more ideas concerning conversion in Iceland and Greenland that can be stated. Most observers would classify the switch to Christianity by the islanders as a conversion, a shift from one religious

¹ Even if Hlenni the Old's genealogical connection does not bear out, there still appears to be a social connection between his son and Flosi, the son-in-law of Hall of Sida.

tradition to another. This certainly makes sense when seen from the Christian point of view. However, when viewed from a pagan perspective, the choice to accept Christianity can be argued as a reaffiliation.

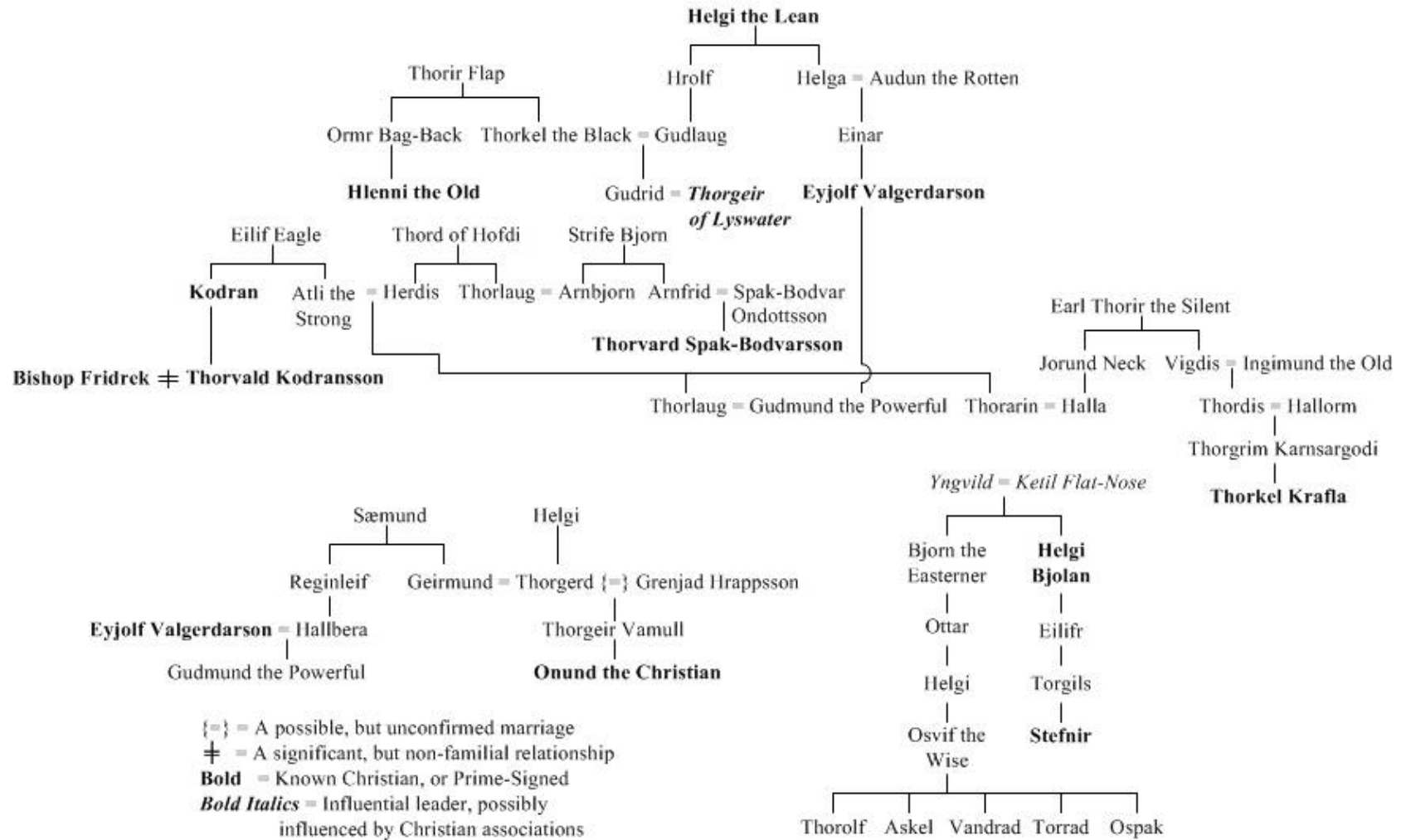
Scandinavian paganism was polytheistic. Wise Christian missionaries may have used that fact to their advantage by first suggesting that the figure of Christ was another god who could be added to the Christian pantheon. This was certainly the mindset of some Icelanders.² Once this mindset was established the next step was to eliminate the pagan gods from the equation, again, a form of reaffiliation rather than strict conversion. By this gradual process Christian missionaries might have drawn popular support away from traditional paganism.

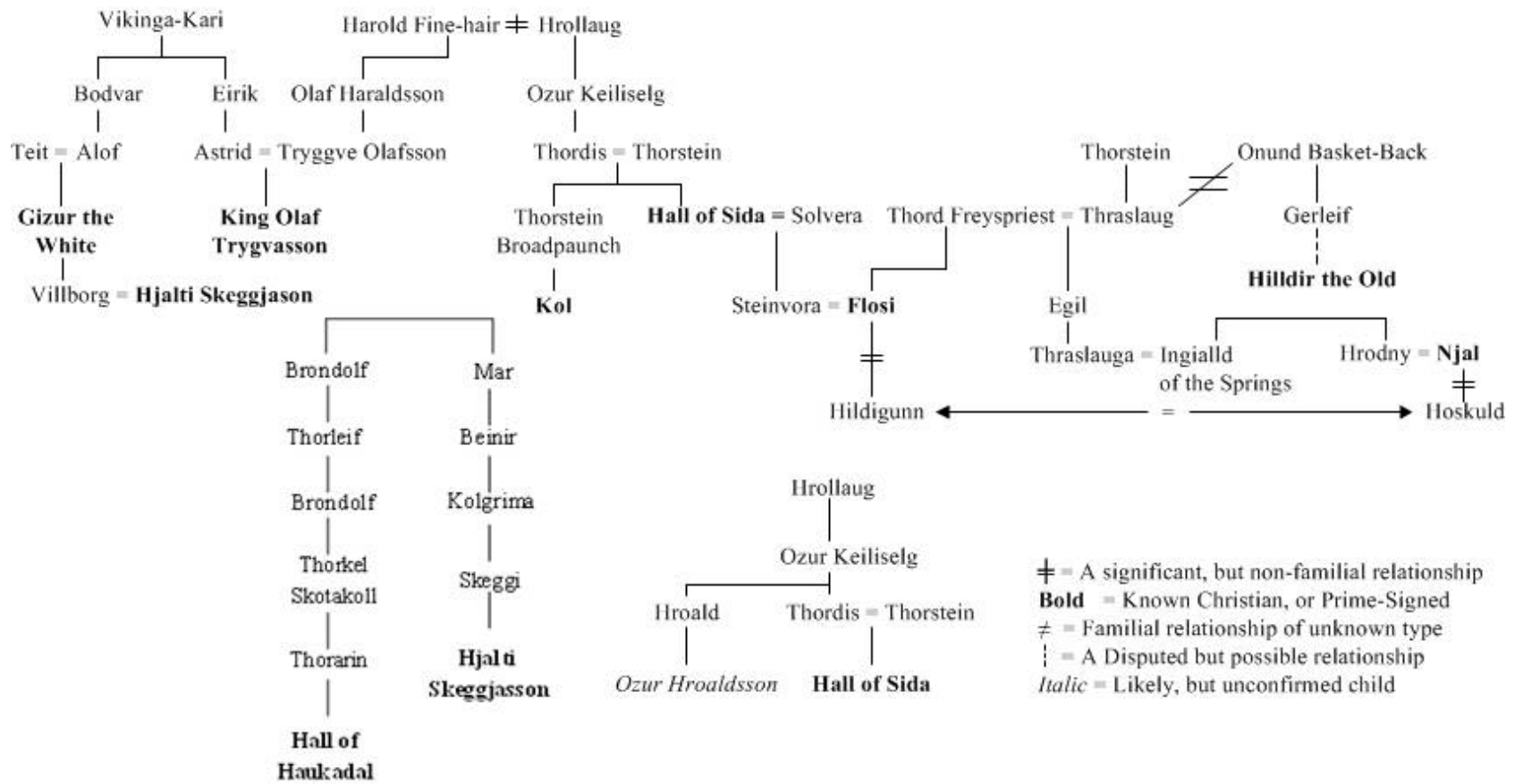
Another aspect that should be considered in the case of Iceland was the willingness of both parties, Christian missionaries and Scandinavian aspirants, to compromise on social questions. Rather than demanding a complete break with all traditions, such as legal and even some religious practices, this early period represents a blending of ideas. These actions by both parties represent reaffiliation efforts to conserve both social and religious capital on a wider scale than just a simple question of changing religion. This gradual approach undoubtedly resulted in less popular animosity for Christianization than otherwise might have been expressed.

The results of this study also demonstrate the viability of integrating multi-disciplinary methods into the historical study of early medieval Scandinavia. The sociological examination of the wide corpus of Scandinavian histories, sagas, and literature, long held unusable by such figures as Sigurður Nordal and his adherents, can only reveal further opportunities for the historical community. Although similarly detailed genealogical records do not exist for mainland

² Such was the example of even the Christian Helgi the Lean who "...believed in Christ but invoked Thor when it came to voyages and difficult times." See *Landnámabók: The Book of Settlements*, trans. and with an introduction and notes by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), 97.

Scandinavia as exist in Iceland and Greenland, the possibility for further studies, similar to this thesis, of social and familial transmission of Christianity in Norway and Denmark is an exciting possibility. Under such circumstances, the continued growth of medieval Scandinavian historical studies appears viable and bright.





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